



Francesco João  
15/03 – 13/04 2019

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TENSIONAL ABSTRACTION

In 1983, American public television network PBS aired the first episode of *The Joy of Painting*, a half-hour instructional television show hosted by painter and television personality Bob Ross. In this show, which counted 403 episodes streamed every week from 1983 to 1994, Ross delivered short and incisive lectures around the right formal execution in the medium of painting. Although impulsively focused on figurativism, the show examined a varied spectrum of painterly techniques, providing historical references, and guiding the hands of the viewers through the screen.

Through the TV show, the medium of painting was typified as a valuable one, an act of extremely adamant craftsmanship that required a full-on dedication, and study. The format had been clearly devised for a broad audience, but nevertheless it succeeded in communicating the extraordinary labor embodied within the practice of painting, and the technical excellence that it requires.

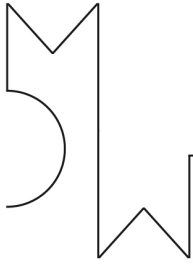
Funnily enough, the professor and art critic, Isabelle Graw encapsulates a similar statement in her book *Painting Beyond Itself*. According to Graw, the *liveness* of painting is scarcely resemblant of the studious exercise delivered in the instructional, hypnotic lectures in *The Joy of Painting*. The *liveness* that Graw discerns as a crucial code of the medium of painting has little to do with its aesthetic characteristics. Rather, it results from the fact that the life and work time of a living artist have been spent in the process of painting. This “narrow bond between product and person”—the painting’s physical connection not to its subject, but to its author—contributes to the hierarchical predominance of painting above all the other formal fine art manifestations. Following up on Graw’s articulation, the ghostly presence of the artist within the work—a holographic, archetypal myth—could also prompt an analysis of the symbolic worth of a painting, i.e. a product loaded with intentionality.

In reverting the terms of this osmotic relationship between the author and the product—the one seeing the artwork as a direct emanation of agency—it is reasonable to assume that the artist, or rather the painter, will find himself in a demiurgic condition where his intentional labor is transferred to the work. This empathic transmission generates the myth of the painter—i.e. the artist whose *liveness* emerges from the work.

This myth, nevertheless, is far from being favored by João’s practice—he clearly eyes it but does not indulge. João’s methodology is one to be observed, discussed within a framework of references, and subtle humor. A certain degree of attention is paid to the structures supporting the painting—format, raw canvas, brushes, frame—as if the gesture of selecting, gathering, and manipulating the means of his painterly production were a theoretical implication of the work itself. This is not, in fact, just a possibility—João makes a statement out of this pre-condition for his practice, claiming a tangible objectuality for his own work.

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What is at stake is to build a language that is capable to speculate on the multilayered, connoted tropes of painting, while also approaching the painting-object with some sort of intellectual detachment—a witty analysis on the fact that painting is here, alive, and we somehow have to deal with it. Appropriating the archetypes of painting and manipulating them into a personal aesthetic language is clearly a process that João wants to make visible in his work. The *détournement*, in fact, is at the very core of his painterly practice, and becomes the vehicle to address questions to the aural medium of painting, while also building up a visual vocabulary that the artist articulates throughout his work.

Distancing himself from the cliché of the painter isolated in the studio, whose sensibility is linked to the work through a mystical bond, who indulges in the idyll of painting, João questions his role of artistic producer with an almost scientific, sociological attitude—and so does his work.

On the occasion of Francesco João's exhibition at Mendes Wood DM Brussels, his first solo show in Belgium, the artist has worked on a new series of paintings articulating his concerns towards the social, aesthetic, and historical implications of the medium of painting. Although this could be regarded as a larger-than-life narrative, João makes use of this paradox—the one that sees him making paintings to talk about painting—to contextualize his work within his references.

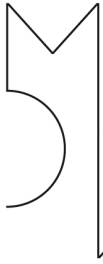
For these paintings, João has appropriated images from a Google search, which he has then rendered to the canvas through a skilful, precise gesture. The images are almost visible, almost recognizable to the viewer, behind many layers of gouache. This painterly gesture is reminiscent of the technique of the silkscreen, where the matrix allows the reproduction of unlimited copies through the stratification of layers. Ironically enough, João is here making a statement—he is working on a 1-of-1 matrix for a 1-of-1 copy, a matrix for the whole notion of painting, one could argue.

This process is theoretically-charged, and reasoned—imagine the artist at work, filling the gaps of the matrix-image projected on the canvas with a precision brush; there's plenty of time for meditation, and consideration of the whole work. Also, the formal enigma of this technique lies within the illusion of the reproducibility of the final painting-object, a question those paintings have been asked many times. The true essence, the detail of unicity is, in fact, to be found within this complex framework of layers—exactly where a drop of paint has forced the code of the image. The imperfection becomes the key to question the work.

There is indeed a huge painterly effort in João's work, but he doesn't make a big deal out of it; there is no mystification of the medium of painting here—above all, a substantial investigation on the objectuality of painting is carried on through a sense of irony. This ironic capacity is mostly conveyed through the subversion of perception, through the disruption of archetypal hierarchies

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and classifications in painting—the ones between figurativism and abstraction, for example. A straightforward example of this could be found in the choice of the subjects in João's paintings: landscapes.

A major canon in the global history of fine arts, landscape painting has survived through imperialist dominations, climate change, socio-political shifts, art avant-gardes, World Wars, and so many other things that I feel a bit embarrassed to discuss it right now due to my little knowledge of this essential, topical matter. What I know, and I'm pretty sure the artist does too, is that landscape painting has always been a vehicle to hijack the playful narrative of a realist depiction of a given surrounding environment and charge the idyllic image with sub-textual references and messages.

The same exact process happens in João's paintings, where the tropes of landscape painting are detoured to a much more obscure, tensional and formal restitution. Unusual crops of landscapes, or seascapes in this case, emerge from layers of complimentary colors through the canvas contained by an artist's frame, as if they were suspended in time and space. It is almost impossible to affirm whether we are on the beach, or on the moon. In fact, the outer-space becomes another landscape to be manipulated in another series of works in this exhibition, mainly through the eyes of Curiosity—a rover controlled by the NASA's Mars Exploration Program.

All these elements—the investigation of painting and its aural connotation, the rejection of the myth of the painter, the disruption of boundaries between abstraction and figurativism, the appropriation of archetypes—situate Francesco João's practice within a realm of tensional abstraction, where images scratch the surface but cannot succeed in affirming themselves as such.

– Federico Sargentone

Francesco João (Milan, 1987) lives and works in São Paulo.  
His exhibitions include *Brasile. Il coltello nella carne*, PAC, Milan (2018); *Donkey Man*, Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo (2017); *Everything tends to ascend. Or not.*, Pivô, São Paulo (2016); *Summertime '78*, Kunsthalle São Paulo, São Paulo (2015); *Nimm's Mal Easy*, Ausstellungsraum Klingental, Basel (2015); *Extra DRY*, Peep Hole/DRY, Milan (2014); *Dizionario di Pittura*, Galleria Francesca Minini, Milan (2014); *The Opposite of the Opposite Opposite of the Opposite*, Gasconade, Milan (2012).

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