

António Olaio: Paintings With Soundtracks

Kenny Schachter

The formal component of António Olaio's art imbues painting with another dimension altogether for there are figurative paintings with overlaid text, accompanied by a music video sing-along. These multi-media constructions function as story telling devices with built-in soundtracks, revealing visual tales from deep in the artist's subconscious. To look further into the work, it is helpful to speak about the person behind the making, as he is inserted, literally and/or figuratively into each and every piece by way of his starring role in a bespoke musical accompaniment for your added visual and aural satisfaction. Olaio's songs are reductive affairs with usually no more than a simple, monotonous tune, while his paintings are like graphic, single-frame films, despite the artist's protestations to the contrary.

Physically, António Olaio is a cross between Kevin Spacey, Elvis Costello, and a dollop of Pee Wee Herman. The Pee Wee bit is manifested in his absurdist, Dadaist musings on everything, nothing and the plain weird. He's twee and sometimes the effect is creepy, but at the same time affecting, touching and charming. The monotone singing can be a distraction, but also it hooks you and remains stuck in your mind's eye. For Olaio, painting is not enough; perhaps he needed more DNA in the work than pigment on canvas alone could satisfy. The result is António himself as the quirky pop performer, injected into each short film. It could be said to be rather exhibitionist and self-aggrandizing, but in the hands of the artist, it is equally pathetic and comic. Unlike Cindy Sherman constantly gazing into her own navel as her performative fantasies run amok, Olaio's explorations are inextricably tied to his sense of self-identity.

In his art, António Olaio is confident yet with low self-esteem, cartoonish and somber, haunting and goofy all simultaneously. He doesn't seem to take himself too seriously, as reflected in this quote describing one of his works: "This song sounds quite serious, almost pompous, but fortunately it's quite silly in its pretentiousness." The sense of insecurity is palpable as the self-deprecating nature of the person that lies beneath the work is evident, but Olaio fearlessly faces failure by positing himself front and center in his compositions time and again.

As much as the significance of the images, both moving and still, the bizarre word groupings always arrest us. Maybe the language is as confusing to him as it is to me, maybe it's lost in translation; scarily maybe it's not and this world of societal absurd-ism is completely normal, knowable and understandable to António. But I don't really care about Olaio's intended meanings, his verbal cocktails are so rich and flavorful they elicit all manner of existential associations.

"Brrrrrain", the title of the exhibition, brings to mind a brain freeze, also known as an ice-cream headache, a momentary seizure-like ache due to excessive cold or god knows what. The wonderful works of António Olaio, consumed too fast like a child attacking a delectable treat, will bring on joy and confusion, pain and pleasure! The artist calls it punk, which is not something I admit to seeing, unless of a variety so sublime it is beyond me. What I see is cute, harmless, a tad annoying, with flourishes of slapstick, *though most definitely eerily unsettling.*

The paintings are of a school I call Good Bad Painting, not a photorealist variety of figuration, but colorful, alluring, gripping and graphic, in the vein of the Chicago Imagists, a group of surreal representational painters like Jim Nutt, Roger Brown and Ed Paschke. The genre of this painting style grabs you by the throat with acidic colors and completes the assault with grotesque imagery.

Olaio adds to this mix by incorporating word play and songs into his art: it's music and lyrics as sculpture, turning a tune into an object as weighty as bronze. Sound and vibration take on the characteristics of paint and brush. In the videos, there is not much happening visually but there is always the distinctive, frog-y moan to catch and hold your attention. The videos have crude production values, as the funerary, atmospheric melodies fill the background. And the songs...often they have the droll drone of Serge Gainsborough, Leonard Cohen and Lou Reed with some of the kooky-ness of John Cage. Yes, it can be irritating but then it sticks in your craw like all good music and art. Ultimately, though, the music works; it stands out as an accomplishment in and of itself.

Only António Olaio can find the "nasty" side of butterflies, and here are some reflections on his titles and wordplay...

"My dreams are small and sad." Sad maybe, but the work of Olaio is far from tragic. Melancholic and filled with a sense of longing and dejection, the art carries with it a component of built-in failure. Is Olaio a misfit? I'd say most definitely not, rather in the manner of both the writer Samuel Beckett, and the singer Beck, he's an existential troubadour, a combination of the two. António seems to say: I'm a loser baby, so why don't you kill me.

"My hand is a readymade." It's as if the act of making art for Olaio is independent of his will, an action beyond volition. There is a sense of pre-determinism, of nature having the upper hand in the perennial nature vs. nurture debate in sociology. This notion of an art practice operating outside of personal choice is also evident in the title: **"If I wasn't an artist what would I be?"** For Olaio, art making is preordained and outside the realm and luxury of choice.

"I think differently now that I can paint." Though for Olaio the capacity for art is something you are inextricably born with, nevertheless, honing those skills is akin to a blue-collar job and entails a diligent, puritanical work ethic.

It takes tenacity, perseverance and doggedness, and even then success is not assured, far from it, especially in trying times. The process of art, in whatever form it takes, often involves (despite perceptions otherwise) routine, task making and administration that does not exactly live up to the romantic idea of an artist in the throes of the act of creation. Art making for Olaio also equals intellectual enlightenment.

“Broadcasting my songs.” Here we have signs of another vain, megalomaniac artist insisting on speaking to the world at large, yet in the same-titled painting, besides the declarative text beneath the image of a microphone, there is also the depiction of knotted and impossible to function wiring. So there is self-love, but it is coupled with a vanity that is at times also self-negating.

“Pictures are not movies.” Hah! I hate to be the one to break the news to Mr. Olaio, but if ever a picture was indeed a movie, it is here. These are one film-cell films. Anyway, regardless of what Olaio insists, often; as is the case here, artists are sometimes the least capable of analyzing their own work. So please forgive me for taking the liberty of looking elsewhere for interpretations and meanings in this art.

“Bambi is in jail.” A stranger juxtaposition of words does not exist: an unpredictable statement that is equal measure demonic and whimsical but simultaneously deliciously cruel.

“Sit on my soul.” In this painting, we are faced with a pinup, nude and voluptuous, striking a provocative pose. The title expresses the yearning not for a quick sexual fix but rather a solicitation to quench Olaio’s intellectual and spiritual curiosity. This work has also got a taste of Olaio looking inside some impenetrable room at others having more love, fun and success than he will seemingly ever enjoy. This is as close as Olaio will get to frontal sex in his paintings and videos, but it is a distracted and abstract longing rather than any consummation. Love, but more likely lost love, a denial of love. **“Three**

pounds of wine and she loves you." If that doesn't say it all I don't know what does.

"Sweaty potatoes." With such disjointed evocations, sometimes Olaio can be plain gross and disgusting, like a certain genre of teenage movies. I guess that is where António wants to take us, on a journey as absurd and surreal as Willy Wonka (the original version) with as much perverted, misguided fun. In any event, it is hard to look at potatoes the same again.

"Wicked teachers." This is Olaio's questioning of authority both in art and otherwise, but always with the perspective of an insatiable, curious, *though naughty child*. That for me is the essence of the work: it is the product of a jaded, twisted but always humorous existentialist take on life, and you can feel the sense of joy and release he seems to enjoy in the process.

The videos, songs and paintings of António Olaio taken as a whole seem a poor excuse to stand on a soapbox shouting at all who will listen to convey an utterly unique voice that is nothing less than enchanting and fantastical. It's an all-encompassing philosophy of life seen through a multi-faceted language of whimsical imaginings. In the end, Olaio has sung, written and painted his way deep into our heads, hearts and souls.