

Gunnar B. Kvaran

Where were you born? Tell me about the place, your family, parents, even grandparents. Who were they, where did they come from and what did/do they do?

Thiago Martins de Melo

I was born in São Luís, capital of the state of Maranhão, a state of predominantly Black and Indigenous population; a geographically hybrid state within an Amazon area but belonging to the northeast region of Brazil.

I'm the son of a psychologist mother from Maranhão and a painter father from Pernambuco. My father's family is very old in Brazil, dating back to the 17th century, during the Dutch colonization, being owners of sugarcane farms. My father's family had some very adventurous figures in its history. My mother's family is relatively recent in Brazil: its roots go back to the 19th century with migrants from the Iberian Peninsula who bought land in the region. My paternal grandparents are from Pernambuco and Alagoas. They were always very independent both intellectually and emotionally. My grandmother wrote poetry and was a voracious reader with a very expansive personality. My grandfather had a technical background in electronics. He was a boxer and during his retirement he became a farmer, and still is today. They lived in São Paulo before returning to the Northeast, after yet another of my grandfather's eccentric episodes.

My maternal grandparents have both passed away. They were more austere figures, but very socially supportive, despite belonging to a wealthy class. My grandmother was a zealous Catholic and my grandfather an austere Protestant. Despite the religious difference, they never fought and were typical of the patriarchal family who owned land.

GBK

What kind of artist was your father?

TMDM

My father was a figurative painter. His main themes were architectural. His paintings had thick layers of paint, mostly applied with a spatula.

GBK

Is this how art come into your life?

TMDM

Yes. I've lived with painting since I was born. I have very early memories of my father mixing powder pigments of various colors with linseed oil and other materials, the thick layers of scraped-off oil paint in his studio, and seeing monsters and battles in these massive wrinkled layers. There were painting books everywhere. Graphic novels, art books and photography books were very common at home. I learned to read very early on by reading comic books, and I was mesmerized by cinema. I bought cinema publications at the age of six or seven and recorded films on VHS. I wrote stories and drew comics at this age. My biggest interest was cinema. Painting only became a passion at the age of 16.

GBK

When did you decide to study art?

TMDM

When I was 16 years old, I decided to study art and went to the studio of Cordeiro do Maranhão, a Maranhão artist who had lived in Rio and had studied for years at the visual arts school at Parque Lage. I got a good introduction to art history and became interested in contemporary art. At the age of 18, I was admitted to the Visual Arts course at the Federal University of Maranhão, but I never finished the course. I was disqualified for not having graduated in time: I'd been coming and going for almost eight years. The course was weak, apart from the humanistic disciplines, which influenced me a lot. I migrated to Psychology and built a short and mediocre academic trajectory in this field. My initial interest was studying Anthropology, but I ended up studying Psychology in parallel with Visual Arts. After graduating, I did a master's degree at the University of Pará. I started a doctorate, but I abandoned it years later when I decided to dedicate myself exclusively to art.

GBK

Who were the main contemporary artists in Brazil and in your environment at that time?

TMDM

I'm not sure who were the most influential, but I can say that Tunga, Nuno Ramos, Antonio Dias, Mario Cravo Neto, Emmanuel Nassar, Miguel Rio Branco, Artur Barrio, Nelson Felix and Cildo Meireles were active in that period – many are still active today – and the most influential to me.

GBK

And who were your international artistic references at the beginning of your art-making?

TMDM

Many of my references at the time remain basically the same today. Many of them were beyond the field of painting. I was interested in literature, cinema, graphic novels, as well as political science, anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy and history. I was fascinated by the writings and the works of people like Glauber Rocha, Tunga, Jörg Immendorff, Matthew Barney, Jung, Georges Bataille, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Portinari, Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Otto Dix, Jodorowsky, Debret, Martin Kippenberger, Raymond Pettibon, Zulawski, Markus Lupertz, Delacroix, George Grosz, Tarkovsky, Darcy Ribeiro, Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, Jorge Amado, William Blake, Akira Kurosawa, Suehiro Maruo, Philippe Drillet, Moebius, Anselm Kiefer and many others.

GBK

When do you consider the beginning of your career as a painter, and were there connections between your psychological studies and your art?

