

Antonio Tarsis – from favela streets to Art Basel

The Brazilian artist used discarded matchboxes he found on the ground to make his earliest work



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Text by Oliver Basciano
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Antonio Tarsis started making art in 2009 when he was 14. His mother had died that year and he had never known his father. It was, he says, not just a way of coping with the situation, but a way of surviving. Along with his two older brothers he was left to grow up largely alone in Arraial do Retiro, a favela far from the touristic centre of Salvador in northern Brazil.

“I was really sad, but I decided I needed to do something, find something I could become good at in five years’, 10 years’ time,” Tarsis, now 26, says. “I thought about trying to become a writer or a musician, but then I started painting and I got addicted. From then I just painted, painted, painted.”

This new passion posed a problem: with no money, he had no way of buying art materials. But he stumbled on a clever solution: “Walking the streets I would see the crack addicts drop their matchboxes.” The drug users favoured a particular cheap brand of matches, recognisable by its plain purple inner packaging. “Each matchbox had a different tone of purple, from how long it had been lying on the floor in the sun, from being in the rain. I realised I could use them as a painting material. It was also a way of giving visibility to the invisible people who dropped them.”



‘O céu em pedaços (Sky in pieces) XIII’ (2022) by Antonio Tarsis © Antonio Tarsis, courtesy the artist and Carlos/Ishikawa. Photographer: Stephen James



Tarsis started using matchbox inners he found on the street...



...whose colour would differ by how long they'd been left there for
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These monochrome collages, using the matchbox inners, veer between geometric abstraction (tapping into Brazil's modernist history, not that Tarsis then recognised it as such) and compositions resembling brooding pared-down landscapes. Having been shown at institutions and galleries internationally, this week Carlos/Ishikawa, Tarsis's dealer in London, will exhibit new works in the series at Art Basel's online fair, OVR:2021.

Tarsis today sees a degree of self-portrait in those works: "Everything I was collecting spoke a lot about who I am, what I was experiencing, and how I would like to analyse the world."

The artist, who now lives in London, went on to pick up more materials from the street. "Caixas de frutas" (2019) features assemblages of old fruit boxes bound in string; "Trabuco" (begun in 2015) is a series of sculptures consisting of glass test tubes filled with fragments of police bullets found strewn across Salvador's streets. He made a photographic self-portrait, "Bucha de prato" (2015), his face obscured by a mask made of found green and yellow sponges, a reference both to the colours of the Brazilian flag and to his memories of accompanying his mother in her job as a cleaner.

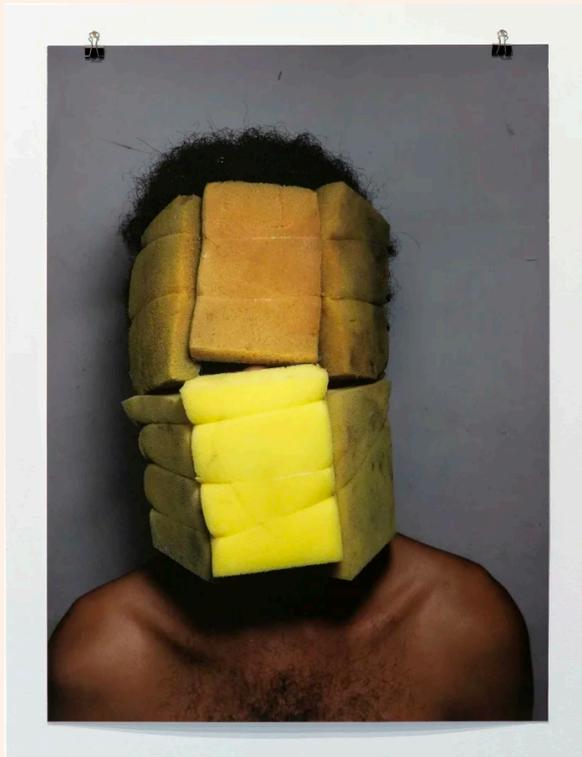


"Trabuco I" (2017) by Antonio Tarsis © Antonio Tarsis

"I stopped going to primary school when I was 12," he says. "On one hand, there are poor black children in a failed system to generate cheap labour. On the other, there are rich white children educated to occupy positions of leadership. When I realised that the academic environment spoke internal codes that neither I,

my family nor my neighbourhood understood, I started going to a public library daily and reading most of the art books they had.” He learnt the deep history behind the objects he’d been picking up — Brazil’s colonial exploitation, the relationship between England and Portugal.

At the library Tarsis began to meet other artists and became involved in local exhibitions. He gained a residency at Salvador’s Museum of Modern Art in 2014 and was shortlisted for a prize for young artists in 2016, which involved exhibiting at Instituto Tomie Ohtake in São Paulo. “I had never even been on a plane before, never stayed at a hotel. It made me think that maybe it was possible that I might survive, doing what I love to do.” It was his interest in the history of colonialism, globalisation and exploitation that led him to London, but the move was also pragmatic. “The potential for danger is always close in Brazil,” he says.



'Bucha de prato' (2015) by Antonio Tarsis © Antonio Tarsis



'Symbolic Genocide' (2021) takes a violent military police logo...



...and reflects how it erases black Brazilians' lives © Antonio Tarsis, courtesy the artist and Carlos/Ishikawa. Photographer: Damian Griffiths

“In my 26 years as a black man from the favela, I have experienced the violence of the state against our bodies in many different ways. In Brazil, the police kill young black guys every moment. It is a genocide.” In 2020, Brazil’s security forces killed 6,416 people, according to the Brazilian Forum for Public Security, disproportionately young black men from the periphery of Brazil’s cities. On the presidential campaign trail, Jair Bolsonaro promised police who kill criminals would be rewarded; since being elected the far-right politician has pardoned many officers previously convicted of extrajudicial killings.

Tarsis addresses this fraught situation in “Symbolic Genocide” (2021), a work recently shown at Carlos/Ishikawa. Six machine-produced embroideries on hand-stitched fabric replicate the badge of an elite unit of Brazil’s military police. The emblem is a shocking one: a skull pierced with a dagger overlays a pair of crossed guns and a parachute, against a black background. Hung in a row, as the series progresses, elements of the emblem disappear until the final embroidery is totally black but for the badge’s white outline.

The works were partly made in the same factories that produce the police’s uniforms, and the slow erasure of the motif, Tarsis says, reflects the police’s erasure of so many black lives. “It is a way of dealing with this situation,” he says. “These works emerge out of trauma and memory.”