Abstract

In the European-Portuguese dialect, when interaction with a person or group of persons reaches the point of saturation, there is a phrase regularly used to express the moment of exhaustion with the social encounter. *Não me consumas* equates to the exasperated desire - verging on begging - to not be consumed by the other person.

In “*Não Me Consumas / ConsuMe Not*” 2018 thesis exhibition I present paintings and works on paper that explore his preoccupation in being a person within a society which is culturally expected and reduced to *acquire* and *ingest* without discretion.

The work is informed by the quotidian struggles of making a living, attaining sustenance and the strife for survival. Art influences derive from modernist painting, painter Henri Rousseau, Primitivism, and Brazilian *modernismo*.

References to Darwinism, predation, financial market systems, and anthropophagy are made through the incorporation of visual symbols and use of work titles which develop analogies supporting Conde’s view related to societal anxieties in consuming and being consumed by the people and environment around us.

Introduction

For the Northeastern University and School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts 2018 thesis exhibitions I have titled both shows *Não Me Consumas / ConsuMe Not*. The exhibitions span two years of paintings and works on paper which focus on my preoccupation with how to depict a person within a society which is culturally expected and reduced to *acquire* and *ingest* without discretion. Namely, the concept of person-as-consumer.
The work’s formal influences derive from European modernist painting of late 19th and early 20th centuries that implement Primitivist aesthetics, such as the painter Rousseau, and influences from historical cultural movements that challenged European cultural hierarchies such as the Anthropophagy aesthetics of Brazilian modernismo\(^1\). Informed by quotidian interests such as the struggle of making a living, attaining sustenance and the strife for survival, visual references to Darwinism, predation, financial market systems, and anthropophagy are made in the works through the incorporation of visual symbols and use of titles which develop analogies supporting my view related to societal anxieties in consuming and being consumed by the people and environment around us.

The trope of the cannibal analogous to the consumer is imbedded in the work, albeit not from the perspective of anthropology, sociology, nor from the critique of capitalism - which are fields far better able to articulate the topic of consumer than that of the practice of painting. Invented and forced associations are made from the view of the artist based on historical mythologies and contemporary consumer culture with the aim of developing a personal language, through visual means, in correspondence to the consumer-cannibal idea.

The thread in the work alludes to the idea of consumer-cannibal as identities borne of, in the case of the former - Capitalism, the later - Colonialism. In this text I do not commit to articulating nor giving an opinion on the positives and negatives of Capitalism. I do have a formed belief that like everyone else, artists working in any medium, cannot escape being participants in the system and for the purposes of this text I don’t engage in a critique. In my work I treat Capitalism as a matter of fact, a backdrop landscape that is always there, and a reality that is the most important existential

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topic of the day, for any creative person to tackle. Instead, I focus on the idea of person-as-consumer as the appropriate identity to place within this landscape. In the 20th century what was once regarded customer, today is termed Consumer. It is pejorative and euphemistic for debased person; the consumer-primitive.

Não Me Consumas / ConsuMe Not

In the European-Portuguese dialect when interaction with a person or group of people reaches the point of saturation, there is a phrase regularly used to express the moment of exhaustion with the social encounter. Não me consumas equates to the exasperated desire—verging on begging—to not be consumed by the other person.

As part of the routine of living there is an understanding that at some point one is bound to interact with people and is confronted with the expectation that an exchange of social niceties is to be performed. Be it wishing a loved one a good day, sharing a crowded commute on the subway, giving a grinned smile to the boss, or being polite during an introduction to someone’s friends, we are constantly assessing our position in relation to the next person. The social sciences inform that on first encounter, people size each other up to see if they are friendly or dangerous and instinctively determine if they like each other in a matter of seconds. From the initial interaction relationships, bonds and power dynamics are formed. The give-and-take of social interaction is a constant source of fascination and perplexity. It makes me wonder how and why people behave the way they do. Of course, I do have the understanding that actions are driven by the innate will to exist and the need to survive. The essential urge for existence is nourished by the basics that sustain longevity; food, shelter, and sex. Ensuring the desires are met is the primal motivator for our behavior from which the competitive urge to seek and obtain is formed.
The Fixation with Consumer

