

ANTONIO MALTA CAMPOS:  
TOXIC RISK, COMBED LIE  
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i.  
It is easy. It is not easy. It was not easy, but Antonio Malta Campos has insisted from the early 1980s on safeguarding his work from any aesthetic imperative that rested on some principle of authenticity. He was not interested in making a commitment neither to the authenticity of the artist's gesture nor to the authenticity of the pictorial matter. No corporeity transmuted into Truth, therefore.

The problem of speaking in the name of Truth is that evoking is always an ideal and moral attitude. If there is Truth itself, it by definition does not belong to our fallen and precarious factual reality, and therefore pursuing it can often resemble an endless walk guided by an unattainable sun. Lies, on the other hand, are completely accessible. With lies - or at least with the infinite variations of non-Truth - we live and go through the concreteness of life.

For Antonio Malta Campos, the art never had to have nothing to do with this such Truth. Working without this commitment is easy, but it is not easy. On one hand, there is the infinite range of alternatives that opens at every stage of the production process, without any obvious compass to follow. On the other hand, there is (or has been) a lack of correspondence with so many of his generation's colleagues (artists and critics) who have spent much of the last few decades embracing arguments for authenticity.

The fact is that now the artist has secured for his work a place of freedom, in which it is impossible to say that something is impossible in the context of his painting. Anything can happen.

By reciprocity, everything can be seen in his painting. Since there is no axis of authenticity driven by a sun outside the work (or even deeply within it), there is no dominant interpretive matrix. The look can achieve chromatic refinements, iconic details, pictorial textures, figure suggestions, analogies to portraits, landscape hypotheses, expansive movements, gravitation notations ... everything is the same, at least at first.

This does not mean only that different people can perceive the elements of each painting with different emphases, but that it is possible to often see the same image as if it were another. A remark: here I speak of something that I confide in theory, but which also affects me in practice. I often had doubts about recognizing a work by Antonio Malta Campos as the one I had seen before. In another rotation, the look sees another image.

ii.  
Let us take a closer look. There are peculiarities in Antonio Malta Campos' painting ways that make his production to not only avoid arguments of authenticity but also to stimulate the spectator's look to be carried away by the large possibilities open to the pictorial image.

In this sense, three aspects deserve attention: the oscillation between trace and color field, the composition in successive layers, and borrowed resources common to graphical languages.

ii.i.  
Since the beginning of its production and especially in the last 10 years, a huge part of the works of Antonio Malta Campos is predominantly defined by traces and fields of color. The traces (traced, thick, angulated and/or defined by intervals between fields of color) manifest a frank relationship with drawing. The color fields (stained, smooth, combed!, graduated and/or mixed by two or more layers of paint) deal with the entire surface of the painting and support it as such.

The contours of its traces and fields can be mutually reiterated, but not necessarily. There is a misarranged dance. The traces can make hatches that cross the fields. Juxtaposed fields can create borders that are confused with traces.

Both are clearly freehanded, with tools (brushes, usually) that are not in disguise, readable by the texture, thickness and finish of each trace or field. They tend to differentiate more decisively in color work and find more areas of ambivalence in black-and-white paintings. In the last instance, however, they are distinct, because they result from different gestures. Fields are made as gradient fills and traces as lines.

The oscillation between these poles takes place both in the finished work and in its realization process. In the finished works, it attributes to each fragment of the work multiple valences, causing to the looks analogous movements of oscillation between reading form and figure, mark and color.

ii.ii.  
The pictorial construction of Antonio Malta Campos takes place in successive layers. In recent years, the initial attack on the canvas is usually done with black ink, which, as previously suggested, oscillates between being line and field. Some sort of drawing responds to the dimensions of the canvas, suggesting a plot of areas and fields. The layers that follow then are usually fields of color that organically overlap, creating temporary balances soon destabilized by the introduction of new elements.

The diptych *Tóxico* [Toxic] (2016), for example, went through stages in which it was all composed of pinkish hues, many of them later covered (and remodeled) by areas of gray, black and white. With such rearrangements, new traces are delimited, hatches and textures appear and then are partially overlapped, and different colors emerge (in this work, violet). From the middle to the end of the facture, changes in the color fields become more subtle, the centers of gravity of the image consolidate and the repertoire of scratches and graphs multiplies in dozens of details that the view of the spectator will take time to analyze. This does not prevent, however, that near the conclusion of the work, a larger black stain may end up imposing itself, rebalancing the general design of one of the parts of the canvas<sup>2</sup>.