TMDM

Despite having participated in several institutional projects from the age of 16, I consider that my mature art began to establish itself in 2008. Psychology played a preponderant role in the way I saw the pictorial sign and how to articulate visual narratives.

GBK

Can you expand on this role played by psychology?

TMDM

I'll have to go back a little, to the beginning of my production, in order to address this issue. In the 1990s and early 2000s in Brazil, the narrative in painting was rarely seen. Painting was formalist to the bone. Figurative painting and compositions that included micronarratives were not seen when I returned to painting in 2008, after having gone through a period of depression. Curiously, in 2008, many young figurative painters attained visibility. At the time, I had a master's degree in Behavior Analysis, and despite this being an analytical-empirical field, my interest in the humanities was increasing. So, I clandestinely approached Social Psychology and, more secretly, Jung, who played a very important role in the way I faced the pictorial sign. Understanding the importance of symbolic construction made me reflect on my own spiritual interests. I'd had family experience within spiritism since childhood, both Kardecist spiritism and Afro-Brazilian religiosity. This Afro-Brazilian spiritual world view introduced me to the syncretic, which was something that always intrigued me. Then I became interested in tarot and other oracles. The union with my first wife Viviane was providential in this regard. Between 2008 and 2011, my production was immersed in personal issues that went through paternity, marriage, gender roles, spirituality, etc., until my interests were increasingly directed from micropolitics to an understanding of the world that goes through social struggle.

GBK

In what way was the union with Viviane, your first wife, providential? You've made some powerful images with yourself and Viviane as the main actors. Was it just in the paintings or in life too – did you do some political actions outside the canvas, in society?

TMDM

She is a very important person and an existential turning point for me. Many of the pledges of struggle and political alliance that I have today began with her influence. It was all very intense! The period when I lived with Viviane was one of elaboration of many personal conflicts and of finding myself in the world.

We had many common interests, both politically and spiritually. Viviane came from a spiritist family and she's a medium of incorporation, who has been reading the tarot since adolescence. She was quickly accepted by my spiritual entities, incorporating many of them, and by my mediumistic friends. The relationship between identity, social struggle, and spirituality became entangled in that relationship. Viviane was an environmental lawyer and was doing her doctorate research on an Amazon extractive reserve (Resex Tauá Mirim) that was under attack, and this had a great impact on me, in addition to putting me in contact and in alliance with traditional and Indigenous communities and organizations in my region. It was a turning point with regards to an existential commitment to resistance struggle.

I'm currently affiliated with a Trotskyist workers' party called PCO (Partido da Causa Operária or Party of the Workers' Cause) and I have party obligations. In addition, I have a political and spiritual commitment to alliance in the struggle of the Gamela Indigenous people. Viviane's son has an Indigenous tribe leadership as a godfather.

GBK

In what way was the "syncretism" important for you?

TMDM

The syncretism I experienced in Tambor de Mina – an Afro-Brazilian cult of voduns – was important in understanding the narratives of African orixás and voduns in relation to other human ancestral narratives such as Greek, Norse and Egyptian mythology. In the Tambor de Mina, the reading of *odus* is the reading of the paths that have been trodden countless times by humanity and that are repeated constantly by us. The signs change, but the human stories are always the same. With syncretism, I'm referring to the cultural melting pot in which I exist, where cosmogonic elements from Tupinambá, Jeje, Nagô and Western civilization amalgamate to create another world. Many archetypal elements recur in the work, among them the Rebis, the universal whole, the two-headed hermaphrodite, the symbolic reconciliation of matter and the spirit, male and female, which is represented in my work as matrices that make up this new postcolonial world.

GBK

Can you tell me more about the importance of Jung?

TMDM

The Jungian system is consistent with my way of thinking about the image and the unconscious. My training as a student was in the most empirical area of psychology, that is, behavior analysis, evolutionary psychology and ethology. My interest in the evolution of the ancestral mind found – now with the mind of an artist – in Jungian mentalism a key to reading that makes a lot of sense to me from an evolutionary perspective.

