

Painting with Objects: Antonio Tarsis Interviewed by Caroline Elbaor

Works that transform the products and detritus of everyday life.

Having achieved notable recognition despite shirking the typical formula followed by most burgeoning artists, Antonio Tarsis is somewhat of an anomaly. The young, self-taught artist originally hails from Salvador, Brazil, where he grew up in a favela. Tarsis left formal schooling after fifth grade, after which he spent his days roaming the favelas of his hometown, an activity that engendered his first acts as an artist in which he began to collect discarded matchboxes littering the streets.

These matchboxes were on view in the form of collages last summer at London's Carlos/Ishikawa (who now represents him), and he was recently a 2021 fellow at Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart. He is now currently participating in the 3rd Frestas Triennial of Arts in his native Brazil.

—Caroline Elbaor

Caroline Elbaor

I find your personal story incredibly compelling, especially as I feel it informs what you produce as a self-taught artist. For instance, this can be seen with your signature matchbox collage works with the matchboxes not only serving as a symbol of life in a favela without electricity but which are sourced from the favela in which you grew up. Can you begin our conversation by telling me about your trajectory into becoming the artist you are now, starting with your childhood and development into adulthood?

Antonio Tarsis

I was born and raised in Salvador, Bahia, the largest Black city in the African diaspora, and learned to read the world from the point of view of its diverse mix of knowledge and culture.

I left school very early: between the ages of ten and eleven I didn't go to school anymore. My grandparents were market traders, and they sold fruits and vegetables at the Sete Portas street market. But I never got to meet them. My mother was a single mother and house cleaner, and she took care of me and my two older brothers. My father was a wall painter and furniture assembler. When I left

Antonio Tarsis
Linha do Horizonte, 2021
Guarany Fósforos de
Segurança matchbox paper
and strike paper
164 x 124 x 4.6 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Carlos/Ishikawa, London.
Image © Antonio Tarsis 2021.



school, I worked with him as an assistant for a short time. When I was thirteen, my mother died of cancer. My father disappeared, and we never spoke again.

After my mother's death, I felt an enormous desire to paint, but I had no money to buy canvas, paint, or brushes. So, I started to collect materials in the favela, picking up what was left over from the wall-paint shops, along with objects and various materials in the Sete Portas trash. I collected everything that I could use


Antonio Tarsis

MP-RJ (OP) (Symbolic Genocide Series), 2021

Follmann Borados factory embroidery, 160 x 100 x 4.5 cm (63 x 39 3/8 x 1 3/4 in) each of six panels Courtesy of the artist and Carlos/Ishikawa, London. Image © Antonio Tarsis 2021.

in my painting process. The matchbox was one of several items that I collected in my neighborhood. The area where I lived was basically a crack land where drug users used the matchboxes to store cigarette ashes that they mixed with crack.

Between 2013 and 2015, I produced the first works with matchboxes. At that moment, I understood that I was articulating a work that connected with the whole historical context of Salvador and Brazil, including Indigenous and African references, landscape, the domestic environment and houses in the favela, memory and handicraft, fire and purple, sky and sea. From this understanding, I started to analyze my practice better. The matchboxes opened my eyes to develop a deeper and more conceptual research without losing the poetics that painting brought me. That was when my work gained more substance and depth.

CE

It appears that the history of the materials employed in your work is hugely important. When I was at your studio, you were assembling fragments from mass-produced packaging—such as pet food bags, toothpaste boxes, and pill packets—to create detailed collages. Would you say that your aim in employing these particles drawn from corporate casings is to redefine or recontextualize their immediate meaning?

AT

My practice of looking at the packaging of industrial products comes from my childhood. I used to accompany my mother in her cleaning work. She worked organizing and cleaning middle-class houses in Salvador. In Brazil this type of work is totally precarious, a remnant of the slavery period, even more so at that time, about twenty years ago. There was a huge difference in the food and packaging of those houses



Antonio Tarsis
Mining III, 2021
 Collage on paper: found items (product packaging and labels) from Salvador, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Lisbon, London, Venice, Stockholm, Berlin and Stuttgart. 40.2 x 32.2 x 4.4 cm
 Courtesy of the artist and Carlos/Ishikawa, London. Image © Antonio Tarsis 2021.

compared to what was in ours. The fridge in our house was always almost empty. In the houses where my mother worked, there were countless products and foods, but all we could do was organize them. The only possible relationship with these products was to desire them and observe the packaging.

