

MAPPING CITIES, MAPPING CULTURES

The thread weaving the bulk of this issue together is **CITIES**. Moving from Tehran to Jeddah, Palestine, Beirut and Syria, *Canvas* looks at how artists are engaging with the urban fabric in their practices. Some comment on the impact of rapid urban transformation, while others lament the destruction of heritage and the erosion of human dignities. Meanwhile placing human beings centre stage in massive metropolises is the focus of street artist-provocateur JR, who gives *Canvas* an exclusive from NYC.

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FRIEZE FRAMES

A sense of loss and melancholy pervades Gil Heitor Cortesão's subdued paintings. They carry an ambivalence that's somewhere between retro-futurism and ruin, a utopia that was never realised. Eschewing traditional painting on canvas, Cortesão composes his works on plexiglass using found images from the 1960s and 70s, creating uncanny tableaux that are dilapidated reproductions of interiors and landscapes from a modernist era, frozen in time. **Arie Amaya-Akkermans** speaks with the artist about his latest show at Dubai's Carbon 12 (which ran until 5 May), and his dream of lost futures.



Gil Heitor Cortesão.
Circular Pool. 2017.
Oil on plexiglass,
quadrptych.
168 x 168 cm

Contemporary painting is replete with allusions to architectural space as a form of surrogate domesticity. It is as if depicting these abstractions of space, and the traces of our lived time within them, would be enough to substitute the displacement, a seemingly inevitable characteristic of being modern – of learning how to live without the illusion of a past. But abstract space is not a place with permanent memory, and these can never be transformed into solid spaces. However historically inert, abstract space needs to be ultimately discarded, abandoned and replaced.

Portuguese painter Gil Heitor Cortesão, whose work often depicts aspects of the urban fabric and employs buildings as metaphor-structures for what he calls the memory of modernism, speaks about the utopian – and therefore unfinished – quality of modern architecture. “Modernism has a very strong utopian dimension,” he tells me. “In many cases, it was a question of creating a new society, a new world in which art took an hitherto unknown role or stopped being strictly necessary as the boundaries between life and art were overcome. But the modern project was left incomplete and its conclusion was probably impossible anyway.” The skillful manipulation between the inside and the outside in his paintings, which are endowed with an almost cinematic chiaroscuro, celebrates this incompleteness – a kind of

remote, unattainable ‘pastness’ of today.

Cortesão's exhibition at Carbon 12, fittingly entitled *Umbra*, as the Latin word for shadow suggests, is a lot about conveying the sombre character of the built environment through the use of subtle contrasts of colour and tone, rather than merely imagining it (which would be too easy). The works speak about something stronger than abandonment or decay. Rather, they are about a suspension of temporality, the ‘now-time’ that Walter Benjamin used to describe the 20th century and, as a whole, the project of modernity; a kind of collective slumber.

‘Umbra’ is often translated as shadow or shade but the original Latin expression also denotes something spectral and ghostly. Accordingly, the word for penumbra in Portuguese, derived from the same Latin root, is translated as a half-light or dusk. This European palette, boasting a nostalgic homesickness and rich in pictorial loneliness, is at times the site of profound contradiction; exteriors and interiors are executed on plexiglass, a material that belies the internal weight of the composition, almost causing them to disintegrate. An essay in deconstruction, Cortesão begins on the backside of the transparent surfaces, moving from painting in the finer details first and the overall backdrop last in a reverse glass-painting technique.



Gil Heitor Cortesão. *Passage #3*. 2017.
Oil on plexiglass, diptych. 72 x 173 cm



Installation view of Gil Heitor Cortesão's solo exhibition *Umbra* at Carbon 12, 2018. Image courtesy of Carbon 12

In a broader reading, this unfinished business of modern architecture and the ever-changing nature of the UAE city complement each other in complex ways.

In pieces such as *Giorgio's Room* (2016) or the diptych *Passage #3* (2017), the images are so familiar that they could be polaroids from a family album, or decomposing memories. It is akin to that imaginary moment when Gordon Matta-Clark or Rachel Whiteread were faced with a flat surface, just before they cut up the buildings or filled them with concrete. The pools, depicted in *Passage #2* (2017) or in the quadriptych *Circular Pool* (2017), could conjure up many art historical references but here they're placeless, cut off from the real.

Though the contrast between the slow methodical painting and the high-speed metropolitan textures of Dubai is very stark, Cortesão doesn't seem intimidated – he has exhibited his heterogeneous yet consistent body of work with Carbon 12

four times in the last nine years – but in a broader reading, this unfinished business of modern architecture and the ever-changing nature of the UAE city complement each other in complex ways. Cortesão's mesmerizing 'anarchitectures' slow down the seamless time warp of the global south; and Dubai, in turn, by means of establishing a radical distance from the European urban model of history, endows the works with the timeless quality of an artefact. The conversation between the artist and his host context remains dynamic and open-ended over the course of almost a decade.

The term 'anarchitecture' is closely associated in art theory with Matta-Clark, referring to a position that's not necessarily posited against architecture as much as it encompasses a critical discourse about architecture that is shaped by the viewers



Gil Heitor Cortesão. *Passage #1*. 2017. Oil on plexiglass. 73 x 128 cm. All images courtesy of the artist and Carbon 12

and the world, instead of being conceived in merely functional terms. This of course applies to Cortesão's work, but the definition falls short, precisely because of the role that architectural depictions have played in contemporary painting since the 1990s, when artists began exploring architecture in a painterly way. Two entire generations of European abstract painters passed before the objects of the world would become tangible for (or mediated in) the act of painting again, so that thinking about architecture from the 1990s has meant also being keenly aware of the abstract essence of (and influence on) spatial thinking today.

When asked about the relationship of figurative painters such as Sabine Moritz (Gerhard Richter's wife), to both abstract European painting and his work on empty architecture, Cortesão remarks, "I was

always very aware of the importance of abstraction in 20th century art; I think that in several ways it is like a post-abstract figuration, something like a second-degree figuration." Overcoming the end of painting, once the ultimate project of abstraction, here also means to become sceptical about painting in general, experiencing constantly, as both viewer and maker, the empty spaces under our feet. It is difficult to tell where exactly we stand; Cortesão has aptly titled a number of his paintings *Passage*, in a series that lend the impression of a permanent transition or threshold, a passageway, a double-entendre, and a labyrinth. We are left rootless and perhaps as Cortesão intended, our world has become undermined by the passage of a time that we have consistently failed to grasp or adjust to. 📍