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## **galeria nara roesler // clima tempestuoso**

recently added to the list of artists represented by Galeria Nara Roesler, Oscar Oiwa presents new works on the contemporary globalized world in his first solo show at the gallery

On May 14, at 7PM, Oscar Oiwa opens his first exhibition at Galeria Nara Roesler. *Clima tempestuoso* [Stormy weather] gathers 12 paintings created in the last two years, all being shown in Brazil for the first time. The show runs until June 15.

The works depict disasters (natural or man-caused), violent weather events, political misconceptions and states of emergency with Oscar Oiwa's traits of fantasy.

One may recognize in his canvases the influence of great masters of *ukiyo-e*, painting style developed in Japan between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. In *Rescue Boat*, for an example, tidal waves threaten to swallow a big ship, making use of typically Japanese aesthetics and theme.

This homage to the Japanese masters, however, is coupled with absolutely global and contemporary issues such as the allusion to the Superdome, which housed the victims of Hurricane Katrina in the work of suggestive title *Swirl*, 2012, or references to great works of art many ciphers going under the bridge in the post-crisis world of the painting *Occupy everywhere*, with an open reference to the Occupy movement.

The work of Oscar Oiwa is a direct result of his itinerancy: son of a Japanese couple, the artist born in São Paulo moved to



Oscar Oiwa  
**Rescue boat**, 2013  
oil on canvas  
227 x 333 cm

### **opening**

05.14.2013 7pm > 10pm

### **exhibition**

05.15 > 06.15

mon > fri 10am > 7pm

sat 11am > 3pm

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Tokyo during the apex of the economic crisis. Then to London, and in 2002, upon receiving a Guggenheim Fellowship, he settled in New York where he lives and works. These different stays have implemented his familiarity with ghost stories, daily news, horror movies and comics in his vision of the urban world.

In critical text about the exhibition, Marilyn Zeitlin concludes: "Oiwa cannot turn his eyes away from the world around him. He makes us able to feel and think in new ways about that world. He uses his awareness of a large world, his wit, his imagination, and his tremendous skills as an artist to transform the terrible into something we are capable of pondering."

#### **about the artist**

Oscar Oiwa was born in 1965 in São Paulo, Brazil. He lives and works in New York, USA, since 2002.

He received artist in residence award from The Delfina Studio Trust, London, as well as grants from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, Asian Cultural Council and John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation.

He participated in the 21st International São Paulo Biennial (1991) and in group exhibitions in institutions like El Museo del Barrio (New York, USA), Instituto Tomie Ohtake (São Paulo, Brazil), Art Arsenal (Kiev, Ukraine) and Kunsthalle Dusseldorf (Dusseldorf, Germany).

His works have recently been shown in solo exhibitions at Museu Nacional de Belas Artes (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 2011), Takamatsu City Museum of Art (Takamatsu, Japan, 2009), Tokyo Museum of Contemporary Art (Tokyo, Japan, 2009), Arizona State University Art Museum (Tempe, USA, 2006) and Centre for Contemporary Art (Leiden, the Netherlands, 2000).

His works are important public collections such as the National Museum of Modern Art (Tokyo, Japan), Museum of Contemporary Art (Tokyo, Japan) Phoenix Museum of Art (Phoenix, USA) and Prince Albert II of Monaco.

#### **press relations**

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**about the gallery**

For over 35 years, Nara Roesler has continuously promoted contemporary art to a local and international body of collectors, curators, and scholars. In 1989, she founded Galeria Nara Roesler in São Paulo, Brazil, as an arena to expand the boundaries of art practice, locally and abroad. Representing some of the most interesting contemporary artists, the gallery directs much of its interest towards opposing art practices from the late 60s onwards with their contemporaneous and convergent ramifications, representing historical names alongside a select group of artists on the rise.

In 2012, the gallery had its exhibition space doubled, totaling an area of 1600m<sup>2</sup> and revitalized the curatorial project Roesler Hotel, started in 2006, with innovative proposals such as group exhibitions *Lo bueno y lo malo*, curated by Patrick Charpenel (director of Fundación/Colección Jumex), and *Buzz* a show dedicated to op art conceived by Vik Muniz with works by Bridget Riley, Josef Albers, Marcel Duchamp and Yayoi Kusama.