This accumulation of layers in dialogic articulation is not just a backstage detail. It is fundamental that these eminently abstract and flat works may be full of complexity. Thanks to this movement, the agency exercised by the artist does not result in a dispersive relationship between the parts of the canvas. In the coming and going of the successive layers, connections and correspondences between the parts are created. Although it was impossible to predict at first where the work would end, there is a certain final cohesion in the aggregation of composition.

ii.iii.  
The graphic character emphasized in Antonio Malta Campos' last years of the production of finds roots in his artistic and intellectual formation. In the late 1970s, still in high school, the artist participated, as did several colleagues of his generation in São Paulo, in the production of student newspapers with illustrated articles<sup>3</sup> and independent comic magazines<sup>4</sup>.

In fact, the artist's entire first cycle of production transcends these experiences, with relationships between figure and background, as well as among traces, color and hatching that refer directly to comics characters, in addition to figures and characters of unmistakable descent.

Over time, however, such explicit referentiality has decreased. In their place, dialogues with the history of painting were strengthened, especially with Picassian modernisms in its multiple facets and frequent uses of the trace as a structuring element of the composition. At the same time, tension with contemporary productions such as Philip Guston's may have contributed to the expansion of the artist's color palette, while allusions to classical painting processes, such as the sepia-toned sketch, have broadened the technical vocabulary employed in his production.

As a result, the graphic quality of the work of Antonio Malta Campos has been less prominent until it has been exacerbated in recent years, with the adoption of black as the basis for the beginning of works and with the presence of punctual figurative elements, icons and almost hatched "glued" to the surface of the paintings<sup>5</sup>. In addition, there is a hint on the possibility of associating Antonio Malta Campos' vertical paintings with portraits, and the horizontal ones with landscapes, always in schematic and open versions. It is an association of formats, therefore also graphic.

For the spectator, the recurrence of clues that allude to the graphic universe can help to perceive each work as a chained set of visual events to be read. The search for visual narratives passes, then, to live directly with the perception of the pictorial whole of each canvas. Even in the face of images without explicit figuration, perception is then invited to imaginatively speculate about the senses stored in the chain of the parts of each work.

iii

In an unpublished interview, Antonio Malta Campos wrote the following passages in answers to questions asked by me:

*“The ‘return to painting’ of the 80s began, therefore, under the sign of the improbability and the impossibility of having relevance and social reach in a solitary studio practice, unrelated to science, technology and cultural industry. That was the idea I had, which gave a tragic character to my practice.”*

*“Thus, if adventure is impossible, everything paradoxically becomes possible. It is quite possible, for example, to consider that the past exists not only as past, but as present. And that’s how I relate to the art of all time.”*

There is a possible basis for his refutation of the Truth and the arguments of authenticity, that, in my opinion, served as a subterfuge for part of the artists of his generation. I believe it is necessary to add that, in addition to any philosophical motivation, Antonio Malta Campos seems to savor the myriad possibilities he leaves open before him. By symmetry, the most fertile attitude for those who decide to look closely at their work may be the one that celebrates the opening of possibilities, both those that come with the accumulation of traces, fields, layers and graphics by the artist, and those that are updated with the intensity of comparisons, analogies, readings and interpretations by the viewer.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The word refers to a gesture recently used by the artist in some areas of monochromatic white, which were “combed” in various directions with the help of some tool, creating a subtle and unusual texture.

<sup>2</sup> At another level of commentary, it is possible to also consider that the way the artist incorporates the gestures and suggestions of his assistant Antonia Baudouin in the facture of the color fields especially intensifies the dialogical character of the process, in which each movement responds to and changes the previous ones, as in a board game match.

<sup>3</sup> Like *Tijolo de Barro*, a student newspaper of Colégio Equipe (1978, year 3, n. 3).

<sup>4</sup> Like *Papagaio!* (1977-9) and *Boca* (1976-8).

<sup>5</sup> One procedural aspect that may have been decisive for this is the daily production of the small format collages that the artist calls “little mixtures”. Made systematically, they have a strong graphic aspect and often serve as a help for the design and development of their paintings.

