

The Insubordination of the Image Before Time

Lorraine Mendes

Everything we know about time is a metaphor. The way we measure its passage in minutes and days is the result of a convention and an attempt to make sense of human existence through cycles. This offers us some possibility of future and overcoming. In linear time, the past is something that has been overcome, and humanity would thus be moving toward something better or more evolved.

But what can be done when a temporal milestone is broken and the past becomes present through a play between presence and absence, silence and history?

In the narrative of the present time, there are those who make the gesture of returning to something that remains unresolved, that needs to change, to make room for what is rightfully due.

In the history of art, painting has also served to create a regime of visibility and representation, foundational myths, and to mark the passage of time: from great battles, heroic deeds, portraits of great personalities, to the construction of images of those who might be deemed inferior. All these images occupy our collective imagination as a social body and allow us to build, together, an idea of history and belonging.

Jorge Luis Borges tells us:

Time is the substance I am made of. Time is a river that sweeps me away, but I am the river; it is a tiger that tears me apart, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire.

Time, that great metaphor, can be understood as a measure that marks human creation: we establish it so that it might give us shape. The artist, in some way, is free from these limits—able to subvert them and recreate paths between what passes, continues, changes, and what remains. The time of painting, for example, is always different: while it is being made, it is suspended time; once presented and celebrated in archives, it becomes time that endures.

There is a generation of artists committed to painting and to a gesture that stirs the permanence of things, like wind blowing through stillness.

In the works that Bruno Lyfe presents to us here, we can perceive—alongside the meticulous layers of paint, color, and form—the superimposition of visions, traditions, and histories. The artist stirs ways of representing and creating, of speaking of presences, and of revealing that which has always been within sight, yet remains forgotten by official narratives unless brought to the forefront.

The artist takes for himself elements that form the canon of Western art: equestrian painting, narratives of discovery and the deeds of Old World nations, the Baroque as the Bible of the illiterate, architecture as a means of domination and the organization of human relations. Bruno appropriates this legacy—which is also his own—and merges it with his own way, and therefore also ours, of seeing the world he inhabits.

Alongside the canon—not as its opposite, but moving through it—between cobogós, crossing the idea of order and progress, there is a citrus sharpness that weaves a path through the boys riding on horseback, through the cracks in the blue tiles, among women who dance and tell stories.

In a manner both subtle and uniquely his own, Bruno Lyfe reminds us that the body that labors is also the one that rests, that the one who dances is also the one who fights, and that, above all, the one who appears to merely witness is, in fact, the one who acts. In his paintings, let us notice the insubordinate boys at play. It is a free portrayal of joyful audacity, of a quiet stubbornness that challenges the gaze. When we see these figures dancing freely on a surface that once sought to imprison them in images of subservience and domination, we begin to confuse the idea of overcoming the past—and in doing so, we can reshape the ways we tell stories.

Untamed, this figuration leaps toward a different notion of time. It stirs the air and unsettles certainties about the image—about representational modes that fail to grasp the complexity of life itself. Time, that metaphor, is renewed here as thread and path: Lyfe returns to the past with moments of the present, becomes the agent of something that may one day also be canon, affirms permanence, makes his painting into time itself, and plays—he himself—through narratives, forms, colors, and history.