

On Blindness

A blind blackbird. Blinded, not born blind. Singing of innocence, it had its eyes pierced by bird-catchers in the Brazilian countryside who were perturbed by the uneven rhythm of its call. By cruelly blinding it, they thought its chants would become organized, dazzled no longer by the beauty of nature or the overwhelming land- and seascapes seen from its highest flights. Now, deprived of sight, it croons mournfully about freedom, light, and totality. But how can it sing songs of freedom when caged by blindness? How can it chant about light now that its retina is as impenetrable as a closed book? How can it talk about totality when fenced in by a curtain of mist?

Paradoxes, once nightmares to hegemonic logic, are long-solved for hybrid cultural societies such as Brazil's. Lucas Arruda systematically tells the tale of *assum preto*, the blinded, warbling blackbird, and has titled several solo shows using this exact name, repeating the song just as the bird does. In the most recent, on the occasion of his fourth solo show at David Zwirner, and second in New York, the artist exhibits a body of new works, his most mature and autobiographical to date.

Blindness, which precludes the discernible outlines defining objects, permeates the epistemological facets of Arruda's practice. It is imperative to emphasize that the artist defies the dual conventional paradigms often imposed on his work: Arruda neither conforms to a European painting tradition that would try to insert him in a crafted, artificial genealogy, nor is he supposed to be seen as a tropical artist drawing from the lush, enigmatic jungle. A more nuanced interpretation reveals a contemporary Brazilian artist steeped in multicultural influences, navigating between extremes. Through the lenses of some Latin American artists, one can elucidate how concepts such as desert, model, emptiness, and blindness intersect, within a robust theoretical structure, with the establishments of modernity and contemporaneity in Latin American art. Active oblivion and canonical emptying forge unique nets neither wholly reliant on, nor subordinate to, hegemonic references.

Deserto-modelo ("desert model"), for Arruda—as for the Brazilian poet João Cabral de Melo Neto, from whom the expression comes—does not obey the Cartesian notion of an infinite, homogeneous, and transparent space. The artist claims a model based not on the repetition of the treatises, manuals, and norms characteristic of Eurocentric epistemologies but rather the infinite reinsertion of oneself into a position of questioning, defiance, and effort—ever changing, ever the same. In this dynamic framework, the concept of a model inherently involves the individual, navigating both recurrent and unique circumstances within a universal yet distinct context.

The veiled light in Arruda's sea-, land-, and jungle-scapes is laid as a balsam overflowing the painting. At times, it appears as if a centrifugal force is propelling the elements

toward the edges, as though scraping the canvas like an engraver etches a copper plate. These marks, borne from the agitation of brush bristles against the canvas, evoke a sense of perpetual unrest that, paradoxically, seeks tranquility and sanctuary. A tension ensues between the depicted wilderness and the physicality of the painting itself, illustrating how the dense forest can evoke a serene state of mind akin to the sea and the desert.

In a group of recent small-scale paintings, there are symptomatic recurrences where Arruda reengages sundered compartmentalization maneuvers in the abstract space through pictorial elements with planar and geometric wills. Although these compositions may initially appear symbolic, their constituent elements provoke a dilution of their esoteric quality, veering toward a more formal aesthetic. While specific motifs depict crosses, tilted arcs, and circular forms, others reference subtle elements from his earlier, figurative work, oscillating between echoes of Italian church windows and illuminated bulbs within still-life compositions. As a reclusive observer in a perennial ashram, Arruda embarks on introspective journeys of self-discovery, revisiting his artistic origins to present an elusive future entwined with an indomitable past.

In his monochrome paintings, Arruda employs a vast and committed effort to dwell in nothingness, in a *Deserto-Modelo* (the title of his decade-long series of untitled works). Meticulously built with several paint coats over months, these larger-format pieces immerse the viewer in a labyrinth of ethereal walls, intensifying feelings of presence and solitude within an endless atmosphere. The desert is no longer a figurative mark but an impetus for painting and an ideal synthesis of abstraction that proposes escape and reencounter.

