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# nara roesler

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**bruno dunley**

clouds

new york

jan 12 – feb 25, 2023

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On the occasion of *Clouds*, a solo show by Bruno Dunley at Nara Roesler New York, Pollyana Quintella visited the artist's studio in São Paulo, for a conversation about painting.

Below are excerpts from that conversation:

**Pollyana Quintella** Bruno, we're here in your studio, in front of a set of recent works. How was the creative process for you?

**Bruno Dunley** These works are the result of my practice over the last two years and come precisely from the conflicting experience of depicting and structuring the paintings. While creating a space of perception and reflection for the viewer, the works also try to find a public meaning, a place that reverberates in people's imagination and builds meanings about the complex reality that surrounds us.

One of the most relevant aspects of this evolving practice has been a more radical relationship with color. When I held my last solo exhibition in 2020, entitled *Virá*, color already had an important role, but its presence was more expansive. The structuring of the works had a more extroverted internal movement and the relationship between the paintings sought to distribute color in the exhibition space in an enthusiastic and euphoric way.

We were experiencing a difficult time, of isolation and fear, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. There was a lot of political and social turmoil in Brazil, a feeling of powerlessness and disbelief. So, this exhibition was an attempt to move towards a more expansive place, towards a desire for a possible future.

Now, in 2022, I realize that recent works have taken on another posture. The conflict remains, but the paintings present a more withdrawn and intimate space in relation to that joy. Another important factor in this current work is *Joules & Joules*. In 2020, right after the exhibition, artist Rafael Carneiro and I set up a little paint factory. We started to produce quality oil paint and send it to artists all over Brazil.

All the paintings shown in this exhibition were made with our own paint and the fact that today, I make these materials and research pigments and the history and uses of colors over the centuries, has given another dimension to my work inside the studio. This deeper exploration of my craft brought me chemical, physical and historical aspects of color that I didn't have before.

**PQ** You used an important word to talk about work: conflict. I think it's a propositional conflict. Your paintings refuse to give explicit meanings or totalitarian statements, whether based on the relationship they establish with the images, or based on the type of experience or atmosphere that the work produces.

The large-format pieces, seen from a distance, are one thing and when seen from a little closer, they become many others, as they negotiate different movements and repertoires within the same canvas. There is an invitation for

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painting to be experimented with through its visual layers. The vision moves back and forth—a movement typical of a work dedicated to showing the space between us and what we see. The same seems to occur with color—although now it's less affirmative and viewed as an ambiguity.

**BD** This place of conflict, ambiguity and suspension is what has shaped my most recent works. It is in the negotiation of motion, repertoire, methods and in the relationship between the works that the unity of the paintings comes into question. With that, the expectation of a painting presenting itself in a contemplative and harmonious way falls short and another perception and temporality arises.

Brush strokes are interrupted by sweeping motions; instances of ink buildup are followed by areas of no ink or drips. All of this materializes conflict into the unity of the image and at the same time, it establishes a pleasant visual experience that can open up room for other questions.

At the beginning, I questioned myself about the place of painting and feared that my work might surrender to a decorative and seductive hedonism. Today, I deal with it in a lighter and sometimes more humorous way. This exhibition of mine in New York, is evidence of this achievement in relation to color and the construction of an atmospheric space and a deterritorialized light.

It's as if I were painting a night without night, or a landscape without a landscape. The environments do not have a defined outline, but bring about a sensitive, reflective and psychic experience. What is underway is the construction of a place that, to the same extent that it affirms itself, also affirms its opposites.

**PQ** We're talking about a visual dialect, aren't we?

**BD** It is dialectical in the sense of always needing doubt in order to have affirmation. This has already been stronger at other times. In other exhibitions I had the need to present paintings that were radically different in themes or styles. If I showed an abstract painting, filled with movement and color, then I also needed to present something more existential, that questioned itself, or a more figurative painting, so that I could better understand the limits of my poetic construction. There was affirmation, doubt and possibility at the same time.