I love the idea of “breaking” those images that have been produced through industrial processes and that package everyday products from different areas of the world. I like to think of these images as painting. My process is totally surgical. I extract small images and shapes from the packaging labels, taking them totally out of context. Often, they are details that remain in the internal areas of the packaging and are barely seen. In this case, it is like revealing images to be noticed for the first time. Collage is very much related to the way I access painting with these materials, along with craft and the handmade process.

Packaging is developed to influence consumer behavior. They receive baths of inks and pigments through printing machines and industrial processes. We can say that packaging is a kind of industrial painting, which reflects globalization, the mass production of capitalism, and the capture of desire. It is among these nuances that this work emerges—breaking, reassembling, mixing pieces of packaging from different types, cities, countries, and time. I turn them into pieces of a “chessboard” to develop the compositions, but deep inside there is a bit of revenge too.

CE

What role does the city or urban life play in the work that you make?

AT

Being part of a city, like London, for example, makes me think about the smallest details. It's as if I'm constantly analyzing the spaces, capturing stories, asking myself questions that open windows to expand my work.

Part of my ancestors were Indigenous. They observed every detail and difference between leaves, plants, fruits, seeds, animals, and all the resources in their environment. They developed technologies to adapt, becoming part of nature and not something outside of it, like our life in the city is.

My relationship with urban space is similar. Unlike a forest, big cities are an open field of products and consumption. I keep cataloging and analyzing everything I see, and I have created key questions that are strategies: How can I find the unknown in the ordinary? How can I develop knowledge, narrative, and technology with the resources that cities offer me?

CE

Additionally, you have spoken about the fact that being a young Black male means your body is perpetually in danger. Can you elaborate on this sentiment and how it functions in terms of your art-making?

AT

Yes, I have been through several situations that even today I wonder how I escaped alive. Many friends were killed by the police. The context of inequality, institutional racism, and epistemicide present in Brazil is an atrocity. It is so present that those who are born in the middle of this reality learn to live in survival mode. Every second, from an early age, we have to find solutions for what affects us. The collection of materials in the streets emerged from the survival instinct of my artistic practice.

CE

The objects themselves are born from labor-intensive work, requiring a high level of precision. While in the studio, I was struck by the attention to detail and minutiae. Can you walk me through your artistic process, discussing both the matchbox series as well as newer collages of corporate materials?

