

THE NAME OF THE RELIGION IS ART

Hans Ulrich Obrist in Conversation with Maxwell Alexandre, 2020

In 2020, Hans Ulrich Obrist interviewed Maxwell Alexandre in anticipation of his solo 2021 exhibition at David Zwirner Gallery in London called “Pardo é Papel: Close a door to open a window”. Alexandre conceived the show as the second “album” of his “Pardo é Papel” series in which each painting pays tribute to Black musicians from Brazil and beyond. Many of his influences for these works take inspiration from songs by Solange, Frank Ocean, and Tyler, the Creator. Alexandre, who borrowed the exhibition’s title from Tyler, the Creator’s song “New Magic Wand,” interpreted these artists’ lyrics into paintings to celebrate Black identity and express feelings of prosperity, self-esteem, and empowerment. Alexandre’s show reflected on the window as a metaphorical source of hope and connection to the outside world in a time of collective physical isolation brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result of this global crisis, Obrist in London and Alexandre in Rio de Janeiro were separated by nearly 6,000 miles. In addition to discussing Alexandre’s plans for his forthcoming exhibition in London, they touched on aspects of his personal and artistic life: his background as a professional in-line skater, his interest in comics, the founding of A Igreja do Reino da Arte, A Noiva [The Church of the Kingdom of Art—The Bride], as a meeting place for young artists, and the ongoing development of “Pardo é Papel.” Alexandre’s Shed exhibition is the culmination of his artistic development over the years and includes “Pardo é Papel” artworks that preceded and followed *Close a door to open a window*, including his first album, “The Glorious Victory,” and his most recent subseries, “New Power.”

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: I’d like to start at the beginning. How did you come to art?

MAXWELL ALEXANDRE: I’ve been drawing since I was little. And my dream was to work with Mauricio de Sousa, the cartoonist who created Turma da Mônica.¹ I was a kid when I first became interested in the world of comic books. I used to watch anime on TV and play video games. It was part of my childhood.

HUO: Can you tell me about your childhood in the favela and your contact with these comics?

MA: I grew up in Rocinha in Rio de Janeiro, the largest favela in Latin America. And comics are accessible to children in the favela. Since I was always drawing,

people used to say, “Wow, you’re an artist. An artist.” And I thought art was Turma da Mônica. I started drawing my own comic books to sell at school. My fear was having a normal life—growing up, having a regular job, getting married, you know? Stuff like that. So I tried to turn my life into an adventure. And I started playing video games.

HUO: So you wanted your life to be an adventure and that’s why you took an interest in video games?

MA: Yes. I fell in love with this character from [the video game franchise Sonic the Hedgehog] and I started skating. I skated for 12 years. I was a professional skater. I had sponsors. I used to participate in competitions. All this because I discovered this character from Sonic Adventure who wore futuristic skates.

HUO: Which video game inspired you the most?

MA: That one. Sonic Adventure on Dreamcast, the last videogame console from Sega. I found out about this character who was a futuristic hedgehog that skated. Sonic is blue, but this character is black. And for the first time, I saw a Black hero, this hedgehog. I wanted to be that character, Shadow. And in order to be Shadow, I had to learn how to skate.

HUO: I didn’t know about this video-game influence. The interesting thing is that all this ended up in your paintings later. It was the skates that led you to painting. Do you still skate?

MA: No. But this was the way I found to turn my life into an adventure. This kind of market is not sustainable, so I tried to create a market. I had to work for the in-line skating industry and I tried to create some things, to create prints for T-shirts, for example. I needed to produce my videos to get sponsorship, to travel to competitions. I decided that I would go to university to improve my situation.

HUO: You started painting in an abandoned building, is that right?

MA: Yes, an abandoned 16-story hotel. It was completely empty. I occupied this building for almost two years with various other artists. There, I was able to experiment with different types of work and I did my first painting with skates. I found a way to combine my old practice of skating with my new practice as an artist.

