



nara roesler

elian almeida
people who were
things that were people

nara roesler são paulo

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to the sound of the *agueré* luiz antonio simas

People from Afro-Brazilian religions say that drums speak to children, women and men. Each different orisha, inqice or vodum spirit, is called to dance based on the call made by the drum. It is no coincidence that the dance circles at the houses of *candomblé* always turn counterclockwise, symbolizing the ritual return of the community to the time of their ancestors.

One of the most famous elements of Afro-Brazilian religions is the *agueré* of Oxóssi, a traditional *candomblé* dance dedicated to Oxóssi, a hunting deity that lives in the forest. By mixing cadence and speed, the rhythm cradles the dance of the orisha, or god of abundance, the guardian of hunters, the one who enters the forest to find food for his community. To the sound of the *agueré*, Oxossi searches, digs, persists, exercises patience and looks for shortcuts.

In a famous *itan*, a poetic and mythical account of Yoruba culture, Oxossi went into the forest to search for food capable of strengthening his people. After much searching and just as he was about to give up, Oxossi found Orunmila, the wise diviner, who consulted the oracle and revealed a secret: if he wanted to find his plenty, Oxossi should look not for an animal in the forest, but for himself.

Everything I say about Oxóssi and the *agueré* comes to mind when viewing Elian Almeida's art and the works in this exhibition. As he leaves the Bahian diaspora and moves towards Rio de Janeiro, Elian, like Oxóssi in the forest, searches for meanings between memory and history that

can bring both abundance and the possibility of re-encountering himself and his community.

Every diaspora brings with it material and symbolic violence, the breaking of identity ties, the dismantling of social protection networks, the fragmentation of life as an experience shared with a group, the emptying of one's own being, which is separated from its ancestral lineage.

In contrast to the horror of the diaspora, every diasporic culture attempts to reconstruct what has been lost: the sense of community and the idea of life as an experience shared in places of worship, *samba* circles, *capoeira* gangs, *maracatus* parades, *afoxés*, *congadas*, *bate-bola* groups, carnival blocks, suburban street corners, celebrations for saints, rhythm circles, brotherhoods and *samba* schools.

The past is hazy, the crime of slavery hijacks history, erasing the peculiar traits of each face and hiding names and lineages. However, amongst these crevices of horror, memories are woven and embroidered and life is rearticulated at lavish tables, washed down with palm oil and hearty laughter. After all, people don't party because life is good, but for the opposite reason.

In Elian Almeida's art, the resounding drums seem to say to the people of the village: people of Ketu, embrace each other! The king has caught his prey and is on his way home.

**people that were things,
that were people**
keyna eleison

Hands are covered in paint,
Clothes are covered in paint,
The room smells like paint,
And us... in another world.
Other. Not because it never existed.
Other. Not because it's in the past.
Other; for being brilliant, safe, known,
traversed by other people and the same
ones that came before us.
Other. Others. Us.

The painting, per se, is an object of Art and it is seen and recognized as Art. Painting is inhabited with practical detachment, theories are applied and values, created by relationships, are added. A painting is never just a painting.

The act of painting, in this movement, is still not free. It is thought out, it is a proposal, an invitation or a text. It's a huge yes surrounded by many no's. Contrary to an illusion, painting is a practical testimony, to be chewed, danced around and answered. It is both physical and mental. And the painter, himself in his entire body, plays a game that, proposed by him or not, has already been won.

He finishes the painting in mid-thought. Painting as a form of knowledge, as a form of learning and as a possible pedagogical structure. But here is a fact: This is not just a text about painting, it is not a distanced view of a whole. It is, specifically, about the paintings of Elian Almeida. This is the painter. Everything is ready... so, what is to be done with it?

It is important to realize that, in a space that has already had immense suspension and future and present memories, this work by Elian is both an incantation and a challenge. Whether we are in the gallery, at school, on the street, we are inside ourselves, whether we recognize ourselves or not. It is a spell, to be defended and to be believed in and after going through it, both through the painting and through him, we won't be the same people. It is a spell, elaborated upon, constructed and an act, filled with and surrounded by intellectuality. It is a memory spell, to ensure that we remember.

And a challenge: to untangle from the place. Art is territory and language. Construction of self-esteem and verbs. His work is part of this construction of self-perception, intimate and personal, but, in the same spiral, it is collective.