## **Stormy Weather: The Sublime and the Paintings of Oscar Oiwa**

Marilyn Zeitlin, 2013

Nature has turned catastrophic. Global warming is producing record-breaking cold and heat, tsunamis, hurricanes, tornadoes, blizzards, forest fires, floods, and droughts that wreak enormous human cost in loss of life, destruction of the environment, and heightened anxiety. Do we really build a wall to stem the tides that threaten to swamp Manhattan? Is this even feasible technically and financially? And what about all the other places under siege from outside weather events? To deal with the meteorological present and the chaos that it has been delivering ever more frequently and ever more violently is a new challenge. It also presents new realities for artists to confront. The imagery of these catastrophes can no longer be seen as metaphors for social or personal interior states of mind nor as just plot-shaping devices. *The Tempest* is now an actual storm, and we are all getting wet.

Oscar Oiwa has been portraying calamity – natural or human-caused – for more than a decade. Representations of violent weather events represent about half his output; additional works portray political and social error and calamitous states. And he has never lacked for instances or inspiration. But he is not merely engaged in reportage. The work evokes more than simply a hand-wringing response. He engages the viewer as he explores these events by creating visually powerful, beautiful painting: by evoking the sublime.

And whether we like the reemergence of the sublime or not, we had better get used to it. The events that Oiwa and other artists confront are not likely to subside, and better to name them and turn them into art than to simply agonize over what has been wrought and the likelihood of future impending disasters.

The sublime emerges in its modern form first in the seventeenth century in translation of a Greek text fragment by a Roman known as Longinus.<sup>1</sup> But the characteristics that form the sublime most widely known to Western thinkers are codified nearly a century later in the work of Edmund Burke. In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), Burke identifies the characteristics of the sublime as our reaction to aspects of nature. These notions of the sublime were widely celebrated by the artists and poets of the Romantic Movement. A central characteristic of the sublime is that it overwhelms reason with emotion. Events or visions elicit awe or fear in the viewer. These feelings are evoked by causing "Astonishment [...] that state of the soul in which all motion is suspended, with some degree of horror [...]". Fear "robs the mind of all its powers [...] and of reasoning."<sup>2</sup> The sublime is found in conditions that defy human control and exceed human scale. It is often said that the sublime is a condition that defies representation altogether.

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<sup>1</sup> Morley, Simon. "Introduction/The Modern Sublime". In: Morley, Simon (ed.). *The Sublime*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Morley, 15.

Burke is referring to a sublime that exists in nature. For us, living in the twenty-first century, nature is being squeezed out of our lives. I sometimes think of it as what we see on the way to the airport. But in later texts, by Immanuel Kant most prominently, the sublime is abstracted from nature and is described as what happens to the mind “at the borderline where reason finds its limits”<sup>3</sup> triggered by art as well as nature. A manifestation of the sublime is the uncanny, which posits that some images or experiences are both familiar and mysterious simultaneously. This condition bridges the tangible world with one beyond reason, carrying us to a place in which we are baffled or overwhelmed by what is beyond rational understanding.

I recently saw Richard Wagner's *Parsifal* produced by the Metropolitan Opera in New York.<sup>4</sup> One of the challenges in producing this last Wagner opera is that the composer evokes the emotions of the sublime in the music and attributes profound depths of spirituality and power to the characters, but he gives little indication of how the staging should be realized. It is a classic case of the unrepresentable. The Met's solution was to create a minimalist set and costumes to create a visual setting that is abstract. In the final act, we see a stage that resembles the depleted natural world and desperate figures of Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*:<sup>5</sup> the endgame of civilization. But while Parsifal returns to lift the curse on the world as he saves the Earth and all mankind with his Christ-like purity, Oiwa offers little in the way of explicit salvation. Instead, within his pictures of disasters, he gives us beauty, elevating the experience of the work to a kind of transcendence.

Abstraction functions well as a means toward the presentation of the sublime, one which Oiwa exploits even within representational works. Perhaps the most vivid statement of the sublime in the group of paintings in this exhibition is *Swirl* (2012). The image of a maelstrom is matched by a domed structure with a ring of windows or lights. To see this dome as the Superdome, that failed refuge for the poor in New Orleans during the debacle of Hurricane Katrina, is only one way to read it. Is it the dome of Hagia Sofia? A spaceship? Rays beam down from the ring to illuminate the maelstrom. Are we indoors or outdoors? The image is frightening, in part, because of its ambiguity. The painting is of a scale suited to the sublime; and the composition, symmetrical but with two complementing concentric masses, exaggerates uncontrolled energy with the tension between expanding outward and compressing downward. The painting is like an explosion about to happen. The absence of specificity – or its abstract quality – makes it insidiously capable of resonating with whatever strikes fear in your imagination most deeply.

