

Gerben Mulder & Iberê Camargo: Closer to the End/After the End

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The artist is an enchanted man, like the friar in the legend, who cannot perceive the passing of time, who cannot perceive the passing of life. Now, when the leaves fall from the trees and nights grow longer, he contemplates his footprints on the earth, along the path. Closer to the end. Closer to death¹.

Iberê Camargo

This exhibition brings together, for the first time, the paintings of Gerben Mulder and Iberê Camargo, awakening surprising thematic and formal parallels, though the artists have no clear personal or historical connection. The works elaborate dramatic dimensions of contemporary figurative painting and reflect – sometimes with cruel humor, sometimes gracefully, sometimes with mordant skepticism – somber viewpoints on human experience. More than this, however, they construct singular relations between figures and empty space through gestures.

Expressive groups from each artist's oeuvre are shown here, parts of their diverse trajectories. Gerben Mulder's latest pieces are on view, made in 2024. These are figurative, gestural works composed through compulsively layered organic blotches and fragmented drippings. There are still-lives, beautiful vases of flowers, but most of the paintings explore scenes with brittle, fragile, disenchanted, morally and psychologically ambiguous characters, such as the smiling figure in *Sister, My Sister, People Just Ain't no Good* (2024).

Iberê Camargo's works, in turn, are mostly from the last phase of his career, dating from 1980 to the early 1990s. This is the period in which the artist returned to the human figure and its hardships. The represented scenes create eerie images of isolation. Corroded, scratched, ill-defined figures tread a muddy abyss of oil paint, virtuosically applied to the surface of the canvas. To employ the critic Sonia Salzstein's definition, these are enactments of "solitude, self-exile and uprooting."²

The two artists create helpless figures that have been removed from the places they know, and transferred into indefinite, empty or deserted environments that range from the decomposing to the overtly hostile. In any case, no one seems well off where they are.

¹ CAMARGO, Iberê: "Encantamento" in *Gaveta dos Guardados*. São Paulo, EDUSP, 1998. (p. 110).

² SALZSTEIN, Sônia: "Anos 60/ Um marco na obra de Iberê Camargo" in SALZSTEIN, Sônia (org.): *Diálogos com Iberê Camargo*. São Paulo, Cosac & Naify, 2003. (p. 43).

This disturbance is further enforced by the formlessness that the painters imprint to the mass of paint. Regardless of thematic differences between the two, which abound, brushstrokes reinforce the figures' and spaces' indefiniteness, and sometimes make relative the contours of one and the other alike. Irregular stains forge a space that seems to lose its determinacy.

We see, for example, the creatures in Iberê Camargo's *Motociclistas* (1988) leaning on their vehicle with a lost, dumbfounded look. They don't see an inch, but they try to move forward, making the same mistakes as always, like Samuel Beckett characters. They don't move. In the dark of night, they cannot distinguish what is soil, what is atmosphere, what is light. Everything is a predominantly bluish paste, but with no defined color; hybrid, with dirty brushstrokes in multiple directions. The wheels of the motorcycle skate over the quagmire without moving. Space is less a void and more of a swamp from which it is difficult to escape. Therefore, in the end, the more the bikers move, the greater the risk of night's darkness engulfing them.

No Vento e na Terra I (Série Ciclistas) (1991) is one of two versions of this scene by Iberê Camargo. In it, a naked body lies on the earth as if about to merge with it. Everything seems to disintegrate under the sun: the body, solid matter, the blinding light. The body seems to suffer from what Iberê called "living fatigue." The painting, however, through color and materiality actually seems to insist on the palpability of some experience, however residual.

The pair depicted by Gerben Mulder in *Mommy's Favorite Little Soldier* (2024), on the other hand, is bathed in hazy dusk due to the touches of gray added by the artist over violet. In fact, it is a painting that works, above all, through addition. There are two women, one older and one younger. One looks at the other, who looks away. The girl on the right, annoyed, lost in her worst thoughts, stares at the person contemplating the painting as if she were catching a glimpse of what is outside. She defiantly returns our gaze. In that moment, the character sends her discomfort back toward whoever looks at her. She has no reason to smile, the surface of her face, her bosom and her hair is spattered, scratched, irregular, corroded and injured. In other portraits, such as *Miss Stevie Guy* (2024), the paint stains become something like bruises in the hands of Gerben Mulder. This is a particularity of his language, made of scraps and damp remains, used to construct strands of existence.

It is curious how, in Mulder, works seem to be made of this accumulation of parts, which together form his imperfect figures. Camargo's paintings, on the other hand, create bodies that lose their unity. There are two perspectives dealing with the idea of the end. One clings to what remains before everything ends, another creates with the waste of what has already ceased to exist.