There have been multiple beliefs created through History to define Consumer. Since the Industrial Revolution the term consumption has been evoked to symbolize different states of human activity involving ingestion, illness, obsession, and accumulation of wealth. In 12th century France, the Latin word consumere was applied to mean the using up of resources². In Renaissance Europe the fascination with and creation of the cannibal myth arose from the anxieties that resulted from contact with people in distant lands who displayed foreign customs, erratic behavior and unrecognizable languages from that of the colonizers. It is well documented that wrongs born out of global exploration were from the exploitative pursuit and gain of resources, found in abundance in distant lands, for the financial gain of the European merchants and for the service of swelling populations in the continent of growing appetites.

In the search for ways to inform my painting practice, I travelled in Italy during the summer of 2017 to study Renaissance Venetian and Florentine painting. I examined the formal and cultural trends occurring in art during the time to draw influence from the uncanny composition arrangements of images and the methods in which the human figure was represented in the paintings of the late 1400’s and early 1500’s. The disproportionate hierarchies given to the portrayal of people, based on the symbolic significance or insignificance of the person depicted, in terms of figure scale and how the body functions in the pictorial space it occupies. The focus of my research centered on societal issues the artists of the 16th century were confronting and how concerns of global expansion, commerce, and economics were translated in art as a result of

contact with new societies. During the Renaissance, the drive for commercial success created competition for finding additional sources of wealth. At distant locations, contact with previously unfamiliar people resulted in social anxieties in the mind of the European in relation to the presumed strange customs of indigenous communities. A peculiar fascination of the era was the interpretation of identity through the depiction of the body and its fragmentation, deriving from a combination of religious beliefs about the Eucharist; the symbolic ingestion of the body of another, prejudices and mythological narratives around ritualistic cannibalism practiced by people of distant lands, and fears of being eaten by unknown entities. From my studies in Italian art I concluded that assumptions and anxieties about the other prevalent in the ideological theories of the Renaissance culture evolved through the centuries and continue today in new forms under the umbrella of what is now called Capitalism. No longer in circulation are the colonial era slanders derived from capitalist trade that described presumed lesser people as primitive, savage or cannibals. Made universal by the fields of economics and finance, consumer is the jargon of the day that political-correctly casts a non-discriminatory net on anyone who is willing to open the wallet.

The Role of Brazilian Anthropophagy Aesthetic In Não Me Consumas / ConsuMe Not

At the beginning of the text I made the emphasis on the European-Portuguese language to differentiate from the Portuguese spoken in Brazil so to set up the historical antecedent to the expression “não me consumas”. While a colloquial expression in modern and contemporary Portuguese society, this wish to not be consumed by another person, be it a private emotive sentiment or verbal outburst, is a residual that has presided in the European psyche since the global
explorations of the “new world” and the Americas during the age of discovery\(^3\). I hypothesize the phrase remains in the Portuguese psyche because of centuries of colonizing Brazil and has taken on a quasi-literal sentiment in colloquial conversation. In art and literature of Brazilian early 20\(^{th}\) century, the concept of anthropophagy – the eating of human flesh by other humans – is the central theme in the manifesto\(^4\) of the Brazilian Anthropophagy movement that sought to appropriate European influence via symbolic cannibalism of European culture. Brazilian anthropophagic thinking looked inward to its indigenous self as a way of gaining autonomy from European high culture by ingesting, through symbolic cannibalism, aspects of European culture and repurpose it to form an authentic Brazilian identity. The Portugal-Brazil dichotomy; the former, the land of my birth and Brazil’s colonizer, opens in my imagination the possibility to an origin story for wanting to explore the ontology of the statement. The manifest anxiety in the expression “não me consumas” is the basis of the connection I make between the cannibal metaphor and person-consumer.