Concepts like collective unconsciousness and archetype, dream life and trance made me conscious of mystical human experiences in all civilizations. I have to say that my spiritual perspective is very much based on the mind and its biological basis. I'm fascinated by mediumistic trances, oracles, signs, but I don't believe in god, nor in miracles. I'm interested in the construction of the sign and symbolism that's culturally rooted in traditions, but I read them as the result of universal processes of the human mind from an evolutionary perspective. Still, I believe in many things that I think will be explained by science in the distant future.

I'm interested in the way the avatar is thought of in Hinduism and how the *caboclos* and *voduns* in the Afro-Amerindian cults present themselves with another personality. To me, this seems very similar to the avatar. Although signs are distinct, underneath them there's an archetype that's more comprehensible and universal, a symbolic layer built across generations. This in turn is the tip of an endless iceberg that is the product of a collective unconscious, an evolution that connects us to the bases of life on Earth. For this reason, all methods of reading the world, whether oracular or symbolic constructions, have very deep bases. In our fragmented minds, they appear in crumbs, but they combine into a vision of a larger picture.

GBK

Who were the other intellectuals and writers that you were reading at the time?

TMDM

It's important to note that in 2007 I was in a process of ritualistic initiation into the Tambor de Mina, and my mind was divided into two. One side was concerned with statistics and empiricism due to my area of expertise in the academy at the time, and the other fluctuated between cultural studies, art, and spirituality. The books I was reading

at this time (some of which I still have always at hand) were, for example: Carl Jung's *The Red Book and Memories, Dreams, Reflections*; Dennis Dutton's *The Art Instinct*; Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell*; Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel*; Darcy Ribeiro's *The Brazilian People: The Formation and Meaning of Brazil*; Reginaldo Prandi's *Mitologia dos orixás*; Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*; Homer's *Odyssey*; Petronius' *Satyricon*; Georges Bataille's, *Story of the Eye*; Marx and Engels' *The Communist Manifesto*; Roberto Gambini's, *Indian Mirror: The Making of the Brazilian Soul*; Viveiros de Castro's *The Inconstancy of the Indian Soul: The Encounter of Catholics and Cannibals in Sixteenth-Century Brazil*; Mundicarmo Ferretti's *Desceu na Guma*; Gonçalves Dias' *I-Juca-Pirama*; Pedro Juan Gutiérrez's *Tropical Animal*. There are many others, but these are works that still resonate with me today.

GBK

Do you see conceptual links between literature, film, theatre and even liturgy and other spiritual rituals?

TMDM

Yes, I see this relationship with other mediums and art forms at work all the time. In paintings, for example, I can clearly see compositional references that range from graphic novels to the tarot. In my stop-motion videos, audiovisual references become more difficult to discern; clearly, cinema is the reference, but this reference mixes with video clips, comics, experimental animation shorts and literature in the composition of the scripts. For me, it's very difficult to say where I get my references from because I see a lot of things at the same time and I absorb everything and amalgamate everything and in the process the footprints of the original disappear. My visual experience, being born in a very culturally hybrid, Indigenous, afro-descendant and euro-descendant region, has influenced me a lot. The elements of popular Catholicism, Afro-Amerindian cults are visually aggressive in terms of color. The altars of the Tambor de Mina combine images of Christian, African and indigenous entities. In the syncretic structure of the cults, masses in Latin are followed by African drums and chants in the Fon language, and rattles and Indigenous music harmonize. I believe that having been created under the influence of this Baroque visuality of Brazil (Latin America, the third world), of a

periphery of capitalism, has made it possible for me to digest different languages more naturally.

GBK

Did the visual, oral or written culture of the Indigenous people inspire you?