And none of it is in silence. In front of the painting, we see, hear, feel and move. Elian says he was born twice: in the kidnapping of the black enslaved population to Brazil and also, the day he left his mother. And these two births have the same location, they are on the same map, marked by the arrow of time with centuries between them.

And this knowledge, of being born and born again, can allow Almeida to recognize himself and thus, assume the responsibility of being this artist. And I can see myself and smile.

It was someone who made me something. It is myself, who makes me a person, together with more of me and more of us.

The exhibition *Pessoas que eram Coisas que eram Pessoas* brings together Elian Almeida's most recent works, developed between 2022 and 2023. While his previous work focused mainly on portraits of black Brazilian figures from different occupations and eras that had been erased by official history, this body of work turns to elements of Brazilian culture that flourished between the states of Bahia and Rio de Janeiro from the colonial period to the 20th century and today constitute a central element of Afro-Brazilian culture.



Igreja Nossa Senhora
do Rosário dos Pretos, 2023
acrylic paint on canvas
193 x 170 x 5 cm
76 x 66.9 x 2 in





temples and terreiros¹

In these paintings, the artist's main subjects are historical architectural buildings that are of great importance for the black populations in Brazil and more specifically in the city of Salvador: the Church of Nossa Senhora do Rosários dos Pretos and the Terreiro do Gantois.

The first belongs to the brotherhood of Our Lady of the Rosário² of Salvador, one of the oldest black brotherhoods in Brazil. The church, built during the 18th century, was frequented by enslaved and freed black people, and became an important site for black resistance in the city and in the country, besides becoming the stage for the consolidation of Afro-Brazilian cultural elements, especially those of religious nature, combining Iberian Catholic elements with beliefs brought from Africa by the enslaved.

1. Terreiro - Place where Afro-Brazilian ceremonial services are held
2. Brotherhood of Our Lady of the Rosario – A catholic brotherhood created in the colonial period to shelter the religiosity of the black people, because at slavery times the enslaved were prevented from attending the same churches as their masters

Promessa ao Gantois, 2023
acrylic paint and
oil pastel on canvas
160 x 240 x 5 cm
63 x 94.5 x 2 in





The second, entitled *Promessa ao Gantois*, shows a representation of the Terreiro do Gantois, one of the oldest Candomblé temples in Brazil, established in 1849 and listed as a historic heritage site by IPHAN. This *terreiro* differs from others in the Bahian capital in that it follows a hereditary tradition, meaning that its *lolorixás*³ are all from the same family.

Both paintings are structured against neutral backgrounds composed of golden and yellow tones, and populated with anonymous characters that represent the community who frequented the places and ultimately gave them meaning.

3. lolorixá/Mãe de Santo – Priestesses in Afro-Brazilian religions, who command the terreiros



rituals and festivals

Another group of works present in the exhibition consists of representations of rituals and festivals of a religious nature. In these paintings, which mostly refer to Bahia's culture, the artist juxtaposes elements from the Catholic religion with that of African religions.



Lavagem do Bonfim, 2023
acrylic paint on canvas
170 x 144 x 5 cm
66.9 x 56.7 x 2 in





Senhor do Bonfim, 2023
acrylic paint on canvas
140 x 165 x 5 cm
55.1 x 65 x 2 in





In *Lavagem do Bonfim*⁴, the artist illustrates the festivities that take place on the steps of the famous Bahian church, in which black people wash the temple steps with scented water to the sound of drums and chants. While celebrating a Catholic saint, the ceremony also represents the waters of Oxalá, while in *Senhor do Bonfim* a group of capoeirista dancers gather under an image of a crucified Christ set against a Brazilian flag.

4. Lavagem do Bonfim – A religious celebration that takes place in the city of Salvador every January at the entrance of the Senhor do Bonfim Church. The ceremony combines Catholic and African elements.



O mais importante
é inventar o Brasil
que nós queremos III, 2023
acrylic paint and
oil pastel on canvas
145 x 170 x 5 cm
57.1 x 66.9 x 2 in





Aguéré de Oxóssi, 2023
acrylic paint and
oil pastel on canvas
170 x 170 x 5 cm
66.9 x 66.9 x 2 in





The intertwinement of Christian and African elements appears again in *Aguéré de Oxóssi*. The ceremony consists of a dance and a rhythm dedicated to the orixá Oxóssi, who is responsible for hunting and bringing sustenance. The image of Saint George on his horse slaying a dragon stands before a group of individuals drumming, clapping and dancing illustrated against curious arabesque of a Portuguese tile. The saint in question is the Christian equivalent of the aforementioned orixá, and one of the most popular in Brazilian culture.



