



Zéh Palito. *Reflections of Clouds on the Water-Lily Pond of the Nile Swim Club*, 2024. Acrylic and oil on canvas. 62 × 106 inch. Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

ZÉH PALITO

CARS, POOLS & MELANIN

September 6 – October 19, 2024

Perrotin New York is pleased to present Zéh Palito's first solo exhibition with the gallery, titled *Cars, Pools & Melanin*, consisting of new paintings and sculptures.

Zéh Palito and I met in Jardins on a July afternoon in 2024 to discuss his work. Neither of us is from Jardins, a neighborhood in São Paulo known for its concentration of galleries and art dealers. Zéh Palito is from Limeira, in the countryside of São Paulo, and I am from Minas Gerais, a state with deep ties to São Paulo. We were both visitors, somewhat accustomed to the social codes of that space which we occupy professionally with varying degrees of comfort and discomfort. I introduce this topic because challenging exclusionary codes is one of the central interests in Palito's painting. In his debut exhibition with Perrotin, he renews this interest by translating these themes into the socio-racial contexts of the United States, depicting Black and Brown bodies occupying leisure spaces in America of the 1940s and '50s. He has chosen two symbols to critique segregation mechanisms: swimming pools and automobiles. His new works therefore allude to an important aspect of the struggle for racial equality: the right to leisure.

Drawing on the process of integration that took place in some U.S. states following *Brown v. Board of Education* (1952-1954), Palito envisions the swimming pool as a space of affirmation. This

reference serves as a bitter reminder that, despite legal support, the end of segregation remains an incomplete process in countries marked by racism imposed by the colonial enterprise, such as the United States and Brazil. (Recently, scrutiny of leisure has also occupied Brazilian cultural debates.) Water serves as a symbolic marker of segregation, representing the purity sought by white supremacy. Consequently, in Palito's paintings, the figures dominate his scenes with a commanding presence.

In *Cars, Pools & Melanin*, Palito pays tribute to historical and contemporary artists. In each painting, he incorporates miniature replicas of their work, including Andy Warhol's Campbell soup in *A Place in the Sun*, a vase with a Mickalene Thomas in *Christopher Walking*, a notebook with a Kerry James Marshall in *Reflections of Clouds on the Water-Lily Pond of the Nile Swim Club*, or a cowboy hat with a Van Gogh in *The Starry Night at Lake Montebello*. While incorporating nods to Western art history, it is the human presence that occupies the centerstage.

One of the most striking works reinterprets David Hockney's iconic 1967 painting *A Bigger Splash*. Celebrated as a high point in Hockney's engagement with the California dream and its bourgeois light and calm, Palito's version features a Black female wearing a papaya-patterned bathing suit, materializing a figure not present in



Zéh Palito. *The Negro Splash*, 2024. Acrylic and oil on canvas. 63 × 49 inch. Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.



Zéh Palito. *Hard Knock Life*, 2024. Acrylic and oil on canvas. 63 × 49 inch. Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

the original painting. In Hockney's version, the splash remains, as though Palito's figure is outside the frame having pushed someone into the pool, generating movement in the water—as the artwork's title suggests, *The Negro Splash*. It is impossible to forget that the same year Hockney painted his piece, artists of color were advocating for greater representation in the United States, a movement that led to the creation of institutions like the Studio Museum in Harlem and El Museo del Barrio, where their works gained more visibility.

In Palito's car paintings, automobiles become stages for displaying Black pride, where figures pose with beauty and defiance next to objects of desire. As Palito explained to me, the car also references the cultural significance of the Green Book, which provided safe routes for Black drivers traveling through segregated states. In both the pool and car paintings, the pictorial space appears to be constructed over ruins, with few references to real spaces, highlighting the utopian narrative that Palito has meticulously crafted.

An artist with roots in muralism and street art, Palito learned to value the importance of communicative art, in which, as he put it, "people can see themselves and give their opinions." It is also from graffiti that he inherited his artistic name, Zéh, a shortened form of José which is one of the most popular names in Brazil. Zéh is an artist who divides his time between his rural property in Limeira and a home in Maryland, where he engages with a vibrant art scene.

The connection with the United States and Brazil is something I share with Zéh Palito. In *Jardins*, we talked about our shared passion for sambista and painter Heitor dos Prazeres, once known as the master of samba and color, the subject of an earlier project by Palito. We discussed how the fruits that are a constant presence in his work are inspired from his trees in Limeira, such as the banana sculptures punctuating the exhibition. And, more painfully, how combating self-hatred and fostering a sense of one's worth is one of the most significant legacies of civil rights.

We discussed how the skins of the figures in his paintings are never rendered as continuous fields of color but always with fragmented patches of various shades of black and brown. How Black children continue to be mistreated by vendors in Brazil, mistaken for beggars—as if this were justifiable. A national shame. In the context of *Jardins*, one of the country's most segregated neighborhoods, it was evident that the fact of my being white and Zéh being Black made a difference. I left that lunch feeling that things are slowly changing in *Jardins* and that Zéh Palito's generation of artists has a big contribution to that change.

— Rodrigo Moura
Chief Curator at El Museo del Barrio, New York