Despite being auratic in a broader sense, the monochromes hold a visual halo inside the canvas, creating a vibrant yet dim corollary between the mass of paint and the raw, dyed linen. By juxtaposing the emptiness of the unpainted zone with the multilayered color block that pretends to mimic the same desertedness, Arruda achieves an utter metaphor of blindness. It is as if this threshold between action and surrender can be felt more than seen. A kindred effect of transition through undefinition can be experienced in the installations featuring projected light that are exhibited in a designated room in the gallery.

Each light work comprises two rectangles: the lower, painted directly onto the wall, and the upper, projected by a meticulously calibrated beam of light. Drawing from the wall as a foundation, the lower body is painted in a subdued tone, while the upper square embodies a lighter timbre—as if the three could be synthesized as 0, -1, and +1, respectively. These biphasic compositions, heterogeneous in any order, conjecture that the material paint has haltingly decanted and the light has emerged—allusions to Christ's scenes of deposition and ascension, being cardinal events in Arruda's repertoire, are encouraged. Despite their serene demeanor, these light installations harbor a perpetual

anticipation as the imminent convergence of the two color fields threatens to nullify each, plunging them into the wall's abyss and evoking a sense of emptiness. Through this visual dialogue, Arruda navigates a spectrum that transcends the cognitive, delving into metaphysical and cosmological realms. By deliberately aligning the two rectangles vertically, Arruda creates a horizon line. It craves—and refrains from—turning everything into absolute landscapes, trying to organize the world epidemically, as *assum preto* did with the world no longer seen. This interruption of verticality through a critical line can recall an artist whose work echoes strongly in Arruda's: the Venezuelan Armando Reverón, and his habit of tightly tying his waist to divide the spiritual and the carnal. The suggestion of a horizon can therefore manifest not only order but restlessness.

Just as the artist crosses a tangle of thorns set by the European artistic canons, arriving free on the other side but with uncountable wounds, Arruda engages in a dialogue with the tradition of mural painting—especially Italian frescoes—albeit while opting for an ambiguous work of light. Even within the painted rectangle, indiscernible as it is from the illuminated field without prior information, light remains the focal point. In these almost insubstantial frescoes, demarcated by an elusive spectral line, Arruda breaks down the walls on which they are projected to access more extensive investigations of the horizon. The will to knock down a wall and to unveil the exterior—not a landscape per se, but a totality ungraspable from interiors where one cannot fly, as aspired to by such European techniques as *trompe-l'oeil* and *quadratura*—is exercised by Arruda through the alchemical nearness of the material and immaterial in a delicate balance with incommensurable force.

The Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges became blind over the three decades preceding his death. Even without his sight, he continued vibrantly lecturing in universities worldwide, often reciting from memory lengthy passages in Old English, Nordic, German, French, and Spanish (oddly, he claimed not to recall any of his own verses). Borges continued to write, dictating to his partner and assistant, María Kodama, his shadow and soul. During a journey to Egypt in 1984, he inscribed in his *Atlas*, in a piece called "The Desert": "Three or four hundred meters from the Pyramid I inclined myself, took a handful of sand, let it silently fall a few steps ahead, and said quietly: I am modifying the Sahara. The act itself was meaningless, but the words, not ingenious at all, were fair, and I thought it had taken me all my life to be able to pronounce them." Despite his greatness, Borges understood his insignificance in comparison to the vastness of the desert—both the entity and history. Yet he recognized his capacity to effect change upon the immutable. Similarly, like a whispered, repetitive prayer, Arruda harbors a silent, yearning fixation for the desert—perhaps a metaphor for life and painting. In blindness, the air was as solid as the colossal bodies of sand were light. To be a prisoner of the desert, as well as its master, is Arruda's curse and blessing, as dual as the blind blackbird that sings about light.

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