

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

José Damasceno

RE: PÚBLICA

3 Duke Street St. James's, SW1

Private View: Thursday 8th March, 2018 6-8pm

Exhibition dates: 9th March – 14th April, 2018

RE: PÚBLICA is José Damasceno's third exhibition at Thomas Dane Gallery, and his first in the UK since *Plot*, his Artangel commission of 2014.

Blacking out the windows of the gallery, Damasceno completely encloses the space from the outside world. Approaching from the street the gallery seems closed, but for a small arched mouse hole ellipse cut from the blackout in the bottom corner of the front window, the only perceivable invitation in. Damasceno forces us (in mind if not in body) to enter his world through this curious aperture, and – as Alice down the rabbit-hole – our perceptions begin to shift. Once inside, the chink of light from the window suggests the gallery as a kind of giant camera obscura or even a magic lantern, filtering the outside world and projecting it in to the gallery.

Dominating the space are three giant billposters, each of the symbolic face of The Republic (República) cropped from the Brazilian Real banknotes. In each poster her normally emotionless, stony eyes have been drawn in by hand such that she has now awakened, and looks anxiously over her shoulder. This triptych of images originally appeared last year on the streets of Rio de Janeiro, Damasceno's hometown, as well as in São Paulo and Belo Horizonte. The artist pasting a number of them across the city, amongst the advertisements and political fly-posters on hoardings and empty shop-fronts. Her anxiety seems ambiguous: a shifting global politics (especially in Damasceno's native Brazil), something else in the world she is now able to see, or perhaps something inside herself.

Across from República the slide keys of a 48-channel mixing desk, each carved from stone, stretch across the length of the wall. There is a sense of synaesthesia in Damasceno's materials, here we begin to see or imagine what it would be to touch sound. From a dance turned to stone (*Dance Floor (Step by Step)*, 2006) or hammers into music (*Soundtrack*, 2002), Damasceno delights in these often surreal or contradictory substitutions that draws on the intuitive essence of materials.

From República and mixing desks Damasceno turns our attention to Twiggy. More precisely a photograph of the 60s star looking typically aloof in a London sound-studio. The echo of her iconic eyes and the mixing desk create a formal, if somewhat unusual, bridge to this new starting point. At first appearance, the image seems familiar, or at least recognisable, though we sense that nothing is what it seems. The photograph is of a painting, which in turn has been made as a copy of a photograph (in fact, the original photograph was serendipitously found in a thrift store close to Damasceno's studio in Rio, but taken and printed at the time in London). In returning this image home, via the tradition of Brazilian film poster painting, Damasceno filters our perception of the image and imbues it with virtually unseen idiosyncrasies.

Statues continue to echo through the rest of the exhibition. The seemingly allegorical works are composed of combinations of found and artist-made models of animals, which suggest a type of surreal storytelling. A hedgehog, perhaps whose front door we saw on the way into the gallery, emerges from a glass tunnel. A wall-dwelling dog and a floor-dwelling horse contemplate each other across the different planes of their intersecting worlds. In Damasceno's world we encounter real, concrete objects; however, what we were sure of when we began to look at them is quickly eroded as their physical form dissolves into a myriad of imaginative meanings and projections.

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Uncommon Company

There is an uncommon poetry in this combination of pieces. A poetry that comes from the unusual juxtaposition of things which spring into existence there, in the choices from the artist's imagination. An unexpected mixture of materials, times and atmospheres that extract their light from the profoundest depths of contemporary times.

In this exhibition, Damasceno introduces some new aspects to his artistic endeavours. The giant banknotes in *RE: PÚBLICA* show a process of metamorphosis: the neoclassical image is given multiple gazes, making the soul beat inside the monster-banknote. Animaesque objects are presented along lines of attraction and contemplation. A marble porcupine, a condensed image of the romantic aphorism, offers us a Schopenhauerian metaphor for life in society in both its necessity: 'One cold winter's day, a number of porcupines huddled together quite closely in order through their mutual warmth to prevent themselves from being frozen', – and its difficulty – '...until they had discovered the proper distance from which they could best tolerate one another'.¹

All this alongside an old mixing desk in front of which the pop sphinx Twiggy sits musing, turned into a kind of graphic legend. Leading off from this elaborated photograph (*Twiggy Wondering*, 2018), keys move along an imaginary plane. Keys sliding as if on a transcendental board. And in the middle, there is also a slice of meteorite cake and a glass tunnel that communicates with another tunnel, which watches us.

It all comes into being together, conceived and planned with the artisan's attention to detail, to give us a glimpse of the cabinet of curiosities that is the artist's imagination. Is it too much? But it is under the control of absolute rigor. Is it over the top? But it is a set of plastic reasons that idle Reason has trouble grasping.

José Thomaz Brum

José Thomaz Brum is professor of Aesthetics in Art History at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro. He holds a doctorate in Philosophy from the University of Nice, France

¹ The well-known parable of the porcupines can be found in Schopenhauer's *Parerga and Paralipomena* (1851), volume 2, § 596. In it, the philosopher presents his vision of the need that drives us to live in society: 'Thus the need for society which springs from the emptiness and monotony of men's lives, drives them together; but their many unpleasant and repulsive qualities and insufferable drawbacks once more drive them apart.' The citations of Schopenhauer come from the translation into English by E.F. J. Payne, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1974, op. cit. p. 651-652.

List of Works

Clock-wise from entrance

***Vinyl Ellipse*, 2018**

vinyl adhesive
dimensions variable

***Soundboard*, 2018**

calcita, 50 elements
21 x 15 x 0.1 cm. each
8 1/4 x 5 7/8 x 1/8 in.

***The Horse and The Dog*, 2018**

bronze
horse: 35 x 25 x 6 cm.
13 3/4 x 9 1/8 x 2 3/8 in.
dog: 12 x 6 x 6 cm.
4 3/4 x 2 3/8 x 2 3/8 in.

***RE: PÚBLICA*, 2017**

digital print, triptych
280 x 220 cm. each
110 1/4 x 86 5/8 in.

***Twiggy Wondering*, 2018**

digital print on aluminium
136 x 116 cm.
53 1/2 x 45 5/8 in.

***The Hedgehog, The Tunnel and The Cake*, 2018**

hedgehog: 50 x 35 x 40 cm.
19 3/4 x 13 3/4 x 15 3/4 in.
tunnel: 35 x 68 x 32 cm.
13 3/4 x 26 3/4 x 12 5/8 in.
cake: 34 x 15 x 15 cm.
13 3/8 x 5 7/8 x 5 7/8 in.