

Gabriel Abrantes

MUSEUM OF ART, ARCHITECTURE AND TECHNOLOGY (MAAT)

While Gabriel Abrantes might be best known as a filmmaker (having recently won the International Critics' Week Grand Prize at the Cannes Film Festival for his first feature-length film, *Diamantino* [2018], codirected with his occasional collaborator Daniel Schmidt), the Lisbon-based artist has been developing his themes, obsessions, and research across a wide range of mediums, from simple pastel drawings and oil paintings to animations and virtual reality. Curated by Inês Grosso, the exhibition "*Melancolia Programada*" (Programmed Melancholy) has brought together more than a decade of work, starting with forty-three works on paper, mounted on white and set in simple wooden frames. Almost all of these images were created as gifts for the artist's friends and relatives, and the prominence of their positioning at the entrance foregrounds the emphasis on family—biological or otherwise—that informs the rest of the show. For example, *Visionary Iraq*, a 2008 Super 16-mm film transferred to HD video, codirected by Benjamin Crotty, ridicules the idea of the nuclear family with its tale of incest, while the low-low-budget film *Too Many Daddies, Mommies and Babies*, 2009, spins the story of a gay couple hesitating between continuing their ecological research in the Amazon and starting a family. The denouement is tragic in both dramatic and moral terms.

Throughout Abrantes's oeuvre, we see illusions based on convictions and noble sentiments under the threat of collapse in the face of social and psychological confrontations. This generates a form of cultural critique within the artist's work that eschews crude ideological stereotypes in favor of something deeper and more original; the ready cynicism linked to a propensity for satirical humor here ultimately yields to a type of nihilistic despair—or, as the exhibition's title has it, to programmed melancholy.

Take for example, the film *Les Extraordinaires Mémoires de la Jeune Fille de Pierre* (The Extraordinary Misadventures of the Stone Lady), 2019. The eponymous protagonist is a decorative sculpture in the Louvre who, with some help from the *Winged Victory of Samothrace*, comes to life, leaves the museum and wanders through the Parisian night amid the exuberance of the "yellow vest" protests. Having gotten a taste for revolution, she joins forces with an Egyptian faience hippopotamus statuette named Jean-Jacques, who has "a cousin in New York," and together they decide to seek the American dream. A one-minute sequel to this film, *Two Sculptures Quarreling in a Hotel Room*, 2020, delivers an update on the couple, now in a tiny hotel room in the middle of an argument that ends with the *jeune fille* attacking her miniature companion with a copy of Pierre Bourdieu's 1979 book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*.

A similar anguish can be found in the video *Os Humores Artificiais* (The Artificial Humors), 2016, a love story between a human teenager and "Andy Coughman," a soccer ball-shaped flying robot modeled after René Magritte's spherical bells. In an adjoining room, a virtual-reality headset allows visitors to interact with the friendly robot. Indeed, throughout the exhibition, we can follow the evolution and metamorphoses of the artist's universe of characters from film or virtual space to the line and splash of pigment of a small watercolor or the surreal habitats of his paintings.

The seven new works on linen or canvas here, all from 2020, manifest a virtuosity and eclecticism whose origins lie in the so-called postmodern condition, but one can also sense an almost palpable pleasure—the observer’s and, I imagine, the artist’s—in the depth of the works’ investment in the traditional parameters of painting: form, background, figure, color, narration, contemplation, and composition. Even so, the recent paintings reveal a significant change in tone and atmosphere from Abrantes’s previous works. The somewhat euphoric aggressiveness of the artist’s earlier paintings has given way to an aura of an active melancholy, animated by humor and the shock triggered by the subversive prostheses and contortions forced upon the figures occupying the canvas. An eighteenth-century still life here seems to have dissolved into a surrealist dreamscape, home to the failed experiments of posthuman creatures—the speculative families of our near futures.

Translated from Portuguese by Clifford E. Landers.

— *Alexandre Melo*