ANTONIO TARSIS

AT

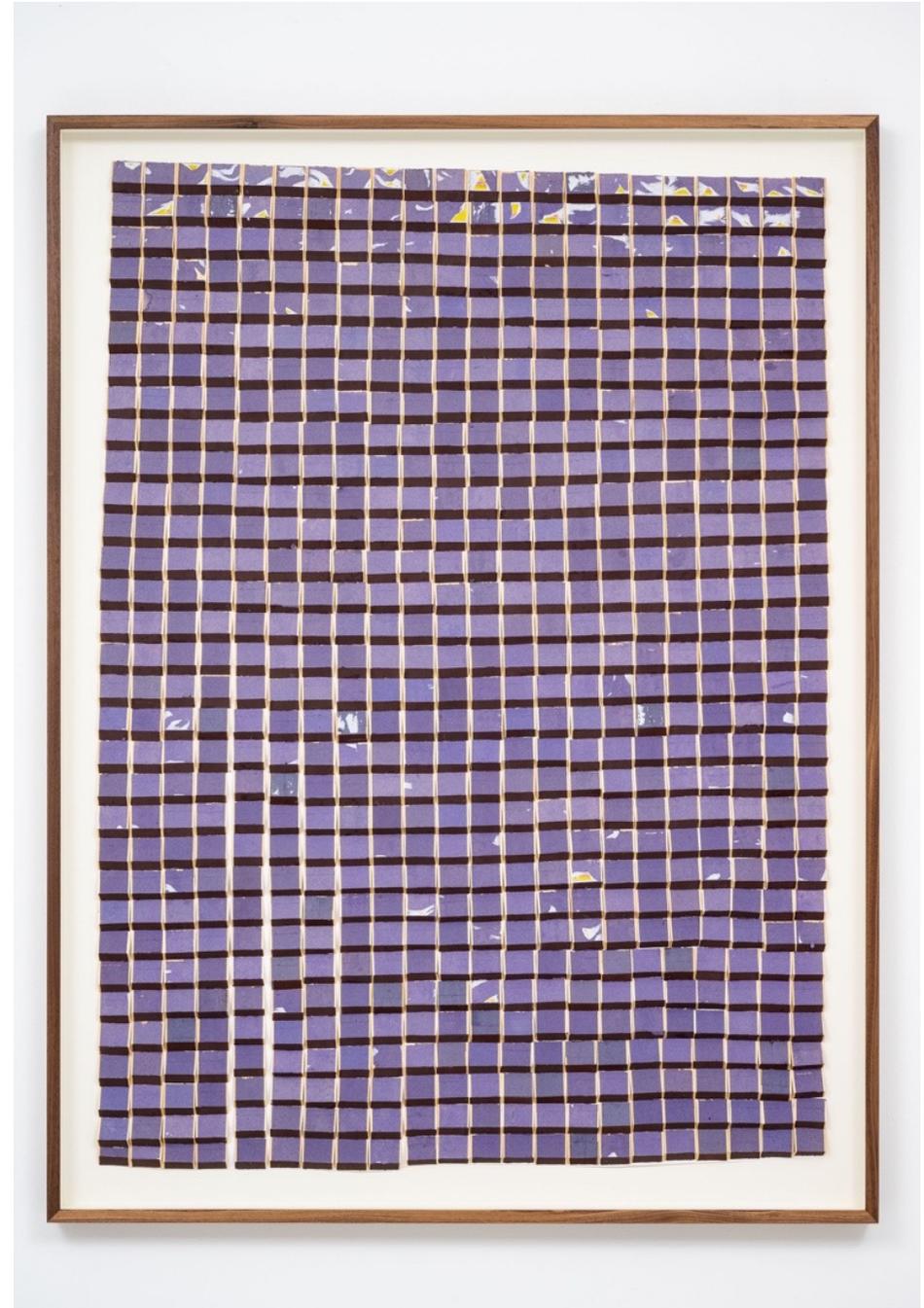
When I started collecting the matchboxes, I was very interested in their purple color. The different shades of purple of each one caught my attention; they varied according to the exposure to sunlight, to rain, to the open sky. They were unique tones, a kind of natural painting; the light printed on papers that time has modified are like pieces of fallen sky. At the same time, the matchboxes I use are of the Guarany brand, the name of an ancestral Indigenous people, prior to Portuguese colonization. The matchbox is present in most of the popular houses in Brazil, especially in the favelas. My work consists of connecting all these references, subverting the meaning and form of these objects. When composing the work, I seek to re-signify the matchboxes, transforming them into landscapes, through an extremely meticulous handwork.

On the packaging of industrial products, gold, silver, and platinum shine; they are designed to awaken the desire for luxury consumption. Even if printed on toothpaste boxes or a powdered soap wrapper, these are images that attract me as possibilities for a pictorial exercise. Instead of the natural painting of the matchboxes, the packages remind me of artificial and industrial painting. The process is like a surgical center. I disassemble the packages' bodies by extracting small fragments. For this, I use a series of different scalpels, tweezers, and scissors to assemble another body where the composition of each small detail, shape, texture, or piece of color makes all the difference.

Antonio Tarsis's work can be seen in Frestas Triennial of Arts 3rd Edition in Sorocaba, Brazil, until January 30.

Caroline Elbaor is a writer and curator living in London.

CARLOS/ISHIKAWA



Antonio Tarsis
O céu em pedaços (Sky in pieces) I, 2021
Guarany Fósforos de Segurança matchbox balsa
wood and paper, 164 x 124 x 4.6 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Carlos/Ishikawa, London.
Image © Antonio Tarsis 2021.