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<sup>3</sup> Morley, 15, referencing Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, 1790.

<sup>4</sup> Metropolitan Opera, 2013, Jonas Kaufmann, *Parsifal*; production, François Girard; conductor, Daniele Gatti.

<sup>5</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2006).

In *Earthscape* (2012), Oiwa expresses his awe at the sight of the Earth from the air. Fields are neatly patterned into rectangles and circles. Shadows create a light rhythm along the perimeters. The image is a celebration of nature shaped by agriculture. Human presence is implied, and all seems fairly right with the world. The companion work, *The Accident* (2012), portrays a similar landscape, but in this version, Oiwa converts it to a site of upheaval and calamity. First the hills undulate; contour lines emphasize the concentric pattern of energy. Like a roiling sea, the hills seem to beat against the cliff on the left edge of the frame where a truck has missed a turn on a mountain road and is hanging on by a thread to avoid tumbling to certain destruction. Oiwa, familiar with the Edo masters of the woodblock print, pays homage to Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858), echoing the waves of the *ukiyo-e* master and his composition in which a diagonal divides a distant, lower space of sea or distant village from a precipitous path in the foreground.<sup>6</sup> Here Oiwa cannot resist doubling down: the sublime of scale and awe at the sight of the Earth from above is now the setting for tragedy; further, he widens the meaning by reminding us of the dangers of everyday living that may await us right around the corner. The work dramatizes the violation of the predictable and offers a window into the dark side of the imagination.

In *Rescue Boat* (2013), the darkness of *Swirl* and the undulating waves of *The Accident* reappear as the framework for drama. Massive waves threaten to engulf a large ship from which a lifeboat dangles. The rescue boat, dwarfed by the waves and ghost ship, has headlights that penetrate the dark. The triangles of light, if read from right to left, form pincers, or the mouth of a sea monster. The painting is filled with fearsome imagery, energy wildly out of control and inexplicable. The only order is conveyed by the rescue boat. Its trajectory draws a huge circle over the waves. The rescue boat is a savior from another realm that rises above the chaos of the sea attempting to right the disaster with its penetrating, supernatural light.

In *Ghosts* (2008), Oiwa creates a mythic swamp of debris that we see as if it were an aquarium. Above the water line, ghosts in the shapes of China and Russia face off silhouetted against the submerged shape of the United States. At the right is a nest in which half a dozen little ghosts are huddled. They are likely cousins of Disney characters and a Greek chorus, watching the confrontation of the major powers. The black figures recall the hungry ghosts (*éguir*) of Buddhist mythology. These beings are not fully human. They reside in limbo, condemned to continue living with insatiable appetites. It is easy to see the insatiability as parallel to lust for geopolitical power, a condition that is fatal to the countries that are caught in the crossfire of competition.

About half of Oiwa's output explores the sublime element in landscape. The other work looks at human folly in a more explicit way, implying critique but also elevating what seems to be a narrative hidden within the ordinary, often urban, reality. Bridging the two groups is *Five Nests* (2012). The sublime in nature appears as a rich, impenetrable jungle. Oiwa paints

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<sup>6</sup> Hiroshige uses this formula several times in the series of prints *Fifty-Three Stations of the Tokaido*.

the jungle to rival Henri Rousseau, with palms, giant ferns, and bromeliads. Ribbon-like forms intertwine with tree trunks, and weave the composition together. He animates the surface with golden dots that embody limpid light, but they also seem to populate the atmosphere with embodiments of energy. The dots are relatives of Shinto *kami*, indwelling spirits who are not quite gods but clearly spiritual actors.<sup>7</sup> Clinging to trees or set into the trunks are pods within which are miniature human habitations. The cut-away views reveal rooms tastefully furnished with classic modernist furniture. But no one is home. Perhaps this is a kinder, gentler post-apocalyptic vision, more enticing than the barren landscapes; but in the scale of the painting (555 centimeters wide) and the incongruity of these tiny dwellings in the midst of the jungle, they evoke what Sigmund Freud calls “the uncanny:” “[...] all that is terrible, [...] all that arouses dread and creeping horror.”<sup>8</sup> Insidiously, this picture gets under your skin more subtly and therefore penetrates more deeply than the more explicit *Rescue Boat* or *The Accident*, with their narratives of disaster. In his jungle, Oiwa leaves us to puzzle what might have driven the human inhabitants from their homes, leaving us to complete the narrative.