TMDM

The most direct approach to the Amerindian aspect addressed in the paintings and films is in the narratives of anticolonial struggle, resistance to extermination and the transcendental (spiritual) narratives elaborated in the political struggles, since my interest is to appropriate the complex history of the world and retell it from my navel. I can't say that I was directly visually influenced or that I appropriated anything in this case. The works where I directly dealt with issues of ethnicity were carried out in co-authorship with the community. This is the case with a work called *Gamela Sumak Kawsay*, for instance. Moreover, many Indigenous references that appear in my work are linked to Afro-Brazilian cults to which I belong: *caboclos* (*caboclo* means a *mestizo* of white and indigenous, but in Afro cults they're characterized by Amerindians, often with aesthetics of the Indigenous American). The Inquices or Nkisis are African entities linked to land. When the bantus came, they couldn't bring these entities because they belong to the territory, so when they arrived, the Amerindians became their Nkisis, hence the Indigenous influence in the Bantu cults in Brazil. Some narratives related to the jaguar and the snake are common in the Latin-American and Brazilian folk imagination. Because we're a *mestizo* people, many spiritual, mythical, and legendary narratives are mergers of European, Indigenous, and African narratives, with the same stories told in different ways in many regions. I was also very much influenced by hermetic iconography and alchemy, as well as by the tarot. There are elements shared with my syncretic influences that help me build this universe. These are influences that have always played within me in order to think of the work as more than it represents. It's important to say that as much as I determine some signs and a path through what I'm dealing with, I don't have total control over the work and I don't want it. I always believe that my paintings can speak to me over the years, as if it were playing with time.

GBK

There have also been politics in your works since 2011–2016 (with paintings such as *Teatro nagô-cartesiano*). What triggered your political consciousness?

TMDM

It's hard to say, but my mother always worked in the social field. She was a social psychologist and worked in the prison system and this gave me, from a very young age, an imaginary influenced by reports of violence and social chaos. But it was only with the engagement of Viviane, my first wife, that political action became almost a moral imperative. Viviane worked as a volunteer lawyer for traditional communities that had no one to turn to, and the issues started to come into my home.

GBK

Would you describe yourself as a political artist?

TMDM

The denomination as a political artist has an external origin. I consider myself just an artist, but I understand that my critical approach leads to this reduction by most of the audience.

GBK

How would you describe the political situation in Brazil that you're dealing with in your works?

TMDM

The situation in the country deteriorated rapidly after the parliamentary coup that removed Dilma [Rousseff]. If in the past we fought against the developmentalism in the country and against the cooptation of resistance leaders, today we're fighting for the lives of entire Indigenous nations and against a state that abandoned development in order to wipe out any minority group that intends to rise up against it. Public policies built over decades have been destroyed, as has any intention of a project for the country. The entire dystopian universe that I expressed in my production went from a nightmare

to reality. This is the darkest period in Brazilian history since the early years of the military dictatorship.

GBK

In your works, you denounce political oppression, corruption, racism, and you plead for social justice. Your paintings are like manifestos or road maps evoking urban guerrilla actions. Can you tell me what forms of resistance and actions you believe could eventually change the political situation?

TMDM

The situation of the left and the anti-establishment struggle is more complex and chaotic than ever. We live in a time when the era of productive capital is in agony and corporations have greater power than country communities. Ministers become lobbyists for this entity called the “market”, and the characterization of workers, the poor, and traditional peoples is no longer as clear as it was in the 20th century. The growing deindustrialization, the uberization of work, the assimilation of identity by the establishment further fragment the resistance. Latin America, and Brazil in particular, have been suffering from this dismantling of the social state and a hybrid war where the corporate media uses the spread of fake news on social media to leverage political platforms aligned with private and anti-democratic interests as instruments of financial groups. All of this increases the intensity of attacks on rights, and existence itself, which is opposed by a fragmentary field of resistance whose elements clash with each other due to a failure of cohesion. Neoliberalism has already crossed the red line and we’re already on the path of environmental and human destruction. History shows us that, in extreme times, revolutions and radical changes occur, even if they haven’t been properly organized, because survival is a natural instinct and collectivities always rise when pushed to extremes. We no longer live in the era of internationalist armed revolutions, although there are some revolutions around the world, among them the Mayan Zapatista revolution in Chiapas, Mexico, which I’m very fond of. In the cloudy scenario I have, this is the only certainty – popular insurgency in various parts of the world –, but what will emerge from it may be either the continuation of a cycle of misfortunes keeping us on the path of the destruction of our existence or a chaos that leads us to a new sort of

organization among the peoples and a new global economics that's subject to the interests of the peoples and not to those of a diminished global elite.

GBK

The paintings look like collage-based works. Do you make collages first, or sketches, or does it all happen in the act of painting?

