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In his first London solo show for a decade, the Brazilian artist Iran do Espírito Santo explores themes of domesticity and representation, inviting us to reconsider our relationship to everyday objects

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WILL MOFFITT

# EVERYDAY ENIGMAS

Iran do Espírito Santo is talking about dreams. The Brazilian contemporary artist is not a surrealist per se: the muted, monochromatic palette and tightly orchestrated geometry of his work is logical and refined, but his obsession with everyday objects starts in his subconscious.

"It doesn't start from an intellectual approach," he says of his work, chatting to me over Zoom from São Paulo. "Each one is like the images that show up in dreams, you

don't control them. They force their way through and they constantly want to show you something. And so, like dreams, you try to interpret them and that's when the intellectual work comes. Then it becomes rational and very controlled."

Widely regarded as one of Brazil's most intriguing artists, Espírito Santo wryly subverts the minimalist tradition through his abstract sculptures of familiar everyday objects such as dice, cans and light bulbs, made

IMAGE: © LEO FARIA

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strange by their disorientating size and incongruous materials.

Working in granite, glass, steel, copper or stone, he is fascinated by themes of domesticity, production and representation – continually blurring the lines between so-called “real” objects and their imitations, remorphing commonplace items into what the art critic Lilian Tone has called “icons of pure contemplation”.

This month those beguiling works come to Mazzoleni, the leading postwar Italian and contemporary gallery on Old Bond Street, marking Espírito Santo's first solo show in the capital in a decade.

Composed of watercolour paintings and sculptures, the exhibition sees the artist explore the tense relationship between abstraction and concreteness that parallels human existence. This dichotomy is exemplified by his resplendent hyperreal black granite light bulb sculpture (*Luz Negra*), which elevates the item beyond everyday functionality into an auratic realm. Is it an object or an icon, and what does it say about how we fetishise and ascribe meaning to manufactured things?

“I think that's an essential issue for the whole human race, because we live between our mind and the concrete world,” Espírito Santo observes. “We have to deal with that all the time. When you see an object, you first consider it mentally. So when I copy a light bulb or a water



IMAGE © IRAN DO ESPÍRITO SANTO

glass I am returning it to the conception level, but, at the same time, making it concrete again.”

The question of where these artistic preoccupations stem from is one that even Espírito Santo cannot fully answer. As a young man he worked as an architect's assistant and then in a photography studio, specialising in black and white photographs and spending an ungodly amount of time in a dark room. This preoccupation with monochromatic light has largely characterised his work. So too the rigid geometry of modernist architecture in his home city.

“São Paulo is a huge, brutal city. It's [an] urbanistic disaster. But in the middle of this place there is some amazing architecture from the modernist period, and also the brutalist [tradition], which is so powerful as a school. I think from the outside, there is a perception that Brazil is all colourful jungle and exoticism, but it's so far from our everyday lives.”

Continually inspired to draw and create works that stretch the boundaries of perception, the Brazilian artist is hard to pin down and quantify. His works are subjective, mysterious even; simultaneously banal and enigmatic. He is not in the habit of telling his audience what or how to think.

“Art has to have some kind of ambiguity,” he explains. “If it's too clear in the message then there's something wrong. I'm not looking for approval, but every artist wants to touch people. That's when you have meaning, when you get feedback from people and sometimes people bring in new [interpretations] that you never thought about.”

In a society oversaturated with rush and stimulation, Espírito Santo wants to awaken us from our habitual indifference and command our attention, gently beckoning us to look more carefully at the world we have built. “What I am telling you, the viewer, is that you should pay more attention to art, but also to the world,” he explains. “Things are not always as they seem.”

*Iran do Espírito Santo, in collaboration with Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, runs until September 6 at Mazzoleni, 15 Old Bond Street*



IMAGE © MAIRO RESTIFE