**The Work**

My art influences originate from modernist painters such as Rousseau, Gauguin, Bonnard and contemporary artists such as Peter Doig, Daniel Richter and Tal R and Jonathan Meese. My practice consists of working in oil paint on canvas and paper, and the printmaking technique of etching. The paintings are structured through the use of pattern and adjacent layers of repetitive zig-zag brush marks to build visual and material texture. Subject matter, abstract and

\(^3\) Fifteenth through eighteenth centuries.

representational, is developed from source images that support my interests, and of small generative paintings and sketches made in pencil, color pencil and mixed media. From the drawings, I work directly on the canvas or at times project an image on the surface to begin working. Often starting with no scheme, I develop a non-a priori approach to image making and allow for unexpected results to occur. Once the direction of the work becomes apparent, I make decisions on the placement of content in the composition. Landscape spaces reveal people performing activities such as having a picnic on the grass, sitting around a bonfire, or crawling on the ground. The outdoor spaces operate as a platform for the enactment of activity, the placement of the human body, and function as a point of entry toward the inclusion of subject matter and the development of narrative.

The paintings and works on paper in the thesis exhibitions reveal my approach to the concept of cannibalism-consumerism by presenting two states of consumption. The cerebral state and the metaphoric.

*Melancholic consumer* [image 1], a blue tonal painting of a close up of a person’s introspective gaze and clenching teeth functions as the interpretation of the mind experiencing thought or preoccupation. The painting is loosely based on German artist Albrecht Dürer’s engraving *Melencolia I* of 1514. Its title [image 1] is a variation on Luis Pérez-Oramas’ poem written for the catalogue for Tarsila do Amaral’s 2018 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. Further, the title of *Melancholic consumer* is an adaptation of Pierre Fédida’s title of the psychoanalytical

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writing⁶ where the connection of symbolic cannibalism to melancholia is asserted as the individual’s inability to cope with the lost object of desire.

In *A bit of sacrifice does a lot of good?* [image 2], a group of people are ritualistically feasting behind a roaring fire which engulfs a mobile phone, a wrist-watch and a fleshy glob of paint. The implication, according to the painting’s title, is to question the existence of the individual in relation to the absence of one’s possessions.

*The everyday business of seeking and finding* [image 3,4] are a painting and an etching that share the same title. In these works, the image functions differently, in terms of presentation of narrative, from the thesis works that incorporate the human figure. Repetitive patterns and decoration are used to transmit content delivered through motifs that stand-in for financial market systems, pie charts and animal pelts.

**Leitmotif**

The Leopard pelt spots, or rosettes, are a recurring motif in my body of work. Now a recognizable and decorative accessory in the realm of female fashion, wearing the leopard pelt as adornment shifted through time to stand for meanings such as masculine authority, as when worn by Zulu warriors, to symbolizing wealth status in 18th century Europe⁷. In my work I use the image of the leopard all-over pattern to embody the symbol of the primal, predatory, and excessive as an indication of the primitive and savage in the consumer. To avoid negative and unintended

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connotations that the terms primitive and savage may imply in my work, the implementation of the rosette motif signifies the same as such but functions differently in how it delivers the message.

**Conclusion**

A person’s formative years shapes their behavior as an adult. Artists, aware of this, go to the source of their experiences to seek the inspiration that motivates work production. My go-to recollection comes from memories of childhood in Europe when I observed adults having conversations where they would ask each other to not be consumed. I did not know what that meant as I waited to see if anyone was about to bite or eat someone else. For the Northeastern University and School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts 2018 thesis exhibitions *Não Me Consumas / ConsuMe Not*, I channel this moment of wonder and bridge it to the concepts of consumer culture and the cannibalism myths of European history to create the beginnings of a narrative on how to depict person as consumer through painting.
Images

1. Melancholic consumer, 2016-18. Oil on canvas, 19x22 in.

2. A bit of sacrifice does a lot of good?, 2018. Oil on linen, 48x40 in.

3. The everyday business of seeking and finding, 2016. Oil on canvas, 20x18 in.

Bibliography