TMDM

I use a lot of visual references, as well as literary research on subjects that I cover in my paintings. The process is very varied and not rigid. That is, I start from the interest in a theme or an image, and from there I expand it in sketches by hand, visual references on the theme, other related themes, making connections between signs. In this process, the compositions are naturally modified in a negotiation between form and content. I often cover entire areas of the painting with elements, erasing or adding. My disorganization contributes to an intuitive process, as often substantial changes are made during the process itself. As much as I schematically plan elements and dialogues between micronarratives, it's in the making that the work decides what it'll be. Lately, I've been doing a lot of digital collage exercises, but they're not at all rigid, because I believe that a lot of things must be left to be solved in the process of doing and in the insights that it can bring.

GBK

How do you construct the narrative structure on the canvas?

TMDM

I usually divide the elements between planes, figure and background, then I use different levels of texture, different painting styles, dividing into layers, trying to create spaces on the canvas where the elements can dialogue between different times. Sometimes I cut out oil-painted elements and embed them in parts of the composition, literally gluing them to the canvas. This relationship also occurs when I add sculptures or TV screens over the painting.

GBK

One has the impression, from the way you deploy the brush, that you paint in the first person. Are you “talking” directly to the public or are you more a story teller?

TMDM

This is yet another difficult question to answer. I don't think that I paint for an audience, because my initial motivation has always been to elaborate questions on the visual plane that make sense to me. I can't deal with a work that's just a formal resolution, because for me it has to be personal on a level of truth that makes sense to me. So I see them as problematizations, more than telling the story itself, because I don't try to focus on making allegories of a story already told. I don't know how to explain it more clearly, but I see the process as an arena where these signs are related in an open narrative construction, even if it has clear conceptual markers. I think I'm talking to the public, but I am not quite sure of it.

GBK

In your composition you often play with scale and fragments, inventing micro narratives within larger scenes and visions. The notion of hybrids is important in your work. What kind of role and signification does this have in your narratives?

TMDM

It plays a key role. A concern with the meaning of the elements at stake, as well as the creation of symbols, has an importance above the formal resolution itself. That is, I sometimes sacrifice interesting formal solutions to avoid falling into entropy. The themes were in the beginning developed from questions of the domestic environment that dialogued with archetypes of everyday narratives reported in classic literature or in myths. Now, I have the ambition of reaching a metanarrative that could be read as an archetype. At the same time, I'm fascinated by the baroque nature of the environment that surrounds me, often interpreted as precarious. Surrounding myself with signs and being able to play with them in an arena (from plan or painting expanded to 3D and architecture) is what compels me to continue to produce. It's not definitive speech, but problematizing, that allows me to further enrich the universe I create.

Using the features of expanded painting such as sculptures, 3D elements and compositions that flirt with architecture allows me to add another layer of complexity to the subject, and to make the subject more palpable, even though in the end the exercise is always mental. I also admit to a certain degree of anxiety in materializing ideas in flux, which in itself is an impossible attempt.

In any case, I believe that my method is very different from that of most artists because, despite being immersed in images, I always take as my starting point issues of the human universe that interest me at that moment. I don't know if I can say it with certainty, but a good part of my work starts from an internal verbalization, from a verbal dialogue, words that become images. Of course, the reverse process occurs a lot: that is, images that give out the verb. This exercise is never definitive, but I think it's important to highlight how discourse guides the construction of images. It's much more likely that I'll sacrifice a composition that contradicts the semantic directions I want to make explicit, than that I'll sacrifice the discourse.

GBK

Your paintings clearly express your desire to communicate, but one can also see an increasing sensuality, if not eroticism, in your wet, thick paint and the way you handle your brushes. Are you aware of this sensuality?

TMDM

Yes, I am aware of it. The painting for me has to do with desire and this is related to how I materialize it. I really like layered painting, and yes, I believe it's something seductive for the viewer who appreciates the making of painting.

GBK

When drawing the images on your canvas, especially the quotations, do you use a projector?

