

Chico da Silva

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Don't try to find the sea creatures in Chico da Silva's paintings in a book; you won't find them. They are creatures not of this world, but of da Silva's imagination; not that the artist would make any distinction between those two realms. These fish dance and bedazzle; they fight and swarm; they eat each other; some even seem to flirt with each other. "Each day I'd invent a different fish: my mind's full of fish," the artist said. They come in a multitude of colours and patterns: whole landscapes, worlds within worlds, unfold across their scales, or perhaps inside their bellies. In oil on canvas and gouache on paper, da Silva imbues them with a jewellike quality, the artist partnering each dash of colour with a brush of white so his subject appears to glimmer luminescent.

Chico da Silva was born Francisco Domingos da Silva in around 1910 (the exact date unknown) somewhere in the vast Amazonian region of Alto Tejo (exactly where is unknown). His mother was Brazilian, while his father was Indigenous Peruvian (the exact indigenous group unknown); and the boy's earliest years were spent immersed in the mythology and cosmology of the forest. His beguiling biography does not end there. When Chico was ten, the family moved east to his mother's home state of Ceará, but his father died after a snakebite. With continued droughts and stricken by poverty, Chico's widowed mother again relocated, this time to Fortaleza, the state capital. There the family gravitated to a beachfront neighbourhood called Pimabu populated mainly by people from the countryside who had likewise sought life in the city away from the parched interior. Chico's education was rudimentary, and employment prospects were constrained to odd jobs of plumbing, welding, stonemasonry, and carpentry. To fill his time, however, he began to draw creatures half remembered from the childhood forest stories in charcoal on the walls of the fishermen's houses and beach huts.

At this time, a young Swiss war émigré named Jean-Pierre Chabloz, employed by the Brazilian government to create the marketing material for an agency recruiting workers into the rubber industry, arrived in Fortaleza. Chabloz became entranced by the murals he found on houses of the labourers his employer was trying to attract. Tracking the self-taught artist down, he encouraged da Silva to take up canvas and paper. Chabloz introduced the work nationally with an exhibition in 1945 in Rio de Janeiro and then participation in several exhibitions in Europe throughout the 1950s.

The paintings in the exhibition at Almine Rech London come from the height of da Silva's power. By 1963, he had established an atelier, still in the same impoverished part of Fortaleza, employing a team of children and teenagers from his neighborhood as assistants, teaching them technique and inviting them to share the visual vocabulary he had by now established (in 2022 Píocoteca de São Paulo hosted a solo show of da Silva and included work from his now adult protégé). These works demonstrate the particular spatial composition da Silva employed, in which the animals vary—the fish are joined by birds and dragons and composite beasts—positions and details would change, but the same sense of framing is preserved.

In one painting from 1966, we see a large reptilian creature with an exuberant green fin and a head bedecked with two blue feathers as it circles a snake. The creatures both open their mouths, their tongues hissing in aggression, both seemingly unaware that a third crocodile-esque creature is wrapping itself around them both, its tale completing this whirlpool of movement. That circular composition is found in a second work in which two winged fish fold in on each other (*Untitled*, 1960s); in a work on paper in which one large sea monster doubles over so that it might devour a trio of smaller fish (*Untitled*, 1966); and a second work on paper in which three cockerels seem to be in a fight, reeling mid-air (*Untitled*, 1965). This circularity, in which the precarious divide between life and death is made evident, nods towards the nonlinear concept of time of many Amerindian cultures, in which spirits can be found living after death in the bodies of non-human animals, flora, and other natural elements. The human, animal, and spirit are rendered indivisible, what anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro called the “cosmological perspectivism” of “multinaturalism.” It is notable that the animals are painted out of place: of the fauna pictured in the fourteen works exhibited here, just one, a bird of paradise in the most recent painting (and the only boasting a title, *Ave do Paraíso*, 1971), is shown in a discernible location, with lush forest ferns lapping at the animal’s clawed feet. Typically, the subjects are depicted out of place, out of time, against a monochrome background or a richly patterned but ultimately abstract space; a visual of an unfathomable worldview (to non-indigenous human animal eyes) that integrates space, the forest, water, fire and wind. Another repeated motif of the paintings is the artist’s interest in mouths: in most of his works, the creatures are shown open mouthed, rather than nod to Oswald de Andrade’s *Manifesto Antropófago*, here the gullet a portal, a liminal space, between the outside and inside of the beast, between the here and now and the elsewhere and immaterial.

Such was the recognition da Silva received that in 1966 he represented Brazil at the Venice Biennale, the first artist with indigenous heritage to do so. But the artist’s mental health was thought to be deteriorating. So too was his relationship with Chaboz, who would later criticise the artist in public for his productivity and the atelier in which he shared his talents. At the center of the argument was a profound misunderstanding of da Silva’s project and its radicality within contemporary art of the time and today. For Chaboz, the figure of the artist was a lone genius; but to da Silva his art was never about his unique production, but a way of sharing a community of stories and of providing a portal into alternative modes of speaking and living that had existed before the colonization of Brazil. The works here bear Chico da Silva’s signature, but, he argued, they belong to a tradition that exists far beyond him and beyond the material realm.

— Oliver Basciano, journalist, critic