

“Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots,  
making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it  
as big as full-grown snow-flakes - gone into mourning,  
one might imagine, for the death of the sun.”  
Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (1853)

It seems that Hans Staden did not write about the smoking habits of the Tupinambá people he encountered in the “New World”, although he did present his contemporaries with a significant set of representations showing squatting natives, puffing on a cigarette or long cartridge and expelling smoke with long, expressive puffs. The German mercenary recounted that when the wind blew hard, those strange subjects would make a big fire and throw a handful of pepper plants into it, seeking to repel their enemies. The smoke would get into the tents and the rivals were impelled to leave; the puff turned into a cloud of war. On the day of a cannibal ritual, the scandalous human flesh, dismembered and arranged on slaughter grids, was described as being prepared and left over large volumes of smoke until it was dry to be consumed later. The body of the dead man was scorched in a fire so that its skin would peel off; after that, it could finally be chopped by the Tupinambá.

In spite of the fictional and fetishist content that comprises a considerable part of this adventurer’s narratives, the circulation of woodcuts documenting this repertoire of habits and establishing its visual topos had such an influence on the 16th century literate milieu that it ended up creating, in the European imaginary of the 16th century (and afterwards), the idea of the Brazilian land as a barbaric and animalised country, especially due to the illustrations with scenes of anthropophagy. In synthesis, the smoke (the result of tobacco, war and ritual) in those graphic demarcations was read by the European eye as a savage and primitive index, a vestige of a primeval fire.

In another time and space, in the United Kingdom of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, distant and unrelated to the cannibalistic concerns, the representations of smoking reached other cultural functions.

In the wake of the creation of the steam engine, English painting expressed an interest in exploring the imagery of factories and the transformations that took place in the relationship between man and nature, flaunting the shining interiors of forges and blacksmiths, their smoking furnaces, as well as the atmospheric effects caused by the by-products of industrialisation. There is no shortage of attempts to extract the sublime effect of smoke emissions from steamships, trains and factory chimneys, full of sulfuric emanations. There, the smoke was an expression of admiration for the power of industry — a beautiful symbol of modernity, an index of the finishing line of history, a remnant of a new fire pointing to the future.

Contradictorily savage and civilising, the smoke, a shapeless and transitory phenomenon par excellence, serves here as a metaphor for an imaginary intercultural zone that crosses time attributing different meanings to similar elements, establishing conflicting trades between form and meaning, visibility and discourse — an entanglement that is of central interest for Tiago Mestre’s work.

In the light of this preamble, Empire, his solo show at LAMB Gallery, invites us to scrutinise how certain socio-cultural forms express social and ideological values; the way in which signs and symbols take on contradictory and conflicting meanings; the discursive arrangements produced in the encounter between nature and culture, the raw and the cooked. It is especially about the imaginaries surrounding that nineteenth-century United Kingdom, a moment that expresses significant changes in the symbolization of man’s relations with his surroundings and that, ironically, seems to refresh some knots in our present.

At first, we are confronted with six sets of ceramics (they are Park, Pound, Jewel, Factory, Smoke and Plantation) that can be read as acts of representation, that is, systems of codification of certain phenomena that sought to express, directly or indirectly, the expansion of English hegemony and its civilising project. All of them also sound like excellent examples of colonization and domestication of certain natural forms — vegetables, minerals, among other raw materials —, besides pointing to a certain theatrical dimension present in dealing with nature in that context.

But if the subject suggests the ambition of a social treatise, Mestre's work operates in the opposite way to the magnificence of the grand narrative, approaching the mellowness of clay as a strategy to sustain a "work under construction", a kind of laboratory of experimentation that resists univocal meanings and totalitarian discourses. It is a question of exploring these concerns on the basis of the development of a grammar of his own (his handling of clay tends towards a radical synthesis, a kind of dense purification) that is capable of speculating on an empathy of forms and proposing new language arrangements between project and intuition — the doing-thinking and the thinking-by-doing. Along with this, the raw appearance of the ceramics reinforces a certain anachronistic state of the work; it suggests a plexus between a primitive and mineral gesture and an ironic and debauched commentary on sumptuous cultural achievements. Although each act is sustained in its singularity, they also inform each other collectively (we could say that the sculptural units are like words, the acts are like sentences, and the show, finally, is the composition of a delirious text), in a draft of a polyphonic narrative, necessarily incomplete, which starts from certain mimetic relations to reach freer flights, making the discourse of history something stuttering and errant.

Furthermore, Empire must be recognised as an ecosystem that mirrors and reflects its own components. The ceramics on the wall (a game between narrative, ornament and sculpture) also stage something like painting; while the paintings on linen (with a marked graphic contrast) unfold and resonate the repertoire present in the ceramics — as if we could see there the shadows or silhouettes of the three-dimensional forms, a constant *mise-en-scène* between "archetypal characters and absolutely prosaic forms", as the artist would say. It is a recurrent feature in Mestre's practice, interested in testing the identity of the supports and distrusting their "nature", with a special taste for profanation.

If the artist's starting point is a specific historical context, the points of arrival are broader and more speculative, and lead us to encounter a myriad of contemporary conflicts. In short, Empire presents a treatment of its time that is not guided by a presentism enclosed in the here and now; on the contrary, what is stitched together is another temporality, more dedicated to dealing with the present as an extemporaneous condition. Mestre braids and reworks some echoes from the past that keep running through us — remnants, memories, traces that survive from the arrangement between form and discourse in collective imaginaries. A chaser of indexical fumes, the artist is attentive to that which sediments after evaporation, the contradictions of the human being as an imaginary subject and political character. If the empire stands on the basis of a central and absolute authority, here its origin is lost, shattered and multiplied by a game of shadows that places it at the mercy of the blows of a past that ruins it and of a future that modifies it.

Pollyana Quintella  
2022

LAMB