TMDM

Rarely. I used it more often in my production from 2009 to 2010. After that, I only used this practice in 2019 in some paintings in the *Necrobrasiliana* series, where an assistant projected and sketched the traditional images of Brazilian history so that I could

reproduce them in the correct proportions. Projections are only used if I seek to faithfully reproduce an image, or if I need urgency in the production of a large-scale painting. I believe that the use of the projector ends up hampering the spontaneity of the line. For the rest, I like to sketch and paint the compositions freehand. My method varies from time to time. I get bored easily and I'm always changing things, but in a more summarized and objective way, I always have a sketch with the main elements and areas of the composition marked. In the process, I continue to research images and read about the topics covered. The painting is often done in layers: first the background, and then elements painted in the second layer and thereafter adding or covering elements according to the resolutions of the process.

GBK

Within the narration (and the understanding of your work) what can you tell me about the role of spectator?

TMDM

The work is non-retinally built but in such a way that the signs dialogue with the viewer's symbolic framework. My hope in putting these works into the world is that they'll be able to establish a connection with viewers from anywhere in the world. The semantic relations that the spectator establishes should guide them to narratives that already exist in the world and across the ages, since the stories of the world are always the same.

GBK

When you plan your narratives combining different signs and symbols, do you aim to create a total, coherent, logical, completed story, or do you intentionally leave "holes" in your narration, a space for the spectator?

TMDM

My intention is that the work always grows in dialogue with the viewer. Closing the narrative completely would be, for me, like killing its transcendent possibilities. My process contradicts itself a little in relation to this issue, because, while I seek in the initial project to concatenate these signs in a way that guides a specific reading, I allow

new images that appear in my mind to go into the composition. That is, I always intend to draw semantic guidelines that allow me to overcome them in the mental game, because one image in relation to another will always draw a third and so on. It's in this way that I believe that the ideal artistic process happens. And those elements that can arise in the process also become elements that amplify or intrigue the observer, who can take the work to places that I can't go. And this is important, so that the work always remains in a timeless dialogue.

GBK

Tell me about your working methods and routines. Do you make a drawing first?

TMDM

The great majority of times, I go straight in with the brush on the canvas, but, very occasionally, when the work needs to be very precise, such as when I want to faithfully reproduce an image, I do a charcoal sketch. So most of the time, the painting is started directly with the brush.

GBK

Do you work at a certain time – in the morning? At night?

TMDM

The time in the studio varied a lot in the past, but since 2019, with the establishment of the main studio in São Paulo, my routine has been eight to twelve daily hours with breaks for a few days of rest. But it's not uncommon for me to spend a whole month working daily. The work isn't only making painting and sculpture in the studio, but also editing videos, reading, looking for references, concepts, signs, myths, etc.

GBK

Do you work with assistants, and if so, what's their role?

TMDM

The work with assistants was sporadic in the past and limited to sculpture-mold technicians, engraving technicians, ceramic technicians. For many years, painting was a

solitary craft, no matter how big it was. The first time that I had the help of assistants in the production of the paintings themselves was in 2019, for the *Necrobrasiliana* series. Their activities ranged from applying masking tape to areas of the canvas, to making charcoal markings from projected traditional images of Brazilian history. Today, painting remains a solitary craft, but I have assistants specialized in sculpture and video who work with me in these areas. The team varies between four to seven people, depending on the demand of the work. There are four permanent assistants.

GBK

What kind of materials do you use: top quality paper, canvas, colors and brushes, or whatever is available?

TMDM

High-quality oil paints, linen and cotton canvas, good-quality oil pastels, good-quality watercolor paints, quality colored pencils, dry pastels, good-quality spray paint, fiberglass air compressor gun, polyurethane, plastic putty, plastilina, different types of paper, editing software, iPad, etc. Although I always have quality brushes, I don't take good care of them and I always find myself using battered brushes. The same is true with spatulas. There's a certain self-indulgence and presumption in making good use of them, even if they're not in good condition.

GBK

Do you write down text-based narratives? Do you keep a diary?

TMDM

Yes, sometimes I write about my work to clarify it better. I don't keep a diary, but I have a lot of random notebooks and drawings. Everything is very chaotic in that area.

GBK

What is a strong image for you?

