

Denilson Baniwa

Pajé Jaguar

This exhibition at Sirius Arts Centre features a small but significant selection of the work made by a unique artist, an intelligent and combative leader, conscious of his important role in the indigenous cause.

'If I can, today, be a role model for Indigenous youth, Indigenous children, who are in the process of understanding themselves in a chaotic world, in a world that doesn't want their presence, I hope they look at me and say: there's someone who looks like me and is on a good path; I can trust this person.'

At the 35th São Paulo Biennial – Choreographies of the Impossible (2023), Denilson Baniwa takes on a prominent role, occupying the exhibition's largest area with *Kwema/Dawn*. The proposal comprises three works: 'Kaá', a cornfield on a wooden structure measuring 250 m²; 'Itá', two rocks with inscriptions that speak of the Baniwa people's first contact with white people, and 'Tatá', a composition of paintings and plumage on tree bark, portraying the Baniwas' first contact with the Catholic Church, marked by colonial and religious violence.

– Nelson Ricardo Martins, curator

* Excerpts of interviews with the artist, taken from the YouTube interview channel 'Escuta', 20 July 2022 (https://youtu.be/matxl_o70Gg?si=2N_9Yco-zi6wOtd9) and from the YouTube channel 'The Getty', 20 August 2022 (https://youtu.be/kqmmEV2ED_g?).



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At the 33rd São Paulo Biennial – Affective Affinities, held in 2018, the Indigenous artist Denilson Baniwa transformed into the Pajé Jaguar entity and moved through the spacious rooms of the Ciccillo Matarazzo Pavilion, where the exhibition was taking place, playing his *maracá*. He merged with the modern architectural structure in the form of snaking mezzanines, absorbing the curious looks of visitors and slowly swallowing the works on display that navigated through his corporal memory. He carried flowers, placing them on works with an Indigenous presence, as a way of showing his respect. He flowed as an animal-person, sacred contemporary dance, a poem of visual repetition. He incorporated the people of the forest, evoked his cruelly vilified ancestors.

In front of a large-scale archival photograph of the Selk'nam people, he tore up the book *A Brief History of Art*, while giving a compelling speech about the invisibility of indigenous art:

'Brief history of art. So brief, but so brief, that I don't see Indigenous art. So brief, that there isn't an Indian in this history of art. But I see Indians in the references, I see Indians and their cultures, stolen. Brief history of art. Theft, theft, theft. Is this the Indian? Is that the Indian? Is this how you want Indians to be? Stuck in the past? Without the right to culture? They steal our image, they steal our time and they steal our art. Brief history of art. Theft, theft, theft, theft, theft. White art. Theft, theft. Indians do not belong to the past. They do not have to be bound to images that white people constructed for Indians. We are alive, despite the theft, the violence and the history of art. Enough of white people taking Indigenous art and transforming it into simulacra.'

The 'cry' echoed in the rusty eardrums of the aseptic and senile mainstream, forced to bow down. Following the action-manifesto, the artist's talent was recognised. He participates in numerous exhibitions in Brazil and abroad, wins the coveted PIPA Online prize, is invited to participate in seminars, interviews and panel discussions with figures from various fields. He takes advantage of these occasions to disseminate his work, with a focus on colonisation and Indigenous peoples, articulating critical, combative philosophies, and establishing channels that build bridges and forge resistances. 'I feel I am the result of a very violent process of colonisation. So, I am part of this ruin, this territory that became a city. I speak Portuguese, I understand the codes of the colonisers well.'

Colonial narratives drive him to reveal what is hidden and what, in fact, should emerge without pejorative approaches. This is the case for certain works that deal with the theme of 'anthropophagy'. By appropriating ancient prints with this idea, which presents Indigenous peoples as monsters, people eaters, he unmask the plot conceived there, intervening through painting, writing and erasure. 'My aim with these works is to comment on how devouring the other can have many meanings besides eating a person. Dominating, swallowing the other, can happen in subtle and invisible ways.' Anthropophagy refers to a religious ritual where the winners, in war, ingest

captured warriors, assimilating their powers. 'It is a very specific ritual with a lot of complexity; it is very dense, but these prints reduce it to a human barbecue. That's not what it is, but art was used to bestialise these populations, in order to justify the occupation and domination of their territories.'

Baniwa finds his place in the world using an anthropophagic logic that includes the swallowing of power, with the mediation of art, transforming it into Indigenous power. According to the artist, this is how Indigenous peoples will be understood by non-indigenous people. The strategy can be referred to as 'Nakoada'. For the Baniwas, it means a set of ethics that seeks to suppress hierarchies, attempting, in a negotiated process, the repossession of something that was stolen from them. Nakoada, for Baniwa, in the context of continuous struggle, manifests as long-term spatio-temporal performance. A core axis that results in a vibrant repertory, intersecting numerous artistic languages, having, as its flight plan, the Indigenous question and the complex intricacies that surround it. Interacting with the world of white people in the construction of interfaces is a stimulating, but diluting task. It is essential to maintain one's integrity.

'I don't seek to understand the tower blocks or the asphalt, or the concrete, or the iron that constructs this city. I seek to understand the layers underneath them, which reveal an ancestry of this territory. This is how I understand the city, this is how I understand my existence, this is how I understand my work, of erasing, of scraping away this colonisation, these layers of colonisation, until I find something ancestral in the middle of all that.'

The Pajé Jaguar is a highly skilled shaman of the Baniwa people who travels between worlds. His portraits in a desolated cornfield of the agroindustrial Mato-Grosso region blend in with the hundred-year-old walls of the Colégio das Artes, a venue at the Universidade de Coimbra, Portugal, where he had a solo show this past March-April. Alone, witnessing the tragedy, he denounces the harmful effects of the large-scale monoculture practised by agribusiness in Brazil that promotes extensive deforestation, irreversible damage to the ecosystem, climate change and the production of food containing high levels of agrochemicals. This exploitation of the soil devastates agricultural and social biodiversity, directly impacting Indigenous peoples.

In the video *Cursed Harvest* (2022), the Pajé Jaguar walks on the threshold between a massive corn plantation and a tarmacked road. He seems aimless, lost, disconnected. There is no forest, no animals, no rivers. Everything is swallowed up by the monoculture of agribusiness. The enigmatic soundtrack includes female voices that repeat the words 'wake up'. Denilson was inspired by the B-horror film *Children of the Corn* (1984), based on a short story by Stephen King and directed by Fritz Kiersch. The story describes the influence of an evil force that convinces children to murder adults in order to guarantee a successful corn harvest. *Cursed Harvest* portrays the end of time, if the model of capitalist extractivism, is not defeated.