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December 15, 2025
Vagarosa Luminescência Voadora
<https://www.newcitybrazil.com/2025/12/15/luiz-zerbinis-exhibition-at-galeria-fortes-daloia-gabriel-is-a-brief-glow-in-the-dark/>

Publication
Author
Artist

New City Brazil
Luiz Armando Bagolin
Luiz Zerbini

Luiz Zerbini's Exhibition at Galeria Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel Is A Brief Glow in the Dark

"Vagarosa Luminescência Voadora" offers neither conclusions nor serene syntheses but exposes a transitional phase, a moment in which the work seems to be testing limits and continues to negotiate.

BY LUIZ ARMANDO BAGOLIN | DECEMBER 15, 2025



Luiz Zerbini, installation view of "Leisurely Floating Luminescence," at Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel Barra Funda, 2025/Photo: Eduardo Ortega

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Few Brazilian artists who began their careers in the 1980s have managed to traverse the aesthetic and discursive agendas of the last forty years without turning their own work into mere thematic commentary, that is, without reducing the complexity of their practice to the labels of the moment that successively imposed themselves on the artistic field. Luiz Zerbini is one of these borderline cases: His painting has always oscillated between the rigorous construction of the image and the risk of absorbing external expectations—from tropical exotica to recent environmentalism, passing in recent years through a historical and critical outlook that reached institutional scale in his large solo show at MASP, “A mesma história nunca é a mesma” (The Same Story Is Never The Same) in 2022. The current exhibition, “Vagarosa Luminescência Voadora” (Leisurely Floating Luminescence), curated by Catarina Duncan, therefore does not appear as an isolated episode, but as another chapter in an exhibition cycle that includes, among other moments, the retrospective review of “Paisagens Ruminadas” (Ruminated Landscapes) at the CCBBs in Rio and Brasília in 2024, and the dialogue with Paraná landscape painting in “Afinidades III—Cochicho” at Oscar Niemeyer Museum (MON) in Curitiba, in the same period. Seen within this arc, the show at Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel reinscribes an old problem—the relationship between light, landscape and history—in a group of works in which, now, tree trunks, stones, roots and bioluminescent termite mounds function simultaneously as pictorial matter and as figures of a nature subjected to forces that do not always allow themselves to be named by the ready-made discourses of the ecological agenda.

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The 2022 MASP show marked, in a certain sense, a turning point in this trajectory by bringing to the center of the stage a series of large-scale historical paintings in which Zerbini critically revisited episodes of the country's violent formation—from the first mass celebrated by the Portuguese invaders to internal wars and massacres of Indigenous and peasant populations—turning painting into a place of montage, of reappropriation of archival images, of reconfiguring the gaze on a past that insists on remaining as an open wound in our history. There, exuberant luminosity, so often associated with tropical hedonism, was summoned to illuminate, with irony and discomfort, scenes of imposition, conquest and ruin, as if the excessive brightness itself became a form of critical exposure of the official narrative.



Luiz Zerbini, installation view of "Leisurely Floating Luminescence," at Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel Barra Funda, 2025/Photo: Eduardo Ortega

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In “Paisagens Ruminadas,” the 2024 retrospective shown in Rio and Brasília, the emphasis shifted to the persistence of landscape as a formal and mental problem: botany, gardens, the city and the bush appeared filtered through processes of repetition, accumulation and rhythmic variation that made evident a kind of visual rumination, in which images reorganized themselves as insistent memories, never entirely pacified. “Afinidades III—Cochicho” at MON, in turn, reinforced the dialogue with a tradition of nature and landscape painting in southern Brazil, inserting Zerbini into a lineage in which attention to atmospheres, to variations in light and to the silent vibrations of the surroundings constructed something like a “nostalgia for silence,” to use the expression the artist himself has adopted in interviews.

It is in the light of this recent trajectory that “Vagarosa Luminescência Voadora” becomes more legible, for the exhibition seems to condense what was learned between explicit historical commentary and the rumination of the Brazilian landscape, while at the same time attempting to respond to the urgencies of a moment in which nature and territory have become fields contested by ecological and decolonial discourses.