**PQ** Given their large scale, these paintings are able to provide us with a fast and sweeping visual experience, with a peripheral appeal. However, as we approach, the vision becomes more nuanced and measured, it's 'sharper', with the promise of a more active involvement between subject and painting. But there

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are more metaphorical or subjective distances, which are built from the motifs you are painting.

In the same painting, there is something of a landscape and a city, but also fragments that suggest celestial or, on the contrary, microscopic bodies. The vibrant palette even leads us to consider them as part of a psychedelic experience, or an after-image experience, like when we close our eyes and the retina continues to produce luminous photochemical activities. All this makes the spatiality of painting an absurd experience.

It is impossible to locate it, because, within all these suggestions, there are countless distortions; sometimes gigantic and sometimes minimal.

**BD** This suspended ambiguity is not a desire to escape to an idealistic or timeless place. The suspension I seek in my work is not spiritual or religious. It is associated with naming and giving form to the sensations and experiences that painting offers.

When you talk about a cosmic space or a microscopic one that the paintings evoke, I ask myself: is this idea of a celestial body, outside the world, an idea of spirituality? But I don't think so. This macro image, of a celestial body, is just a body in outer space. It's funny that the macro image evoked is a celestial body and the micro image is something like a closed eye on a sunny day. It's like that image that remains when you rub your eyes while they're closed, and the sun hits and everything turns more orange and dots of color appear.

Regarding distances, there is one image that you see when you are far from the painting and then you see the makings of the image and the brushstrokes when you are up close. From afar I try to structure an image that can sustain itself.

It may even be a fragile structure, a conflicted image, without balance, but even still, it needs to remain standing. Up close, it is possible to perceive the multiplicity of small strokes, details, and an excess of visual aspects that were important for the development of the work. I started making large paintings to place myself in a situation where the space of the painting was larger than the space that my body can occupy and reach. My entire horizon is taken over by the canvas and perhaps it is this immersion that intensifies this psychedelic or dreamlike aspect of the work.

**PQ** Yes, your painting doesn't want to produce a kind of spiritualized redemption before the world, it doesn't want to be metaphysical. The fact that we recognize visual codes in your painting that are present in the world is not coincidental, because you never cease to negotiate between the symbolic and the imaginary. There is not a total abandonment of the image or of signs, although they may manifest themselves only as echoes, whispers

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or murmurs; remnants which survive on the surface of the painting.

But it is curious, the fact that, in this recent work, everything that suggests micro-organisms, psychedelic experiences or the 'after-image' effect also seems to signal a desire to set one foot outside cultural signs, in search of a more biochemical, synaesthetic experience. It's something that makes me think about your research references, because, often, to start a painting, you're looking at other images, including those from other socio-historical contexts, such as illuminated manuscripts and Egyptian paintings.

**BD** I started looking at illuminated manuscripts in 2014, due to an impasse I had with my painting the year before, in 2013. At the time, I was doing work that used diagrams, encyclopedic images and scientific manuals as a reference. They were technical images that sought to name and organize things in the world, and the colors I used came from a reduced and monochromatic palette.

The vision for the work was to oppose these pragmatic and aseptic images with a visual treatment that would give body, materiality and movement to that universe. I wanted to use painting and its meanings to give a pulse to those dead images. The work started to become very rational and codified, and everything I did became a meta-painting. It was at that moment that I felt the need to complicate this universe with color and intensify other ways of painting.

I asked myself how color could expand language and from there I went to study colorist painters that I already liked. I focused on the work of Volpi, Matisse, Bonnard, Rothko and tried to understand the genealogy of color

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in the work of these artists. I wanted to know what paintings they themselves had seen.

I learned more about Volpi, who had looked a lot at pre-Renaissance works. I went to Italy to study Giotto, Fra Angelico, Masaccio and Piero Della Francesca. I discovered that Matisse was inspired by an exhibition of Persian illuminated manuscripts in Germany in 1910 and, when studying Rothko, I found illuminated manuscripts created in the 1000s, such as those of Blessed Saint Sever and Blessed de Liébana.