*Irmandade de Nossa Senhora
do Rosário dos Homens Pretos, 2023*
acrylic paint on canvas
170 x 140 x 5 cm
66.9 x 55.1 x 2 in





Ventre Livre II, 2023
acrylic paint and
oil pastel on canvas
155 x 155 x 5 cm
61 x 61 x 2 in







Mais um santo para esculpir
é o que lhe vale pra evitar que
o rancor e suas ervas espalhe, 2023
acrylic paint and oil pastel on canvas
144 x 120 x 5 cm
56.7 x 47.2 x 2 in





Kindred I, 2023
acrylic paint on canvas
135 x 120 x 5 cm
53.1 x 47.2 x 2 in





*Maria Júlia da
Conceição Nazareth, 2023*
acrylic paint and oil
pastel on canvas
144 x 126 x 5 cm
56.7 x 49.6 x 2 in





portraits

Here the artist continues to explore a recurrent theme in his work, creating portraits of important mães de santo in the country. Two of them, Mãe Menininha do Gantois and Maria Júlia da Conceição Nazareth, were from Bahia and commanded, at different times, the Terreiro do Gantois, one of the most important in the city of Salvador.



Mãe menina
do Gantois, 2023
acrylic paint on canvas
170 x 124 x 5 cm
66.9 x 48.8 x 2 in







The Carmem do Xibuca, 2023
acrylic paint on canvas
140 x 120 x 5 cm
55.1 x 47.2 x 2 in

Tia Carmem do Xibuca, in turn, was also originally from Bahia, but migrated to Rio de Janeiro and became an important religious and community leader of the so-called "Little Africa", a region near the Valongo wharf where most of the black population of the capital of Rio de Janeiro lived.



elian almeida

b. 1994, rio de janeiro, brazil, where he lives and works

Elian Almeida's practice is characterized by a convergence of different techniques, such as painting, photography, video and installation, functioning as part of a new generation of artists whose works revindicate protagonism to agents and bodies that have been traditionally marginalized in our society and in the history of art. His body of work addresses decolonialism, exploring the experience and performativity of the black body in contemporary Brazilian society, through a process of recuperating elements from the past—imagens, narratives, characters—as a means of contributing to the process of empowerment and dissemination of afro-brazilian historiography.

On one hand, Almeida's research engages with the biographies of black personalities whose importance has been erased through history, striving to restore the notability that they deserve. On the other hand, the artist also addresses the violent ways in which police approach racialized bodies, exploring matters of privilege within Brazilian culture and society, while also denouncing the myth of racial democracy. In his series *Vogue*, Almeida appropriates the visual identity and aesthetics of the famous fashion magazine, integrating them into the composition of his portraits of black individuals. With this, the artist demonstrates the ways in which his different lines of work have come to converge as a means of encouraging the public to question the ways in which these subjects have been represented and circulated within Brazilian visual culture.

selected solo exhibitions

- *Antes – agora – o que há de vir*, Nara Roesler, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2021)

selected group exhibitions

- *Quilombo: vida, problemas e aspiracoes do negro*, Inhotim, Minas Gerais, Brazil (2022)
- *Atos de revolta*, Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro (MAM Rio), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2022)
- *Nova vanguarda carioca*, Cidade das Artes, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2022)
- *Crônicas cariocas*, Museu de Arte do Rio (MAR), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2021)
- *Enciclopédia negra*, Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil (2021)
- *Arte naïf – Nenhum museu a menos*, Escola de Artes Visuais do Parque Lage (EAV Parque Lage), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2019)
- *Mostra memórias da resistência*, Centro Municipal de Arte Hélio Oiticica (CMAHO), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2018)
- *Bela verão e Transnômade Opavivará*, Galpão Bela Maré, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2018)
- *Novas poéticas – Diálogos expandidos em arte contemporânea*, Museu do Futuro, Curitiba, Brazil (2016)

selected collections

- Museu de Arte do Rio (MAR), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

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