TMDM

I believe that these sparse episodes in which ready-made images emerge are the product of previous image research that my brain keeps working on, even when my attention is in another area. This is something already commonly understood in the creative process. This issue of choosing strong images is something that has been with me since the beginning. It happens in a very natural way. I'd have to think more about this question to get a satisfactory answer, but I can say that symbolic images most of the time are strong. An example is the tarot arcana: the cards make a strong impression on the neophyte through the signs represented there. From the beginning, I tried to put feelings of shame or moral zeal out of my creative process and try to use the most honest images possible. In the beginning, I had this in my method in a radical way. I identified as petit-bourgeois morality any shame in representing colonial rape or gender-based violence in the works. Even today, these questions persist. It's my work ethic. In the end, I'm not satisfied if an image doesn't make an impact on me, if it doesn't leave me intrigued or even, as in some works, affronted. I think there are already too many images in the world and if I have to put another one into the world then it should at least attempt to mark people with some experience and be intriguing.

GBK

To reorientate the question: what are powerful images?

TMDM

This is probably the most difficult question and my answer can only be an approximation. A strong image is something that when you see it, you immediately know it's important, but you're not quite sure why. I don't think it necessarily has to do with the theme, or with any specific formal feature. A strong image is something that resonates in the unconscious.

GBK

Do you see a difference between a "strong" image and a "powerful" image?

TMDM

I never thought about this specific differentiation, but I would call strong images any image related to meanings that cause some emotional reaction, whether due to utopian, sexual or uncomfortable themes such as pain, etc. If I have to categorize strong images I would say they're related to themes that grab the attention either out of disgust or out of desire and inspiration. Powerful images speak to the unconscious, and can be triggers for internal reflections, momentary variations in behavior and mood, inspiration for future actions.

GBK

Your images aren't illusions. However, they capture the spectator through their sensorial and sensual forces. What are your thoughts about this? Can you talk about how you produce that kind of effect?

TMDM

I believe this is due to my personal determination not to stop working on an image until it makes an impression on me. The variety of techniques, the feeling of depth when using layers, contrast and texture are elements that I use a lot. I use brushstrokes that range from more liquid to more heavy and caked, I use a spatula and a variety of round and flat brushes. I also use adhesive tape in works to accentuate the division between planes of different textures. I believe that this variation of layering techniques and the drama of many compositions lead to this feeling.

GBK

Once, speaking about your career, you summarized different periods – 2011–2016: *teatro nagô-cartesiano*-syncretism, the search for the place of the soul in the body in Cartesian (European) matrices and Afro-Indian traditions, with archetypal narratives resonating in different signs; and 2019: *Necrobrasiliansa*, reinterpretation and manipulation of images of Brazilian historical iconography under the sign of the necropolitics established with the advent of neo-fascism in Brazil. There seems to be a hole from 2016 until 2019. What happened during these years?

TMDM

This hiatus of series occurs because my work becomes more fluid and based on unique works that in turn deal with themes that are continually revisited. The *Necrobrasiliانا* series, for example, appears as a project to deal with the Brazilian tragedy with the rise of fascism to power and the cathartic reflection of cycles of institutionalized violence that have always been part of Brazilian history. But I see it as a specific proposal, where I operate between demarcated lines, and this is different from my production of unique works. Everything that I produce in the intervals between series I consider the most characteristic of my work, precisely because they deal with everything that populates my universe. They're unique, freer works that dialogue with everything else. Most of the production in this period deals with questions from all previous series, in addition to formal experiments in painting in relation to sculpture and video. The themes deal with resistance struggles typical of the global south, syncretic spirituality, deindustrialization, colonialism, revisiting myths that dialogue with the human condition, and contemporary issues.

GBK

In your latest works, one can see more artistic freedom. You seem to be "forcing" the content less, and instead you invent and experiment with the language of paintings or the "écriture" of the form and the figures. Can you comment on this?

TMDM

Yes. I've noticed this when analyzing my process. I think I mentioned that I'm more interested in the mental images that jump out when I look for connections between signs, in addition to being afraid to remain fixed in the narrative structure of the compositions, which may make me fail to recognize those images and compositions that appear almost readily in the mind during this process. Over the years, I've understood that these images in relation to others or alone in certain compositions make sense over time. Accepting this and being open is the most important thing in the creative process and makes it even more organic and fluid, allowing me to explore more freely the formal and compositional aspects.