HUO: Where are you now?²

MA: I’m in my studio in Rocinha, in Rio de Janeiro, working on an exhibition that

I'm going to have at the David Zwirner Gallery in London.

HUO: And what are you going to show?

MA: Nine paintings, the second part of the series "Pardo é Papel."

HUO: And could you tell us about these paintings?

MA: These paintings, this second part of "Pardo é Papel," I'm calling it "Close a door to open a window." This second phase of "Pardo é Papel" is pretty intense, and I felt the need to catalog the paintings by making an analogy with music. While in painting distinctions are often made by series and themes, there's something in music that allows you to create collections and bring songs together with more precision. Like in the organization of albums, EPs, mixtapes, and so on. Starting with this exhibition, I began to retroactively look at the group of previous paintings from "Pardo é Papel." I'm calling this group of paintings "The Glorious Victory," which is the title of one of the paintings. This painting is going to be the cover of what I am calling the first "album," which is this old album, the first part of the series. The album I'm calling "Close a door to open a window" is the moment when I start inserting three international poets: Frank Ocean, Solange Knowles, and Tyler, the Creator. On the first album, I was working with three Brazilian rappers: BK', Baco Exu do Blues, and Djonga. For this international context, I saw an opportunity to bring these poets to this new show. The name "Close a door to open a window" comes from the lyrics of a song called "New Magic Wand," off of Tyler, the Creator's new album.

HUO: One thing that also made me curious was the connection to music. You already talked a little about it today and when we first met. The titles of your works are very political and some are inspired by rap. Não foi pedindo licença que chegamos até aqui [We didn't get here by apologizing] is a direct reference to "Ábre caminho" by Baco Exu do Blues, who is famous for his political lyrics.³ Can you talk a little bit about this connection to politics, activism, and rap?

MA: I don't consider myself an activist, but my existence alone already ends up incorporating activist notions and attitudes because I am who I am, and because I was born here, in the favela of Rocinha, and because I'm now occupying a prestigious space as an artist. This is going to reinforce this activist side on some level. But I also don't want to raise that flag or carry that weight that an activist sometimes carries. I really like the space of art as a space for vagrancy.

When I was doing abstract painting, or doing a work to talk about the spirit or the soul, I had no voice. But from the moment I begin to talk about the political Black body, it starts to become a relevant voice. That bothers me. The Black man's place is still very much predetermined in these matters. If you're Black, and you're from the favela, and you're an artist, your art has to be political. Somehow this role, or this reading, is a place where they must try to fit in the Black artist. The Black artist

has less room to talk about sublime subject matter, about the spirit. Your place is much safer when you talk about the Black political body. And my work is subjected to this interpretation. But I also deliver excellent work that is resolved in terms of visual and poetic issues. I can hold my own in these matters.

Incidentally, rap is subjected to this a lot. It's an art form that was born in this context of the political, but these days it's already starting to move more toward a place of social disengagement too. Trap, for example, which is a subgenre of rap, goes through these issues. I actually make this analogy: trap is to rap what abstract painting is to figurative painting. Trap rappers are much more concerned about sound. Take [rapper] Playboi Carti, for example. He keeps repeating the same word. He's almost taking his voice out and only throwing noise in there. That's moving away from this commitment and flirting with matters inherent to the field of the artistic language itself. The work of visual artists is mostly made based on white European poetry. So they're going to read Nietzsche, Italo Calvino, whatever. When I paint based on Baco Exu do Blues, BK', and Djonga, it's a statement that I'm making. It means establishing a production in the fine arts based on Black poetry from the slums by artists who are Brazilian, who have experiences congruent to mine.