Before situating this show more precisely within the series of the last few years, however, it may be necessary to return to an earlier moment, when Zerbini’s painting began to distrust what it itself illuminated. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the artist began to interrogate the Brazilian landscape without yielding to the familiarity of the motif, seemingly tranquil scenes emerged that concealed small perceptual disturbances. This period, often remembered only for the solar luminosity of his colors or the immediate seduction of his compositions, actually marks the beginning of a deeper investigation that put into question the very

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transparency of light—and not just the landscape onto which that light fell. Tropical brightness, instead of offering itself as evidence, begins to operate as a kind of suspicious filter, a layer that both reveals and hides, and that would be taken up again, decades later, in other forms, when the painting moves closer to trunks, stones and termite mounds.



Luiz Zerbini, "A manhã dos vagalumes," 2025, acrylic on canvas, 94.4" × 94.4" / Photo: Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel

This inflection appears clearly, for example, in a canvas such as "Untitled" (1988), a large painting that arranges a belvedere ornamented with tiles, columns and objects distributed with almost choreographic precision

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before a bay in Rio de Janeiro. At first glance, the scene could suggest a praise of tropical clarity, a setting in which everything seems arranged for the delight of the eye, but the accumulation of elements—birds under glass domes, suspended flowers, objects displaced along the parapet—introduces a discreet estrangement that prevents the work from stabilizing in contemplation. In this painting, light does not dissipate unease; on the contrary, it makes it sharper, revealing that the idyll is only a layer over an internal organization that is far from peaceful (and that offers itself as a synecdoche of Brazilian reality, seemingly cordial at first sight, but essentially and historically violent). Objects coexist in improbable proximities, the architecture projects itself without perspective offering secure rest, nature appears organized in an almost scenographic fashion, as if the landscape were constructed atop a stage. Nothing there is entirely out of place, but nothing quite settles, and this ambiguity sustains the visual tension, suggesting that clarity is no guarantee of stability, but a condition for certain hidden disturbances to appear.

The influence of David Hockney, so often pointed out, could be described here not as a simple formal or stylistic borrowing, but as a perceptual method: a way of using light to bring out discrepancies, small internal noises, temperature shifts that belie any notion of transparent naturalness. If Hockney exposed Californian excess as a constructed surface, as a color-saturated set in which artificiality is shamelessly assumed, Zerbini displaces this logic to the tropics, where brightness does not soften tensions—it only makes them more visible, as if light were a lens that intensifies, under a peaceful guise, the contradiction between what is shown and what remains in conflict.

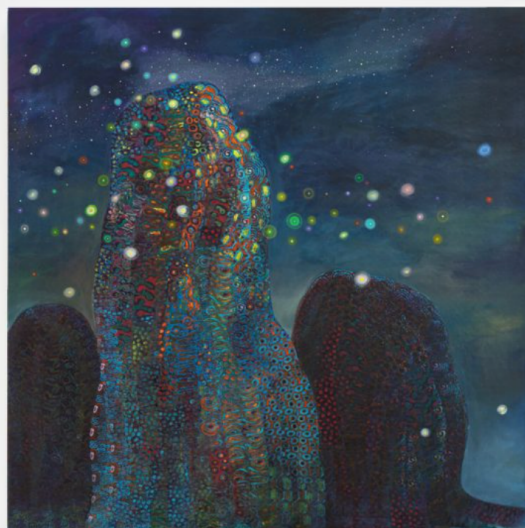
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Another example from the same phase, “Untitled” (1993), presents a still life of fruit arranged in a simple, almost banal container. At first glance, we might see it as an exercise in genre, a study focused on color and volume, but here Zerbini radicalizes his distrust: The modesty of the motif serves as a starting point to investigate what lies beneath the apparently neutral balance of the still life. The fruits, modeled by light that seems homogeneous, carry a tension between ripening and decay, as if each surface accumulated a diffuse, slightly unsettling intensity that makes the stability of the scene less immediate. The composition is rigorous, but not serene; the dry branches beside the bowl introduce a discreet fragility, while the shadows that ought to consolidate the whole generate a gentle instability, a kind of vibration beneath the order. The painting, which could have been merely a disciplined technical exercise, functions as a laboratory in which sharpness and disturbance confront one another—two forces that, in different ways, will continue to guide the work afterward, whether in the reorganization of history on large canvases, as at MASP, or in the patient observation of luminous phenomena in the current exhibition.



