

Emmanuel Nassar – A Brazilian pop?

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One must say that there is nothing naïve about the painting. Emmanuel Nassar performs a mental task, in which primitive sources are processed by the thought and by sharp comments. Although appropriating popular signs and techniques, it does not seem to be only mere praise to precariousness or to innocence. Retrieving the origins and supporting folklore may be the apparent signs but the work isn't reduced to anthropological observations. Neither the use of popular imagery seems to be just hailing Amazonian nature and its traditions, the context where the artist lives. On the contrary, what Nassar's painting points to is to an essentially pictorial discussion, to the possibility of creating Brazilian pop art. And this is an issue that places itself within an essentially speculative field, one that has been seen swirling around the national artistic output since the 60's. After all, how can a Brazilian artist ' particularly one living in the north of the country interpret and adjust to his own conditions the propositions launched by a totally different society, socially and culturally, as is the North American society? What could be retained from the original pop, respecting the distinct cultural characteristics, without betraying the basic principles that guided its project? Is it possible to think of pop art outside the industrialized and technological world, away from the cutting-edge media of mass communication? Nassar tries to show that, yes, it is.

The mistake incurred by Brazilian art in the 60's was the assimilation of what was only at the surface of the pop issue, its urban and its publicity iconography, effecting only a purely formal reading of the phenomenon, without grasping the tragic meaning of such exteriority'. American pop artists were interested in demonstrating the cynicism of happiness driven by publicity and consumerism; they wanted to prove that the process of standardization did not only affect the product cycle, but the very human condition. And they did so, depersonalizing themselves, so that the idea of impersonality and repetition would reaffirm the corrosive power of stereotypes. Among us, things went a little different: Brazilian artists in the 60's enveloped their pop art with explicit passion, surrounded with lively and personal observations loaded with criticism. The original pop was not critical, it was impartial, following closely the loss of the humanistic concept in the new societies, where people become things, treated as consumer goods - therefore morbid and perverse societies. The meaning in pop lies in this distant irony, in the neutral manipulation of reality, in the mere appropriation of emblematic images of the bourgeois world. Despite all its iconographic and chromatic exuberance, there was a certain dark humor about it.

Well, that is where one can find certain affinities with Nassar's work. His painting might contain some remote information that can be traced back to constructive art, given the clearness of surfaces and the quest for symmetrical order, but the question isn't about geometry, it's the imagination that goes pop. The signs don't originate any more from the mass media, but from the lower classes of a third world country. He used however the same randomness for image selection: flowers, toys, primitive contrivances, but also car batteries, chainsaws and rockets, in a mixture that renders indeterminate the symbolic value of each thing. In fact, even the simplest and most naïve objects displayed in Nassar's paintings are treated as stereotypes. Shapes that are almost standards, recognizable as Brazilian' and regional', forms that clearly state their origins, bringing about identifiable, repeated habits and practices. Claes Oldenburg said: if I see an Arp and I use this Arp as in the form of ketchup, will this reduce the

Arp, will it amplify the ketchup, or does it make everything equal? The way Nassar makes use of insignificant things of primitive facture and of powerful signs of a bellicose industrial society are also means of reducing everything to the same thing. After all, the „noble Amazonian savage has to live today with multicultural emanations, watching TV and its commercials. The lower classes, particularly middle class, whether in the US or in the backlands of Brazil, tend to absorb information without any critical judgment. Standardization may also be found in a certain type of popular imagery spread out among the poor, who are very much used to the production of the same objects, the same gadgets. Low-class jerrybuilt contraptions, truck license plates, Brazil's map - all are trite symbols for us, our most widely vulgarized universe. The naïve undertone in Nassar's paintings, his provincial pseudo-poetry is a disguise for sharpness. His distant irony is the same, in subtle but premeditated doses of humor. In a certain way, he is at the same time criticizing and lending value to northern Brazil primitivism as Americans simultaneously lamented and worshiped the subculture of the masses with the same cynicism. And everything is treated objectively. Of course biographical data of the Brazilian artist is embedded in the process. But his biography' does not contribute in a lyrical fashion, like the unabashedly passionate and subjective outpouring as in Brazilian pop art in the 60's. When Mario Pedrosa mentions the countryman Dias', he is talking about works filled with violence and passion that „do not convey journalistic commentary as in American pop, but rather a raw chunk of life.‰ Nassar instead, is discreetly trying to externalize his propositions- therefore his extreme graphic frugality. What North Americans expressed with an abundance of elements, he does it sparingly, reacting to affluence with poverty but neutrality is still there. Some came with very much and with monumentality, others with very little and with dryness, all reduced to emblems, in the search of what is generic and synthetic within the emblem. The artist's initials - EN- as seen in many of his works, are emblematic. They do not refer to the subject- Emmanuel Nassar, to someone who makes himself personally and purposefully clear through his works. The initials, given their positioning in the painting, might be taken for directions like North and East which, in the end, don't lead anywhere. They are disguises for the subject and for the meaning of the artwork, both reduced to just like any other thing, holding the same value as any other signs used: EN, a little plastic toy are the same as Arp and ketchup.

Nassar's solar colors, luminous and equatorial, undoubtedly stick with the regional environment of the artist, but to no greater extent than the dazzling colors of American pop stuck with their specific context. For the American artist, color should be bold and flat, like in publicity ads. For Nassar, who has also been a professional in the publicity area, color should also possess that impartial flatness, so that it would not determine the 'artist's hand'. Nassar's reference is natural light, while for the American artist is the neon light. But as we are reminded by Roland Barthes, American pop arts reference „is, in the end, exactly what it was in the good old times of classic art: Nature. Certainly, not any more as vegetation or landscape, neither as in human or psychological nature; nature today is the absolute social, or better still, the collective social.‰ Distinct measures, proportional functions of one same impulse, both are ways to detect the functioning of societies within the poetical scope of art.

Of course some may say, and not without a reason, that Nassar's painting hasn't got anything of the neutrality of a pop artist like Warhol, that his art keeps hold of affective signs, that his irony is permeated with metaphors and humanism. But then we may ask: what about George Segal, is it different with him? Was Segal being totally anonymous when he dealt with the subject of anonymity? Besides, the insertion of pop art, as it originally happened, would surely find difficult penetration in Brazilian society even today, moreover in the north of the country, which is very precarious industrially. But what we are trying to say is that Emmanuel Nassar's response to the tenets set by

the pop universe is no less than a possible Brazilian pop', thought over with intelligence, un-dramatically, adjusted to the limits of our imagery and our repertoire.