Oiwa has lived in intense urban environments most of his life: in São Paulo, Tokyo, and now New York City. He brings to his vision and imagination of the urban world his familiarity with ghost tales, horror comics and movies, and the everyday news. His point of view in the urban images is often from above, as if he is in an upper floor of an apartment building looking down on the street. He often focuses on what is overlooked. In *Yellow Elephant* (2013), Oiwa’s central actor is a giant backhoe. It is scooping debris off the floor of a platform built in a river. Behind is a bridge that is being repaired. The water reflects clouds, the only link to the natural world. The backhoe is the elephant. We know that this is a circus elephant by the placement of a drum-like stand, topped with a star, placed to the side of the elephant. The animation of the backhoe into an animal again flirts with the mysterious, but here in an ambiguously humorous way. Is it strictly fanciful, the resemblance, an associative quirk? Or is the elephant like many faceless workers, just a machine anonymously slaving away for the benefit of others?

Oiwa was in New York when the Occupy Wall Street movement was attempting to make the plight of the poor and dispossessed known to a wider public. In *Occupy Everywhere* (2011), Oiwa shows a structure similar to the construction platform in *Yellow Elephant*. He shows us improvised living spaces under a subway overpass and beside the river that we know from *Yellow Elephant*. Two dwellings are shown. In the back space is an unadorned place, the residence of the 99 percent. In the front, under a glaring light straight out of Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937), is a similar space, but this one is the elegant designer loft of the 1 percent. Oiwa places the very rich and the destitute in the same place: both are living on the margin,

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<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, “Oiwa” is the name of the main character in *Yotsuya Kaidan*, a Japanese tale of betrayal, murder, and ghostly revenge. Written originally as a kabuki play in 1825, it has entered the culture as the quintessential horror story. See [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yosuya\\_Kaidan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yosuya_Kaidan).

<sup>8</sup> First published in 1919, quoted in “Mike Kelley in Conversation with Thomas McEvilley,” 1992, in Morley, 198.

under the bridge. The space for the 1 percent is furnished with the modernist classic furniture from *Five Nests* and a favorite Oiwa reference to modernism in general, with all its high ideals and unintended consequences. The dimensions and proportions of Oiwa's painting are similar to those of *Guernica*. Picasso's painting is 350 by 780 centimeters, Oiwa's, 227 by 444 centimeters. Other art references are to Keith Haring, who in fact painted in the subway system and in the streets of New York. Here the Haring painting *Crack is Wack* (1986; restored 2007) is guerilla art and simultaneously a collector's prize. We see Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), here restored to its lowly origins as a urinal, tossed aside as junk. Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* (1964) is restored to its origins as well. It is now mere flattened cardboard, its art value no longer relevant. Oiwa is critiquing modernism, questioning the value system of his own world – the art market. He tells us that the Occupy movement will never run out of targets, that the compromises of ideals run far beyond Wall Street to encompass virtually everything. Oiwa is showing us that we are all impacted by the income disparity that the Occupy movement rebels against. But above all, he shows persistence to survive and those who do so in environments much like the one he depicts, whether in New York or the favelas of Brazil. It is the frisson of horror of the sublime made palatable by his wit and the beauty of the painting itself.

In *Big Circus* (2011), Oiwa transports the elephant to a completely fanciful place. A weary-looking elephant is in the traces with a donkey. The pair are emblems of the bastions of politics. The bull is from Wall Street, the symbol of an aggressive financial market, one that in 2008 overreached and threatened the entire U.S. economy. An eagle, looking a bit frayed, suggests freedom. The elephant and bull have been flayed to reveal mechanical innards. All these creatures – or machines – are enacting a tedious drama against the map of the United States. The background is built up of constructed forms that are disintegrating. The whole scenario is taking place under The Big Top, a focal point of a circus. Oiwa is expressing the revulsion that many American and other people felt and feel about the circus that seems to have replaced major institutions. Not even his dots can bring much optimism. This is a clever and terrible painting.

Oiwa cannot turn his eyes away from the world around him. He makes us able to feel and think in new ways about that world. He uses his awareness of a large world, his wit, his imagination, and his tremendous skills as an artist to transform the terrible into something we are capable of pondering.