Luiz Zerbini, “A noite dos vagalumes,” 2025, acrylic on canvas, 94.4” × 94.4” / Photo: Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel

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From this set of experiences in the 1980s and 1990s emerges an attitude toward the visible: the perception that light, far from fully clarifying, can also complicate; that intense luminosity can reveal hidden structures that escape the first glance; that no image is completely innocent. It is this slow learning, sedimented over decades, that serves as the starting point for what will later become the patient construction of “Vagarosa Luminescência Voadora,” the exhibition in the warehouse space of Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, where colors and forms seem less interested in describing an external world than in registering, on the very surface of the canvas, the ways in which matter absorbs, returns and transforms light.

the sedimentation of procedures and suspicions. What in the 1980s and 1990s presented itself as tension between appearance and unease—the idyllic landscape corroded by small deviations, the slightly off-kilter still life—now becomes a method for approaching pictorial matter itself. It is no longer a question of exposing a hidden discomfort at the heart of a represented scene, but of observing how light structures volumes and surfaces in a way that transfigures ordinary images of reality, establishing among them a kind of silent kinship. Luminosity, once suspect, becomes a mode of approach, though without dissolving conflict entirely. In place of architectures and objects, we find trunks, roots, stones and chromatic fields freed from the function of directly representing landscapes, functioning instead as sensitive structures of a visual thinking that refuses to fully separate nature, memory and abstract form.

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It is in this context that the first impact of the show, “A Manhã dos Vagalumes” (2025), is produced: the large-format canvas is occupied by a vertical figure, similar to a tree trunk, which dominates the space without, however, establishing a rigid hierarchy in relation to the background. The brightness is initial, almost hesitant, and the luminous points scattered around function as signs of activity, indications of microscopic life insinuating itself at the margins of the field of vision. The painting does not describe dawn in the illustrative sense of the passage from night to day; it accompanies its formation, as if seeking to record the slow emergence of a light that has not yet stabilized. The surface is organized by circular marks, incisions and repetitions that give the trunk an internal, almost mineral record, making it less a “theme” than an archive of time deposits. The accumulation of gestures produces a luminosity that seems to arise from within the material itself, not as an external effect projected onto it.



Luiz Zerbini, “Bruxo,” 2025, acrylic on canvas, 94.4” × 165.3” / Photo: Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel

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In “A Noite dos Vagalumes” (2025), the logic inverts without losing continuity with the previous work: Light no longer spreads as a promise of clarification, but cuts through darkness with restrained, almost parsimonious precision. The luminous points do not form identifiable constellations, do not yield a recognizable drawing, but suggest a silent expansion, as if the bioluminescence of insects and larvae in the termite mounds—an explicit reference throughout the show—were less a natural phenomenon to be contemplated than a way of inscribing internal rhythms on the surface of the canvas. The central trunk, denser than in “A Manhã dos Vagalumes,” sustains the rhythm of the image; the painting does not organize night as mere opacity, but as a field of gradual intensities, in which one measures the distance between what appears and what remains in suspension, between what offers itself to the eye and what insists on not fully revealing itself.

This capacity to extract time from matter—to make the pictorial surface behave like a kind of condensed chronology—reappears in “Bruxo” (2025), where two ascending forms reorganize space without settling into recognizable categories. They are not trees, nor figures, nor rocks; they are, rather, intermediate entities, volumes in the process of formation, crossed by a horizon line that wavers, as if the undecided ground had not yet chosen which way to tilt. From one of the forms, a faint plume of smoke rises, indicating a small change of state; the solid seems to approach the gaseous, which, in an artist so attentive to materiality, is a discreet comment on the metamorphoses of the painting itself. The forms do not describe anything definable, but sustain an internal process; the movement of the smoke, followed with evident pleasure by the brush, is one of the rare moments in which one almost physically perceives the artist’s delight in following, with paint, a phenomenon that dissolves.

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In “Pé de Árvore” (2025), the base of a trunk occupies the canvas as if the magnification of the fragment allowed us to grasp a stretch of the material’s cycle that would normally escape us. What we see is no longer the whole tree, dominant, but an enlarged cutout of its zone of contact with the ground. The surface is constructed through incisions, repetition and rhythmic variations that register the deposit of time in the wood; the trunk seems to have been scratched, traversed, remade countless times, until it acquires the thickness of something that has already been many things over the course of its existence. The background, organized in blocks, patterns and chromatic planes that vibrate autonomously, does not function as a neutral support for the foreground; it enlarges, on the contrary, the presence of the trunk, making it extend beyond its physical limits.



