

## Painting and Ceremony

Daniel Sturgis on Maxwell Alexandre at David Zwirner, London

Two paintings of gilded frames hang side by side and alone in the central room of the Brazilian painter Maxwell Alexandre's exhibition *Pardo é Papel: Close a door to open a window* at David Zwirner's gallery in London. The paintings are huge, at over three meters high and close to five meters long, and identical. Together they comprise one single work, *Dois quadros SAMO na parede* (2020). They are part of Alexandre's *KNovo Poder* (New Power) series and although they are placed midway through this exhibition, they act as both a prologue and a subset of the broader *Pardo é Papel* exhibition cycle, of which this London presentation is the second iteration. #A1

The title, *Dois quadros SAMO na parede* (Two Paintings by SAMO on the Wall) is taken from a verse by the rapper Baco Exu do Blues, one of a number of current and political Brazilian rap-poets that Alexandre's work can be seen to be both in harmony and dialogue with. Alexandre has described his artistic process as painting rap verses and is totally immersed in the scene, releasing an album, *Anjo Maxwell*, himself in 2020 and also providing a playlist of music for this current exhibition. In Baco Exu do Blues's song "Preto e Prata," the singer plays with the Portuguese word *somos* (we are), combining it with SAMO, the iconic graffiti tag of the New York painter Jean-Michel Basquiat, which is a pointed, charged, and dystopian abbreviation of "same old shit."

Like all the works in this exhibition, these paintings are created on numerous sheets of light brown kraft paper which have been glued together to make vast surfaces. In this room, the works are hung with binder clips on tension wires parallel to the wall, and it is only the ornate gold frames themselves and an expanse of white outside of each frame that have actually been painted. The rectangular monochrome interior of each has been left untouched, leaving just the raw paper. The paper, though, is loaded, and in Alexandre's hands it speaks powerfully about race, oppression, and empowerment. In Brazil, this kraft paper, which is widely used in schools, is simply referred to as *pardo*, or "brown" in Portuguese. But in Brazil *pardo* is also a word of racial classification and oppression, used politically since the 1940s by the government's censuses to classify, judge, and subdivide the country's Afro-Brazilian and mixed-heritage communities by the darkness of their skin. Alexandre has therefore filled the emptiness of each gilt frame with a community and the black activist rallying cry of "*Pardo é papel*" (brown is paper). The aesthetic beauty and tranquility of *Dois quadros SAMO na parede* is resolutely double-edged. It is an artwork that directly asks, through its title, materiality, and depiction of the trappings and prestige of European high-art, who is, was, and can be represented in painting.

Through the other eight works on view at David Zwirner, Alexandre answers this question. These paintings, full of images, are hung like banners or stage backdrops breaking up and subdividing the gallery spaces. Each work is rooted in and draws upon the culture, politics, and marginalization of Alexandre's own community from the Rocinha favela in Rio de Janeiro, where the artist lives and works. His figurative paintings speak to and for this community. Alexandre first displayed similar works in 2017 in the favela's community sports center, and later, as a defiant act to claim space and visibility as an artist of color, he unfurled paintings that were well over and above the permitted dimensions at the prestigious Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel gallery in central Rio.

Unlike Alexandre's previous works, such as the *Reprovados* series of paintings, which directly confronted violence with depictions of racial oppression and injustice, the current paintings exhibited in London, and the *Pardo é Papel* series more generally, focus on ideas of community emancipation, wealth, and self-belief.

The name of the painting *Close a door to open a window* (2020) is taken from the line of a song by the American rapper Tyler, the Creator and is also used as the current exhibition's subtitle. This is a painting of fractured layers, with multiple cultural codifications that would be readily familiar to the favela communities that it depicts. The painting's background is a huge blow-up of the design on a popular LSD blotter and shows a geometrically stylized snow-capped mountain with a sun and moon. Within each field of color, Alexandre had added an all-over pattern. This recurring wave motif recurs in many of the works in this exhibition. It is taken from the design on the coveted plastic Capri paddling pools that are visible throughout the favela and, because they are relatively expensive, hold status in the neighborhood.

Groupings and single figures are superimposed onto this painted background. The figures themselves are loosely drawn, with skin tones painted in brown liquid shoe polish, bitumen, and henê hair relaxer. These are non-conventional art materials that resonate biographically. For example, the polish connects to Alexandre's boot-cleaning ritual when he was conscripted into the army at eighteen, as all young men are in Brazil. But these materials, which Alexandre uses to paint the colors of black skin, are conceptual as well. They are associated with aspects of a community and recognize the lack of its representation in the Western canonical tradition of painting.

The favela's power structures, whether of the state, organized crime, or evangelical religion, are also on display in this work. On the left-hand side of the painting are men posing with guns; there is also a baptism and a group of figures huddled by a fire. Just one of these men is white: a biblical figure in clean divine robes. Another man has a large gig-economy courier-backpack and holds Brazil's blue CTPS Work Card and Social Security Booklet, one of two blue books in the painting that refer to aspects of the work's title. In this case, the ability to work represents the figurative door: "A door [is] the place of passage and responsibility." #A2 At the top of the painting there is an image of heavy-handed law enforcement with a UPP narcotics patrol truck. There is also the second blue book, which the artist refers to as "the window of escapism." #A3 The blue Brazilian passport protrudes from the breast pocket belonging to a man whose head is surrounded by butterflies. Elsewhere a person lounges in an airplane seat with an iPhone and a gold watch. Is the very act of painting itself another means of escape? Alexandre's artworks also travel imaginatively and literally. Multiple narratives seep out of his work and, in their specificity, point to the social and economic constraints in his neighborhood and question the bias present in the making and reception of so much painting – painting that is often too white and too elitist. Through size, references, display strategies, and low-tech material innovations, Alexandre's work redirects painting's discourses while questioning Western traditions.

Alexandre's three-part work *If you could die and come back to life, up for air from the swimming pool* (2020) offers such a repositioning. This is a beautifully complex narrative installation that dominates a whole room. Two wall-sized paintings are hung at right angles to each other, with a smaller work suspended diagonally in the middle of the room. These paintings show men and women publicly baptizing each other in swimming pools. The figures are faceless, the hairstyles unique and blond, in Rio's politicized 'blond-black' anti-establishment style. Decorative waves from the Capri pool patterns add a visual calmness to the proceedings. Behind each ceremony, jackets emblazoned with NOIVA hang on hooks and await the initiated. In 2018 the artist and some friends founded a church with this name, *A Noiva* (The Bride); it is a church to art, drafting the redemptive qualities of creativity onto one of the favelas' dominant power structures. Through its regular exhibitions, empowering performances, processions, and baptisms, *A Noiva* shows, as this exhibition does, that it takes a community to make a painting and that paintings create communities.

## Notes

1 The first iteration of Pardo é Papel was at the Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon from March 8 to July 7, 2019.

2 "Maxwell Alexandre on Pardo é Papel: Close a door to open a window," David Zwirner Gallery, 2020, video, 22:21, <https://vimeo.com/user16467475/review/496091704/f420d867b1> (accessed Jan 11, 2021).

3 Ibid.