For my exhibition at Palais de Tokyo opening June 11, 2021, I'm going to present a subseries and extension of "Pardo é Papel" called "New Power."⁴ I consider contemporary art like a new power in that it's a field where there is a significant amount of financial capital, symbolic capital, social capital, but above all intellectual capital. This exhibition will be focused only on one theme, which is the Black community in spaces for the contemplation of works of art, which are museums and galleries. Why am I talking about this? Because one of my interests is to draw my community's attention to these spaces that legitimize narratives and histories, which are galleries and museums. To allocate what is in the place of oblivion to a place of permanence and reverence.

But, at the same time, this is it. I'm here in my studio. I live on Travessa Mesopotâmia in Rocinha, which is one of the busier alleys, and, at the same time, painting here is not valued. I'm making a life for myself, opening up spaces of power, prestige, making money from this, but that is not a value, because it's not part of the values here. When I open an exhibition at the museum, the community doesn't go there. The ones who deliver this experience of the sublime and the transcendent to the community are the neo-Pentecostal churches. This notion of crying before a work of art or being moved in front of a Rothko, this whole thing is part of another ritual, of other temples of another faith, which is not the faith here.

When I paint a rap verse, because rap is an artistic expression that is seen as one of the voices of the urban poor, it is a way to bridge this gap. Because the kids on the street here, the minors on the street here, they listen to BK', they listen to Djonga, they listen to rap, they listen to Brazilian funk. These are the arts that are more assimilated here. It's when I get close to this field of rap, trying to make this

approximation between the world of art and the world of the favela.

HUO: So you created your own religion. Do you think art replaces religion? Is art the new religion?

MA: If you analyze the word religion, it means “reconnection with the divine,” with the idea of the divine. The name of the religion is Art.

HUO: In Rio de Janeiro, a group of artists founded an art scene that you’re a part of, which you helped to conceive: the Church of the Kingdom of Art—The Bride. This church is based in Rocinha and it’s a meeting place for young artists. It’s amazing that this art scene has formed so quickly. I’d like you to talk about how this scene came about and what it means to you. And also about the name you gave it. I’m also very interested in knowing about these works that are a procession, these rituals. Could you tell us a bit about the genesis of this church? I wonder if any miracles happened.

MA: The Church of the Kingdom of Art, also known as The Bride, is basically a church for artists that was born in 2017 out of a meeting of some friends there at PUC [Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro]. Raoni Azevedo and Edu de Barros are some of the founding members. We started to meet as a congregation as a way to create an outlet for what we were doing. At that time, I wasn’t a full-fledged artist yet. We were flirting with the art world, but we still didn’t know how to find the way in. And these ways into the arts often come [about] because of relationships, not necessarily because of the quality of the work. And since we were not well connected to the agents in the field, we decided to create this congregation (fig. 4). And we knew that we couldn’t create an art collective because art collectives were already... I don’t know if “outdated” is the word, but it carried this connotation that was not what we wanted. The idea of a collective also has to do with the collective practice, whereas church is a meeting that happens collectively, but the practices are individual. We have the idea of “one’s own gospel.” At the same time that we’re creating, we’re outlining a collective narrative, but we all have a point of view and can choose our own gospels, our own bibles.

HUO: You said that everything is faith, that the same faith that leads a person to a church of any religion also leads a person to art. What is your definition of art?

MA: Defining art always seems pretentious to me. And when you name something, when you start to delineate something, it loses its potency. For me, art is a mental, internal phenomenon, something in the spirit that can become everything in materiality. I think it’s something close to that.

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1. A Brazilian comic strip that has been popular among children since the 1960s.
 2. Gávea Tourist Hotel, located in São Conrado, Rio de Janeiro. There, Alexandre presented the performance *Sangue Preto* [Black blood], which can be seen in the video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yD0814GDE5s>
 3. “Abre caminho,” from the album *Estú*, 2017.
 4. As a result of changes brought on by the pandemic, this exhibition opened later than originally planned, running from November 26, 2021, to March 13, 2022.

A longer version of this interview originally appeared in Portuguese in the book Hans Ullrich Obrist: *Entrevistas brasileiras* vol. 2, published by Editora Cobogó
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