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An opening onto another construction of space appears in “Caminho das Pedras” (2025), a work that shifts the gaze from trunk to ground, from vertical to horizontal. Each stone functions as an independent chromatic unit; the variety of forms and colors produces a harmony that does not derive from resemblance, but from the coexistence of discrete chromatic planes that are irreducible to one another. Light follows each surface with equal interest; there is no evident compositional center, but a multiplicity of tensions distributed across the canvas, as if the artist were less concerned with hierarchizing than with showing painting’s capacity to host juxtaposed differences without the need to reconcile them.

A different movement still appears in “Cangaceiro” (2025), which articulates intense horizontal bands—indirectly evoking Tarsila do Amaral’s “A Negra” (1923)—with an almost figurative central trunk. The relationship between figure and ground is more marked here: the trunk, carrying echoes of the *sertão* landscape and the iconography of Brazil’s Northeast interior, condenses a series of references without any one of them imposing itself as the single key to interpretation. The colors recall popular painting, painted façades, banners; the figure resists its surroundings, standing out against that ground as if it wished to leave the frame, or at least negotiate with the excess of color that surrounds it. The title, by associating the trunk with a historical and mythical figure—the *cangaceiro*—intensifies the sense that, beneath the appearance of a tree, a human silhouette is still being sketched, or at least a presence that carries the memory of social and geographic conflicts.

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In “Olho d’Água” (2025), the coexistence between solid matter and flow becomes more explicit. The movement of water, suggested by the chromatic distribution and by the way certain lines and patches stretch out, organizes the canvas as a passage between zones, as a sequence of transitions rather than the record of a fixed instant. There is no attempt to freeze an exemplary moment; there is, instead, an understanding of constant transformation that painting strives to follow, without seeking to reduce it to the image of a single state. Water appears less as motif than as a model of thought: that which never ceases to reconfigure itself as it flows.



Luiz Zerbini, “Caminho das pedras,” 2025, acrylic on canvas, 59” × 59”/Photo: Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel

Amid the paintings, two sculptures of very different character function as three-dimensional unfoldings of the luminous reasoning that runs through the show. The first, a replica of a polychrome termite mound, covered with layers of paint that create irregular reliefs, records in

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volume the repetitive gesture of painting on its surface: The layers accumulate as if the mound itself were in continuous formation, carrying in its chromatic skin the work of time and of the hand. At the opening, when Zerbini lit a small cigarette in one of the mound's cavities, the brief ascent of smoke, following the glow of the burning tip, conferred on the work a simple and precise event in space, almost a generational micro-ritual, also functioning as an ironic and discreet comment on a mode of sociability that runs through the artist's own trajectory and that of his generation. The almost anecdotal scene makes clear how a minimal action can intensify the sense of "life" attributed to the mound, bringing the sculpture closer to a breathing organism.

The second sculpture, made of sand, fishing net and small blinking lights, presents another form of luminosity: unstable, irregular, mechanical, almost nervous. The continuous flickering creates a contrast with the pictorial density of the canvases, introducing a different temporality, made of pulses and interruptions, which inevitably alludes to coastal landscapes, to the precariousness of certain kinds of work, to the

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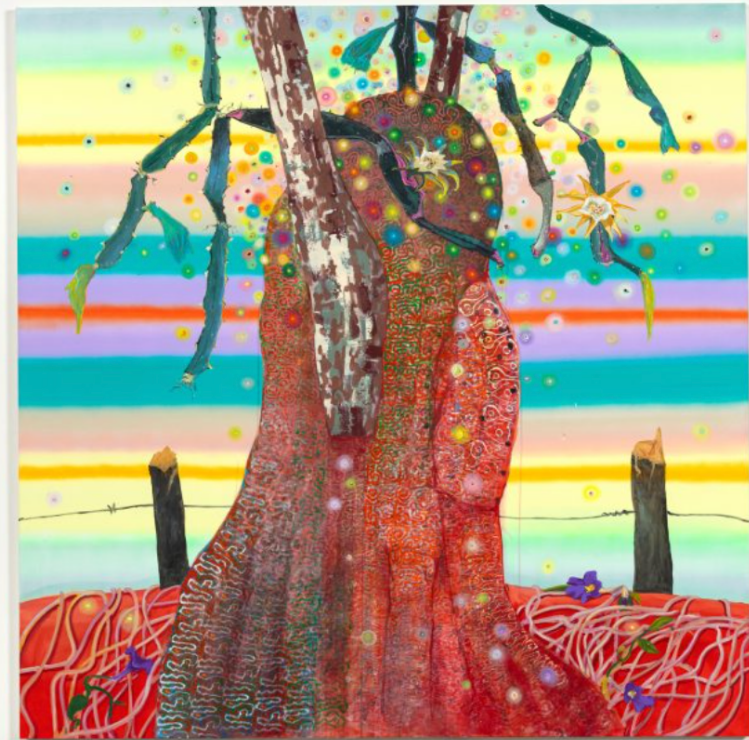
universe of an economy that depends on natural cycles and on an increasingly fragile control over them. The presence of the sculptures, occupying space in dialogue with the paintings, makes it explicit that, for Zerbini, light is not a theme to be illustrated, but a mechanism of relation between matter and time, a sensitive device that governs both the construction of the image and the way we move among them.

In “Vagarosa Luminescência Voadora,” there are moments in which Zerbini precisely resumes issues already present in his earlier production—above all, the relationship between pictorial construction, light and estrangement—and moments in which he tries to respond more directly to the agendas that have reorganized the artistic field over the last ten years. Trunks, roots, stones and small luminous points can suggest an approximation to the dominant ecological agenda, just as certain vertical structures referring to the Cerrado and to bioluminescent termite mounds brush against, from a distance, decolonial debates around landscape and territory; however, this approximation occurs with different degrees of integration. In some works, the artist manages to incorporate this recent repertoire without dismantling the essential core of his painting, transforming natural vocabulary into a formal and rhythmic problem rather than a thematic message; in these cases, the dialogue with contemporary agendas expands the work without compromising its internal coherence. In other pieces, however, the attempt to update himself in relation to these debates appears more directly, approaching a visual grammar now widely disseminated, making the painting, at certain moments, seem to respond more to external expectations of the art system than to the internal history of its own operations.

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Luiz Zerbini, "Cangaceiro," 2025, acrylic on canvas, 78.7" × 78.7" /Photo: Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel

This oscillation is not an isolated flaw of the artist, but a symptom of a broader situation that affects many of his generation: invited to revisit themes, reposition iconographies and respond to discursive urgencies running through institutions, curatorships and cultural policies, these artists try to preserve, at the same time, a personal history of formal problems, of specific experiments with color, light and space, which cannot easily be reduced to the vocabulary of great watchwords. In Zerbini's case, this tension becomes evident when we compare the recent

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works with those of his formative period: If before light destabilized the apparent tranquility of the scene, introducing small disturbances into a supposedly stable environment, today it acts as a mediator between materials and motifs that sometimes seem to suggest an ecological reading—and, at other times, do not require it at all, remaining as investigations of surface, rhythm and structure. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the exhibition lies precisely in this unstable zone, in this territory where painting remains in constant negotiation. When Zerbini resists the temptation to turn trunks, stones, waters and termite mounds into environmental allegories, allowing them to remain figures of a natural world that can still be seen without the immediate weight of the slogan, his painting preserves its original force: Light once again becomes an instrument of suspicion, not of pacification.

This is not about demanding definitive answers—which would be an imposture in art—nor about expecting from the artist some heroic gesture of refusal toward the transformations underway in the field, as if it were possible to ignore the pressure of contemporary discourses on the way an exhibition is organized. What we observe is a painting situated between external vectors and its own trajectory, crossing a point of tension that, far from being a problem to be quickly overcome, can be productive for the development of his language, as long as Zerbini continues to allow light to complicate, rather than illustrate, the situations he puts on canvas. “Vagarosa Luminescência Voadora” offers neither conclusions nor serene syntheses; it exposes a transitional phase, a moment in which the work seems to be testing the limits between what it learned in the 1980s and 1990s, what it was forced to confront at MASP

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in 2022, and what, in contact with the more recent ecological and territorial agendas, it still needs to decide whether it will incorporate or leave at the margins, as noise, hesitation or silent refusal.

“Luiz Zerbini: Vagarosa Luminescência Voadora” (Leisurely Floating Luminescence) is on view at Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel Barra Funda, Rua James Holland 71, São Paulo, through January 24, 2026.