GBK

Do these mental images influence your way of painting, the “form giving”, and if so in what way?

TMDM

It's hard to say. I've never thought about it. Most of the time, images come up in certain contexts and concepts, and through connections between signs. The image sometimes appears ready-made at once, but that's rare. Most of the time, the relationships between the elements take place at intervals and I recombine them in the general composition. I think mainly about the sign-image. The way in which I'm going to paint it is defined in the action of painting and in the reflection that occurs simultaneously with the act.

GBK

In some of your recent paintings, the forms and figures seem to be looser, more expressionist, even losing corporality. It looks good, but aren't you concerned that it will lose the strength of the narrative? Or does it just change the nature of the narrative? Is there a balance to be respected? Or is the challenge to break it?

TMDM

This is a natural process. I'm at a stage where I allow myself more freedom in representation and this includes the relationship between painting, the three-dimensional and the moving image. If the narrative loses force, this I cannot see. The fact that I'm at work sometimes prevents me from making this type of analysis. I've talked about my need to restrict my rationalist impulses, not to tie myself up to connections between signs or too closed narratives. The challenge is to expand the universe represented through certain semantic markers, that is, to allow a space of transcendence and I believe that this is directly related to what I'm doing now.

GBK

Can you tell me what is currently your “artistic challenge”? What kind of pictorial questions are you asking yourself and what kind of artistic and pictorial solutions do you have in mind?

TMDM

I want to continue expanding the formal possibilities of painting and dialogue with other media, as I have been doing. I'm interested in the relationship between the plane, the three-dimensional and movement; the relationship to temporality, which is characteristic of video, or of the static layers of painting, and expansion in space; narrative elements arranged in layers and dimensions.

GBK

Do you see and feel a certain kind of "progression" when dealing with your pictorial questions?

TMDM

Over time, solutions become more fluid, repertoires become larger and possibilities arise more naturally in the creative process. In the end, my production, that is, the materialization of my ideas, is very much based on the resources available to me. If my resources are limited, I adapt and try to make use of what I have.

GBK

Do you see yourself as belonging to a group of international artists?

TMDM

The years I've spent producing in certain parts of the world have given me a more universal understanding of my production and of how I think. I have many artist friends in very different cultures around the world, with different approaches to their work, who I talk to now and then, but I always have the feeling that we're all very similar. Even though I often deal more directly with issues of the global south, my work is very recognizable in the world.

GBK

Can you name a few international artists to whom you feel artistically close?

TMDM

Matthew Barney, for the creation of a unique world from the body and his universal and baroque references; Anselm Kiefer for the literary, historical references, and the epic materiality and scale; Jörg Immendorff for his strength of painting, expression, criticism, irony, and politics. Martin Kippenberger for provocative, experimental, liberating, cynical, and humorous work. Paul McCarthy for the provocative, eschatological, political character of his work, the liberating ride between diverse media. Raymond Pettibon for the literary character of his work, the variety of themes, the logic of fanzines, the appropriation of iconographies, and the bridge between underground and mainstream through drawing.

GBK

Are you concerned by the notion of originality? What are your thoughts about the notion of originality as an artist?

TMDM

I think that every artist has the illusion of originality. I have this illusion, that's what keeps me going, but I think the originality is more related to the construction – it's a personal path that isn't followed by anyone else. We live in a moment in the history of art where all possible formal limits have been crossed and what remains is the construction of a path that is yours only. In my case, I've always been interested in using painting as a narrative medium, and this interest comes from my appreciation of the great masters of the past, but also influenced by the contemporary visual culture of graphic novels, games, advertisements, cinema, etc. It's in this matter that I seek to build a path that's as aligned as possible with my way of thinking – that is, to create my own method with which I can build my world. Contemporary art allows me to dedicate myself to this without being guided by the concern to communicate with a specific audience, which for me is dangerous because there's always the risk of falling into a hermetic speech. But this characteristic is at the same time liberating. I believe that artists and creators in general, who have an interest in opening and building unique paths, often think of their work in the context of a time that's yet to come and a future audience that will be able to absorb their production more deeply.