These manuscripts are from the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries and they tell an entire biblical apocalyptic story, and my relationship with these works was conflicting. The narrative of these images did not interest me, but instead, I was drawn in by the fascinating way in which they were structured. They are very flat spaces with sophisticated and direct chromatic relationships. In 2016, I saw an exhibition on Indian illuminated manuscripts that was on display at the Met Museum, in New York several times. I was totally fascinated by them and their world and, since then, it's the thing I have seen the most. They help me to understand what I would like to do.

In addition to the illuminated manuscripts, there are two other things that have encouraged me to paint lately: one is the moment before going to sleep, when my eyes are closed. I am interested in this drowsy, tired space, this kind of sleep circuit and the images that come with it. The other thing is the radical conviviality of colors within Joules & Joules. Often, the story of a color and how it's produced in a factory, makes me want to try painting with it. This direct relationship with other paintings, with the state of imagination and somnolence, with the materiality of a color and experimentation, is what inspires my painting today.

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The work of **Bruno Dunley** questions the specificity of painting, particularly in relation to representation and materiality. His paintings depart from carefully constructed compositions, which he gradually begins to correct, alter, and cover up, frequently revealing the lacunae in the apparent continuity of perception. Bruno Dunley is part of a new generation of Brazilian painters called 200e8 group. The collective, based in São Paulo, was founded with a common interest in painting, to enable its eight members to develop a critical approach to painting within the contemporary art scene. Dunley's work begins with found images and with an analysis of the nature of painting, where language codes such as gesture, plane, surface, and representation are understood as an alphabet. Recently, his practice has shifted towards gestural abstraction, all while maintaining his interest for representation.

As stated by the artist 'I see my work as a series of questions and affirmations about the possibilities of painting, about its essence and

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our expectations of it." Often, a single color predominates the surface of his compositions, establishing a minimalist language and a meditative quality, that is frequently addressed in critical texts about his work. More recently, the artist has shown an interest for more aggressive composition, expressed through vibrant and contrasting colors. The 200e8's practices stipulate that stable or preconceived ideas about artistic processes should be abandoned, and procedures continually reformulated. In the work of Dunley, promises are made and consequently broken, testing the limits of the viewer's tension.

Bruno Dunley was born in 1984 in Petropolis, Brazil. He lives and work in São Paulo. Recent solo shows and projects include: *Virá*, at Nara Roesler (2020), in São Paulo, Brazil; *The Mirror*, at Nara Roesler (2018), in New York, USA; *Dilúvio*, at SIM Galeria (2018), in Curitiba, Brazil; *Ruído*, at Nara Roesler (2015), in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; e, at Centro Universitário Maria Antonia (CEUMA) (2013), in São Paulo, Brazil.

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He participated in the 33<sup>th</sup> Bienal de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil (2018). Recent group shows include: *Entre tanto*, at Casa de Cultura do Parque (CCP) (2020), in São Paulo, Brazil; *Triangular - Arte deste século*, at Casa Niemeyer (2019), in Brasília, Brazil; *AI-5 50 anos – Ainda não terminou de acabar*, at Instituto Tomie Ohtake (ITO) (2018), in São Paulo, Brazil; *139 X Nothing but Good, at Park – Platform for Visual Arts* (2018), in Tilburg, The Netherlands; *Visões da arte no acervo do MAC USP 1900-2000*, at Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo (MAC-USP) (2016), in São Paulo, Brazil; and *Deserto-modelo*, at 713 Arte Contemporâneo (2010), in Buenos Aires, Argentina. His works are included in important institutional collections, such as: Instituto Itaú Cultural, São Paulo, Brazil; Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo (MAC-USP), São Paulo, Brazil; Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM-SP), São Paulo, Brazil, and Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil.