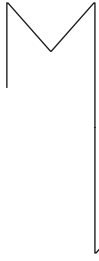


Mendes  
Wood  
DM

**Antonio Obá**  
Selected Press and Texts



Osman Can Yerebakan, “Antonio Obá’s Vivid Paintings Illuminate Intimate Understated Memories” *Artsy*, Jan, 2023 <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-antonio-obas-vivid-paintings-illuminate-intimate-understated-memories>

Art

# Antonio Obá’s Vivid Paintings Illuminate Intimate and Understated Memories

Osman Can Yerebakan

Jan 17, 2023 5:50PM



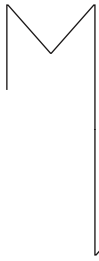
Portrait of Antonio Obá by Diego Bresani. Courtesy of Antonio Obá



Antonio Obá, *Variação sobre Sankofa - Quem toma as rédeas abre caminhos* (Variation on Sankofa - Whosoever takes the reins opens the paths), 2021. Photo by Bruno Leão. Courtesy of the artist and Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo, Brussels, and New York.

For Afro-Brazilian artist Antonio Obá, painting is not unlike *contenda*, believed to be the most difficult type of fight in the Brazilian martial art tradition of capoeira. In this form of combat, one must fight with themselves, “and painting for me has always been that—I get one move in, then get knocked out,” Obá said in an interview with Artsy. “I fight, fall down, and persist in this lonely dispute until the piece is finally born. Each painting of mine is a brawl!”

The Brasília-based artist’s current solo exhibition at Mendes Wood DM in New York, on view through January 21st, brims with the crops of this gentle yet arduous exchange between endurance and letting go, both physically over the canvas and mentally through the works’ fruition. “*Outras águas / Other waters*” is a fitting title for a show that includes paintings, drawings, and sculptures—all of which Obá created not at his shed studio at the back of his house, but at a SoHo loft a few blocks away from the gallery. For an artist who has long dealt with the idea of place in his



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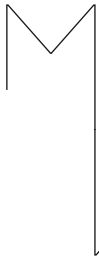
work, a change of country, weather, and sound feels like an innate prompt—a promising challenge to explore uncharted reflections of sunlight through a new window or daydreams about lands far in miles, yet near in imagination.



In *Fata Morgana no1* (2022), a toddler plunges into a turquoise blue pool crystallized with sunlight. With arms open wide, his form is elegantly free while a dragonfly—painted in a stark white that contrasts against the wash of shades on the nude child’s brown skin—accompanies the boy on his seconds-long flight above the water. This orchestration of hues extends to the pool’s illumination of light where the very reality of the moment and its fleeting rush coalesce.

“It’s a very familiar and striking feeling for me: being incredibly and unintentionally attentive at the same time,” Obá said. “By allowing yourself to be unpretentiously surprised by something you did not expect—be it in an image, a song, during a trip, throughout the day-to-day, and by experiences completely unrelated to art—you end up giving in and allowing the unexpected to eventually inspire you.”

*Orev - pouso* (*Orev - landing*) (2022) also portrays the artist’s sharp attention to variations of light, perhaps the most joyous and surreal reflection on Earth: a rainbow that rises from the ground, reaching outwards into the sky. Obá called light a “defining element of the show,” which he connects to the research he conducts in an almost genealogical method. “I look back to very personal incidents, these intimate memories, and understand them as equally shared human experiences that are not only individual, but also collective,” he said. “As you reflect upon this and you understand this, it is like casting a light onto the aspects that have been overshadowed, forgotten, erased, and I believe that light achieves this poetic dimension.”



## Antonio Obá

Press and Selected Texts

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The most eye-popping embodiment of luminosity on canvas is also the show’s most spiritually surreal painting, *Angelus* (2022), which shows a Black man slumped against a tree. Obá bridges the earthly scene with a sense of the otherworldly through the presence of angels, Black children flying around the sheltering tree and an adjacent fire—yet another form of light, dancing while scorching. With faint shades of pastel hues and a glaring white illustrating the flame’s destructive allure, Obá’s color palette draws in the viewer like a moth surrendering to the fire’s inviting swirl. The tree and backdrop sky also glow from this masterful handling of light that feels foreign to this world.

For Obá, painting was his given path long before he realized it himself. Although he drew as a teenager in Ceilândia, outside of Brasília, Obá decided to pursue advertising for financial independence. His relationship with paint and paper, however, never ceased. Between learning capoeira and contemplating becoming a priest, he eventually enrolled in an art school and began teaching art at a high school in the underprivileged outskirts of Brasília. He altered his christened surname, de Paula, to the Yoruba word Obá, meaning “king.”

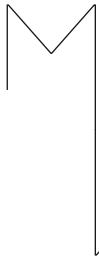
The experience of working with teenagers was fruitful in the formation of Obá’s visual lexicon. “I noticed how teenagers began to experience a process of cultural and social emancipation through their own aesthetic language, for example, through their way of dressing, of doing their hair, or by incorporating aspects that referred to Afro-Brazilian culture,” he recalled. “But obviously it doesn’t stop there, because visual representation is one pathway that allows for emancipation of the consciousness, of who you are within this historical moment and within a historical heritage.”

Narrative depth therefore functions like a well in Obá’s work, particularly in paintings that pull viewers in with sinuous scenarios and skillful palette work before revealing their innumerable subjective potentials. Take, for example, *Sankofa: cavaleiro* (*Sankofa: horseman*) (2022), in which a young Black man sits backwards on a white horse. An equestrian venture suspended, the human and the stallion seem dormant and introspective as specks of light flicker across the open field and in the man’s eyes.

Oftentimes, Obá’s figures claim their existence in detached and aloof poses that encapsulate a plethora of emotions and modes of being within solitary bodies. “Returning to my family roots, intimate memories, reflections about oneself, all this demarcates an individual attitude, an attitude of the individual, of the alone, of this being,” Obá said. “In this interior hinterland, one observes a character of a solitude, of an observation from a distance, of an observer of his own questions there, but which obviously dialogues with the questions of the world, with the questions of the other.”

Unsurprising for an artist whose command over the canvas is entangled with his cerebral quests, success has found Obá along his transformative path. In addition to “*Outras águas / Other waters*,” this year will see the 40-year-old artist open a solo show at Pinacoteca de São Paulo in August during the São Paulo Art Biennial, as well as exhibition in the 2023 Liverpool Biennial “*uMoya: The Sacred Return of Lost Things*.”

In his art practice, Obá gives himself to his paintings. Meanwhile, in *Contenda - dois títeres* (*Strife - two pawns*) (2022), a small-scale, red-washed rendition of capoeira practitioners engage with the hardest fight of all.



**Antonio Obá**  
Press and Selected Texts

Arthur Lubow, "Through Afro-Brazilian History, Antonio Obá Discovers His Own Story" *W Magazine*, November 4, 2022 <https://www.wmagazine.com/culture/antonio-oba-artist-performance-interview>

STUDIO VISIT

## Through Afro-Brazilian History, Antonio Obá Discovers His Own Story

The artist, a native of Brasilia, discusses reclaiming his African heritage in a society that has sought to dilute Black culture.

by **Arthur Lubow**  
Photographs by **Mara Corsino**  
November 4, 2022



In a rented studio in SoHo, where he was finishing two paintings for his New York show at the Mendes Wood DM gallery opening November 16, Antonio Oba explained the importance for him of capoeira, an Afro-Brazilian form of martial arts that originated among enslaved people and, after the end of slavery, was for a time prohibited.

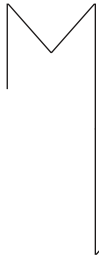
Obá is the younger of two children. His father was a propane tank delivery man and his mother a housewife who worked part-time as a cook and manicurist. Growing up in Ceilandia, an agricultural suburb of Brasilia, he was always drawing. "I never thought that something I did so naturally would become my way of living," he said. But in high school, he was given access to canvas and paint for the first time. He chose to portray capoeira.

"It's a dance and a fight without touching," he said. "It's very harmonious, a very slow movement with no impact or shock. It was a manifestation of resistance to slavery." His paintings were included in an exhibition of student art in a gallery in Brasilia. "The work caused an emotional reaction in other people," he recalled.

Intrigued by art but uncertain that it could financially support him, he enrolled in a course in advertising at the Catholic University of Brasilia and painted in his free time. "Studying advertising, I was completely unhappy and dissatisfied," he said. A friend who was in the journalism program wrote an article for the university newspaper about Obá's paintings. Reading it, Obá could envision his life as an artist. He quit the advertising program and transferred to an art college.

He was teaching art at a school open to students of all ages as well as developing his own practice. His paintings were heavily influenced by artists he admired, including Francis Bacon and Chinese calligraphers. "I started asking myself, 'Where am I in this work?'" he said. "I began feeling this inner discomfort and stopped making work for a while."

Then he took up the practice of capoeira himself. "It was, in a way, determinative," said Obá, "it was a corporeal relation that was awakened in me. I was raised in a Christian tradition where you recognize your body not by moving it but by denying it. To start capoeira helped me to not only recognize and understand my body but the other person's body dancing with me. It was putting myself in a vulnerable position on purpose."



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He was also reclaiming his African heritage in a society that has sought to dilute Black culture. "I was taking back an ancestral body from this tradition that acknowledges the body, and also the other body, in an interplay," he said. "I felt a need to change the focus of my research to look at my origins."

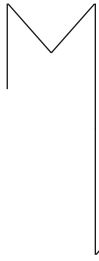
Raised as a Catholic boy who played music in church and "almost became a priest," he had been christened Antonio de Paula. He replaced the Christian surname with Obá, which means "king" in the Yoruba language of West Africa. "It was a self-baptism," he said. "The enslaved people that came on ships, one of the first experiences they went through while being bought was to have their original names substituted by the name of a saint. For me, the taking of a new name became a critical position for resistance."

He had found his subject. "I began diving into the genealogy of my family, coming out of a small familial circle to reach a larger realm related to the generational history of Brazil and the issue of miscegenation," he said. "I arrived at a more complete picture of nineteenth century eugenics, the persecution of Afro-Brazilian traditions and the overall violence—not only physical but symbolic—on the Black body." He painted figures that were unmistakably Black. "Why does it seem so strange to see a Black body?" he said. "If you have a tradition that has always been erasing and whitening an identity for centuries, it's not by signing a paper that this is all of a sudden going to end."

The counterpoint to his assertion of pride is the acceptance of vulnerability. In 2013, he did three performances in which he ground up a statue of the Virgin Mary and poured the white powder over his naked body. "The performance was a way of reclaiming the body and the ancestry of this body, and adding the political and historical context," he said. "This celebration of the nude body in this performance was not gratuitous. It was to put myself naked in a story that made me vulnerable. Historically, enslaved people were sold nude." Four years after he staged the piece in a museum, edited videos of it were circulated on the Internet by right-wing politicians. The reaction was so hostile that Obá left his home in Brasilia and lived for four months in London and Brussels. "What is uncomfortable is how this is used, and that as an artist it is something I can't control," he said. "I and several artists in Brazil learned that the hard way."

He said he values the immediacy, compressed time frame and "surprise element" of performance, but the practice of painting also delivers the unexpected. "I never have a predefined idea of what will happen in the end," he said. "During the process of painting, the image will reveal itself."

One of the paintings he made in New York started with photographs that he found by chance. It depicts a Black man dreaming in a hammock, his face recognizably Obá's own. A flurry of white moths is descending on him. "I saw images of an entomologist in the Amazon Forest who found a moth that feeds on the tears of birds and alligators," he said. "As a mixed Black man, to put my face there is a necessary and obvious decision. It's a very strong self-reference, telling a subjective fable for an emotional state. It comes from a particular point of view, but because they're emotions, they're accessible to other people." Weeping that provides nourishment—it is a powerful metaphor for Obá's exploration of Afro-Brazilian history, and more broadly, for an artist's stripping away all defenses in service to his art.



**Antonio Obá**  
Press and Selected Texts

Text published on the occasion of his solo show  
*“Erase the Silence”* at Archipelago, New York, 2024

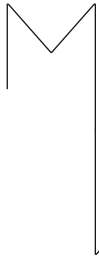


Archipelago is pleased to present *Erase the Silence*, an exhibition comprised of new drawings by the Brazilian artist Antonio Obá. Within Obá’s artistic practice, the act of drawing is grounded in the realm of intuition. The artist, as if compelled by a wistful desire for form, moves from the expanded plane of the canvas to a place he describes as “rest.” Drawing emerges as an instinctive process, where a sequence of figures enact and dictate the work’s narrative. Paper becomes a cradle for the exquisite details present across the surface of his paintings, refiguring the practice of his research, making space for delicate symbolism.

The nebulous linework of his charcoal drawings introduces the *nigredo* in a poetic conception. The shadows, which appear innate at first sight, shift and decompose, giving shape to new images in a profoundly fluid way. These figures of fertility arise from an ended process of what they once were, representing the living in nature, now composed of dead matter, thus creating a kind of paradise in reverse.

The artist’s devotion to form paves the way for liberation from historical bonds. Obá reworks imagery from anthropological encyclopedias that we now understand are records of ethnographic prejudice. The artist creates a new index of images that redress a historiography of failures. The nobility of the *pietà*; the warrior boy at attention, his gaze fixed upon the viewer; and many other details present a changed narrative where he, the figure of the savior or warrior, refuses to uphold the burdens which would historically be placed upon him. Serene, the figure can return to elements which have already lived in the lexicon of Obá, now able to embody a history that has been denied for so long.

In *Erase the Silence*, Antonio Obá celebrates his heroes and brings to light archetypes once informed by false objectivity. The artist’s deep imaginary gently reveals understandings lost by the prejudiced gaze. The images come from a narrative that reconfigures and transcends the canonical order and we are faced with a plot that makes them proponents of their own story, moving them away from the insidious terrain of sorrow and uncertainty. Through this process, there is no space for anything that is not impelled in the most honorable way through a search of form.



**Antonio Obá**  
Press and Selected Texts

Text published on the occasion of his solo show  
“*Outras águas / Other waters*” at Mendes Wood DM, New York, 2022



You go, you stay, you never come back!  
—João Guimarães Rosa, “The Third Bank of the River” (1962)

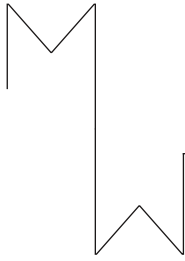
Mendes Wood DM New York is pleased to announce *Outras águas / Other waters*, Antonio Obá’s second solo exhibition in New York. Comprising new paintings and bronze sculptures, *Outras águas / Other waters* intertwines a panorama of references across the histories of Brazilian literature, music, and painting, exploring shared histories and personal resonances that at once engage and reconstruct the worlds embedded within.

The point of departure for *Outras águas / Other waters* is the seminal writing of the Brazilian author and diplomat João Guimarães Rosa, in particular his short story “The Third Bank of the River” (1962). The story tells of a man who secludes himself from his family, his friends, and society to live in a canoe, sailing up and down a river in solitude. Guimarães Rosa explores this notion of solitude as a return to the self, defending the principle that the real encounter between a person and themselves happens within silence, in observation of nature, and in search for the unknown. This search is the premise of Obá’s exhibition.

The works make references across time and place, from the Brazilian Baroque through late twentieth-century Black American painting, to recent Brazilian popular music. These references, however, are freed from their roots and rendered universal to any observer—rather it is from the point of the universal unknown that *Outras águas / Other waters* draws upon. Throughout the exhibition Obá revisits places and stories from his childhood, while also representing unknown figures and figments. His approach is both biographical and oneiric—dream and painting replace reality; memory acts as the central axis through which he re-designs his past.

Several works in the exhibition reference the Sankofa, a West African Akan symbol of a bird with its head turned backward and its feet facing forward. It symbolizes the act of looking back in order to acquire the knowledge to look forward, emphasizing the importance of one’s cultural heritage. In *Sankofa: cavaleiro* (Sankofa: horseman), 2022, a man sits atop his horse facing backward in a





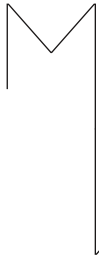
**Antonio Obá**  
Press and Selected Texts

Text published on the occasion of his solo show  
*"Outras águas / Other waters"* at Mendes Wood DM, New York, 2022

landscape dotted by fireflies flickering at dusk. Such symbols in Obá's work are a way of seeking, through nature, the source of existential feelings and thoughts. Like Guimarães Rosa, Obá looks at his familiar environment in order to subvert it, attempting to universalize these subversions through natural imagery.

In *Encantaria - Gorgone Macarea*, 2022, a man lays in a hammock with moths streaming from his eyes. The background is a deep green, surrounded by a landscape that suggests the Brazilian hinterland as described by Guimarães Rosa—a non-place, a place both deserted and mysteriously full of possibilities. The moths are a Brazilian species found in the Amazon named *Gorgone macarea*, known for feeding on the tears of birds. In nature, Obá's surrealism finds a fertile ground to represent human feelings. While crying, the man rests by an abyss, which could be his own shadow or an unknown trench. Obá's compositions suggest an impossible pictorial scenario, their perspectives subverting the natural order of things.

Antonio Obá rewrites his own narrative; like the nameless character in Guimarães Rosa's short story, Obá also questions the truth of his reality. In his own words, his works reflect "the idea of compositions that emblematically play with this situation—what appears to be, what is apparently there but sometimes is not, that which is sometimes bifurcated, throwing you into a visual trap that subverts the plot of things." Obá's world is a delicate construct of improbable shadows, illusion, and secret symbols that look toward the past to build a hopeful future—a new river, a landscape that lies beyond the unconscious and in the realm of dreams.



**Antonio Obá**  
Press and Selected Texts

Text published on the occasion of his solo show  
“Sentinela” at Mendes Wood DM São Paulo, 2019

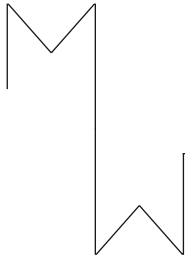


Antonio Obá develops his body of work through a road linking colonial Brazil and contemporary Brazil. Also, he walks on this road from the moment he begins to understand the black body and the black individual in the construction of history. This understanding came at the beginning of his relationship with painting, in a way that Brazilian Baroque reveals itself, and thus opens up an infinity of relationships in the artist's work, which demands a look at the past.

In colonial Brazil, the influence of an aftereffect from medieval exteriorism would not be so specifically Portuguese, but European Norse and impregnated with magic, that would suffering Europe the conflict of Catholicism against the reformer but would persist for a long time in the colonies. In Minas Gerais, mainly, and in the northeast and center-west of the country, religious practices such as processions, festivals and rituals would find fertile ground for its dissemination, combined with the baroque pomp that the richness of the extraction of minerals could propitiate. The production at that time in a cultural sense is the opulent worship of the baroque temples, the monumentality of the altars, tragic expressiveness of the images, the elegance of the details and the surrealities of the gesture. All this aesthetic construction of the Catholic faith in Brazil triggers a different relationship with the ethics of the church as a political force for the maintenance of the slave system and, consequently, of control of major's country population: black people.

Obá explores the implications of the Catholic black body and from this begins to move towards a study of objects and monotypes, which in their allegorical character, propose figures of bodies that are buried. This way is indicating their primitive forms: the fossil of man. The exploitation of erased memory takes place as a kind of excavation, soon the artist moves away from the painting and begins to look for the origin of the black man away from the Catholic faith and all its aesthetic implications.

This move away from the Brazilian Baroque in its less intricate resolutions causes the artist to throw himself on an empty ground to understand the origin of the black body and that man beyond his body, but against the origin of this body in artistic representations. This confrontation is reminiscent of memories, places of knowledge and identities; a resinated diasporic space when



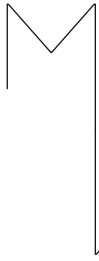
**Antonio Obá**  
Press and Selected Texts

Text published on the occasion of his solo show  
“*Sentinela*” at Mendes Wood DM São Paulo, 2019

it is integrated into the South American continent and begins to produce and legitimize its expression. The reminiscences of the memory mentioned, are found in the Afro-Brazilian religious rites and reflect in the syncretisms and constructions of identity.

The empty territory brought the artist back to the painting, now more diluted in the work of Antonio Obá, who no longer walks the road of colonization to the present times. It is a silent painting, removing the sound from the landscapes and lies in the silence of the portraits. It is the isolated individual who is in the surveillance, reveal himself in the reflection of the grinding knife, prepared not to walk but to remains where it is his place. The artist delivers legitimate figurative references of the history of the Negro in his paintings, like the man who eats the watermelon and the Eres surrounding the Old Black Man.

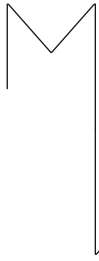
Obá crossed the superficialities of references and gave the soul of an artist who now knows about his body and understands it as a geographical, political and human space, beyond body, memory, and history, which once triggered cannot be erased again. The title of the show suggests he takes a position, and this presupposes that he should not run away, but be aware and aware of himself, which will consciously lead him to understand the whole of the world.



If we are forests not orchards, how can we break the boundaries of our identity? At first sight, this question – posed by the indigenous leader, environmentalist and honorary professor at the Federal University of Juiz de Fora Ailton Krenak – evokes the notion of territory as a place of political, ancestral and spiritual belonging. Similarly, a Bantu saying states that Nations are forests, suggesting that the root of our belonging is the intertwining of our own history and other histories that connect us to different temporalities. Therefore, identity stems from difference, which is intersected by coloniality. Consequently, there is a clash between the ‘same’ and the ‘diverse’. According to Martiniquais writer, poet, and novelist Édouard Glissant in his text *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (1981), ‘Sameness requires fixed Being. Diversity establishes Becoming. Just as Sameness began with expansionist plunder in the West, Diversity came to light through the political and armed resistance of peoples’.

Antonio Obá. Obá. Kwa language. King. Soba. Obá River in Nigeria. Ancestral figure that holds the secrets of knowledge. Orisha Obá Lady of Turbulent Freshwater who controls the power of floods and clay. The river as a metaphor for what flows in different connections.

The memory of Antônio Obá’s domestic living. The mother from Anápolis and the Father from Catalão, both towns in inland Goiás. A process of crisscrossed stories and the birth of Obá in



Ceilândia (Distrito Federal). His parents' daily manual labor in the fields as a thread of memory that sews together past and present. For the artist, the activation of this memory is poetically transposed into performance, object, drawing, painting, and installation.

The memory that works as aesthetic potential and translates a relationship with an inner reality, with inland traditions and domestic experiences. Here we can highlight the many religious festivals in the state of Goiás, such as the Divine Eternal Father Pilgrimages, the Praise to Our Lady of the Holy Rosary, the Congada in Catalão, the Our Lady of Abadia, the Praise to Our Lady Mary Help of Christians, and the Divine Holy Spirit Festivity. The rites, the prayers, the novenas within a Catholic spiritual practice intertwined by an Afro-Indigenous spirituality.

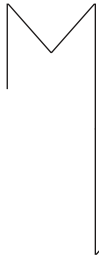
In its autobiographical dimension, for the artist, syncretism stems from the impacts of coloniality on non-hegemonic forms of existence. Including, in this context, the expansion of Catholicism carried out by Portuguese missionaries from the mid-15th century in countries such as Congo, Angola, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Nigeria, Benin, Cape Verde, and São Tomé and Príncipe. The same extractive dynamics appears in the history of the first Jesuits in charge of catechizing indigenous peoples and in the political and religious strategies that were formed in the clash between the Catholic tradition and the Black Brotherhoods or Confraternities in colonial Brazil, as well as in the Kings' Festival Reizados, the Brotherhood of Our Lady of Good Death, and the contemporary Festa de Reinado. Above all, how do micro narratives constitute macro politics in contemporary art? In Obá's own words, these memories are not 'a sort of nostalgia. Instead, I try to understand them in their bigger picture: what does it mean for me today? Also, what does it mean historically within my national reality?'

Et Verbum (2011) consists of a wooden box filled with communion wafers, where red words suggest a dimension of the body within the sacred, the carnal, and the erotic. Et Verbum refers to verse 14 of the Gospel According to John: 'the Word made flesh, was sent as 'a man to men''. The Latin etymology of the word *hóstia* (wafer, in Portuguese) refers to both victim and 'animal.' In this context, the idea of flesh comprises a body incapable of reasoning. A body without a soul. A raw body. Above all, the flesh is not yet a body. It is sacrificial flesh, in reference to the flesh of Christ. It is the fabrication of the flesh, the sacrificial body; the bodies of those whose integrity was not taken into account in colonial times.

Et Verbum generates a narrative of human morphology within art history, for instance, in the period before the Renaissance and later in modern tradition, as something considered fragmented and free from consciousness. A body as an object of nature outside the spirit was the basis of the racial theories that emerged between the late-19th and early-20th centuries. In this sense, French writer Georges Bataille becomes a key reference for the artist in his reflection on the integrity of the body within the three dimensions of eroticism (the body, the heart, and the sacred).

Integrity is found in the replacement of the isolation of being and its discontinuity with a feeling of deep continuity. All eroticism becomes a manifestation of the sacred. The series *Ambiente com Espelhos* (Venus Noire, Vanitas, Votivo) [Environment with Mirrors (Venus Noire, Vanitas, Votive)] (2017) is a projection of elements not reflected by a hegemonic history – the non-Apollonian – beyond its surface. Or still, in line with Protagoras's axiom: 'Man is the measure of all things'. Which bodies are seen in the place of fetish and do not become measures of something? When does the ephemerality of the body translate a colonial history? How does the experience of the sacred resize these bodies for the potential regeneration of their integrity?

In turn, the monotypes *Fecha-Corpo*, *Mártir*, *Agnus Dei* [Close-Body, Martyr, Agnus Dei] (2016) and the installation *Malungo* (2017) establish a relationship with each other through the blackness

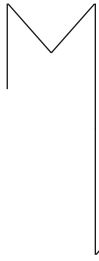


that is not only color but also the materiality of coal. It represents something that was once alive, but whose existence still endures. In this context, the term Bantu Malungo refers not only to the distilled spirit cachaça but also to a runaway slave or the link of a chain. Cachaça is an offering on an altar to Exu, messenger-orisha and lord of the crossroads. Cachaça as a form of enslaved labor in the colonial past and as pain-relief for the numbing of the body. The ritualistic meaning is conjured in the edge of human elevation in the sense of aggregating pain and pleasure in a body placed in involuntary sacrifice.

For Antonio Obá, the syncretic altar replaces the idea of white purity with the reiteration of black purity. The alchemical nigredo that when decomposed by combustion turns into the chaos that reinvents itself and enhances the creation of other epistemologies and places of coexistence. This relationship is perhaps indirectly linked to the poetic research of German artist Joseph Beuys influenced by Paracelsus' alchemy around the constitutive principles of mercury, salt and sulfur in the transmutation of plant elementals as a symbolic image of society. More specifically, Beuys' reading of the Science of the Spirit and the Social Question by Austrian educator, philosopher, and artist Rudolf Steiner in the formulation of the concept of social organism as community development.

In the essay *De la traversée: raconter des expériences, partager le sens*, published in 2002, Cameroonian philosopher Jean-Godefroy Bidima argues that the crossing (*traversée*) is conjured in the 'historical possibilities of the social fabric and the subjective trends and motivations that push historical characters to another place'. This place of movement, according to Bidima, 'is concerned with becoming, exorcism, and exuberance; it tells us the plurals that make up a particular story'. The crossing is where memory also becomes a gap once torn by violence. And, consequently, forgetfulness forcibly requires new writing strategies. The notion of writing is not restricted to script but also evokes speech that reverberates in the body and transcends temporalities. The painting *Fábula dos Erês [The Erês Fable]* (2019) depicts a domestic environment in which the perspective not only refers to the geometry of space but also reveals what memory ruminates, what memory makes up, what memory insists on diffusely preserving. *Erês* are states of trance. *Erês* are the child spirits that help the divinities. Similarly, in *Oratório I [Oratory I]* (2016) and *Totem* (2016), the link with *aiyé* (world) and *òrùn* (sky) puts people and things into a kind of sacred state. In turn, in *Sankofa – Aroni* (2016), the figures of *Ossosi* (orisha of hunting and the woods) and *Àròni* (guardian of the secrets of the leaves and liturgical herbs) enter the forest and become the path itself. *Sankofa* is an Adinkra pictographic symbol from the Akan people (Ghana, Ivory Coast, Togo), which is represented by a bird, emphasizing the importance of learning from the past to build the present. For the artist, it refers to 'undertaking a return via a path that you had not necessarily taken previously' to get back to your own roots.

The work is part of the series *Sentinela [Sentinel]* (2019), in which the artist imagines the absence of his place of origin whilst moving through different places. Longing for the land. Longing for the smell of wet soil. Longing for the color of the tropical savanna. The moments of quietness that create memory. The title *Sentinela* refers to the time he spent listening to Milton Nascimento's song of the same title in this situation of absence. Quietness is also alertness, as in the following excerpt of the song: 'you need to scream your strength, brother, to survive / Death will not come if we stick together / The paths are one, we mustn't flee nor detract (...)' The same relationship also appears in *Tocaia [Ambush]* (2019). There is also reference to Guimarães Rosa's *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*. In the painting *Yauaretê* (2019), whose title is a combination between the Tupi words for jaguar – *ÿagûara* – and truthful – *eté*, we see Obá's view of Rosa's short story *Meu tio, o Iauaretê [My Uncle, the Iauaretê]*, which presents the dilemma between the limits of being prey/game and predator/hunter. The protagonist is a jaguar hunter, of mixed white and indigenous lineage, who after living intensely with jaguars begins to metamorphose into one. Yet, which symmetries are created in the relationship between the Self and the Other?



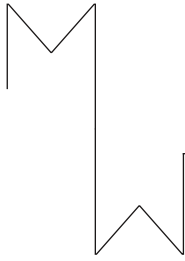
**Antonio Obá**  
Press and Selected Texts

Janaina Barros, "Fecha-Corpo/Close-Body: Memory Transmutation and Sacred Performativity in Antonio Obá" 2019

Dialogically, *Fortuna* [Fortune] (2015), an object from the series *Inventário Instrumental da Casa* [Instrumental Inventory of the House], consists of the gold mold of a forked chicken breastbone, widely known as a wishbone, on a white plate purchased from an antique shop in Minas Gerais. The artist references *Carmina Burana* (Songs of Beuern) – a cantata made of a series of anonymous poems written in medieval Latin and German produced by the German composer Carl Orff (1935-1936) – as the result of the understanding that ‘gambling is the fatal aspect of the relationship with luck’. In an excerpt from *Carmina Burana* entitled *The Fortune* (‘The Wheel of Fortune turns/I go down, demeaned/another is raised up’) we find the uncertain aspect of luck. The tarot’s oracle. The Wheel of Fortune. The Roman Goddess *Fortuna*. Random purposes of life. The inheritance. The objects that used to belong to his grandmother in her childhood. All that constitutes immeasurable value.

Most importantly, Obá’s production put forward the notion of self-ethnography as an epistemological strategy in the contemporary art world of non-hegemonic creations, by reflecting on the crisis of the metanarratives adopted by different scholars in the second half of the 20th century. Methodologically, this refers to the strategy of poetically unveiling different subjectivities in which the interpretation of the scene revisits the past by launching to the present a dialogical, polyphonic and communitarian production that weaves and inscribes Obá’s writing in the here and now: What is a Black body? What is a mixed-raced body? With these physical features that I was born with I have already inherited a whole range of behaviors that I do not master, which I have received as a kind of social inheritance. So, of course, this involves thinking about the Black body, about this historic body. Obviously these situations introduce some issues. All this experience within a Catholic tradition. Why has the Afro-Brazilian side always been rejected, always marginalized? So I think it starts from a lot of personal distress and a personal quest to understand these roots. When I talk about this issue of syncretism, there is the ritual side that has always really interested me, the issue of a transcendental, archetypal, symbolic perception...

– Janaina Barros is a visual artist, teacher, researcher, and art critic. Her research focuses on Brazilian contemporary art produced by Black artists.

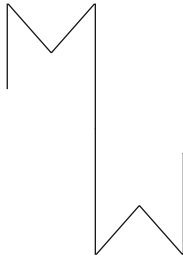


An update of our colonial past through its domestic rituals and the training of enslaved bodies echoes today, and lead us to reflect on the historical consequences of social amalgamation. Engaging in an autobiography of cultural and genealogical nature – his own a personal history – Antonio Obá puts us in a place of conscious danger. He demonstrates that his redemption will always be licentious, or better yet, a settling of accounts with himself, given the absence of recent daily living and family references that go beyond the body phenotype. He questions human behaviour and decision-making policies which can be strategically expressed in the mystic and religious universe.

The artist allows the renewal of the sacred art theme, which is barely perceived in a hurried visit – one must insist and dig deeper. The performance entitled “Receita de como fazer um santo” [Recipe for making a saint] sums up the attributes used in his artistic production. The performance includes objects, the body and paintings that also refer to the synthesis of paintings, installations and performances. The themes suggested in the titles of the works include religious representation, the black mythic sexuality or the ambivalence of gender, private servitude, cultural and racial ‘eugenics’ (turning white), the purging of traumas, and the reconstruction of the present by the ritualistic manipulation of objects.

Obá leads us to reflect, as well, on the concept of ‘performance-ritual’ that prevails in most of his work.





If every performance, in general, reveals ritualistic principles, the artist specifically evokes and establishes the rite as a theme as well. The scenes have a purging and appeasement effect on the viewers.

The body is there, both as reason and as matter, questioning eroticism and stigmas of identity. Therefore, physical fitness is another element in his work. Muscle tone and a strong, vigorous body meet requirements of the design of every performance. Just like in "Malungo: rito para uma missa preta" [Malungo: ritual for a black mass], in which the artist, while indulging himself with a liter of cachaça in a chalice just like the ones used in Catholic masses, repeatedly makes the sign of the cross with macerated charcoal in his own body, generating, as a result, the exhaustion of limits, to claim a leading devotional role typical of the Congolese masses. In Obá's point of view, this is "syncretism as seen by the perspective of personal negritude". In other circumstances, it is the naked body itself that is exposed and offered as a sacrifice. The exploitation of the black body, seen both as mechanical and manual labour and as part of the sexual exoticism, is thus revealed.

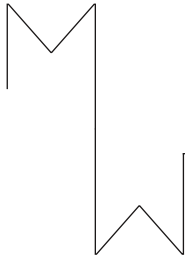
Subject to slander and opportunist interpretations because of the hypocrisy of political-religious groups trying to win their "herd"; and constituencies with a moral discourse that encourages terror and intellectual impoverishment, some works are reduced to attacks on symbols of the Catholic religion, disrespect for the image of Our Lady of Aparecida, or the indecency of the naked body. This is because understanding the comments of a black artist, a Catholic with strong family ties whose provocation aims at highlighting the overwhelming presence of colonialist, Catholic, slavery-based societies in the formation of the Brazilian people, is of no interest at all. And, for that end, he cuts in his own flesh and inflicts himself the pain of such a review.

Antonio Obá's artistic look allows us to realise us that 'transfiguring' deals with the search for the autonomy of desire and decision-making ability by the identification that has been usurped from him. The artist questions the critical development processes of religious and cultural heretical self-acceptance. He puts his own marks to the test, so that we are conscious of the fact that we repeatedly create an intimate relationship with what we want and what might not exist in practice, but rather what persists as a lack.

Reminiscences and absences are the central points of the series entitled "Ambiente com espelhos" ["Room with mirrors"], specially designed for the Pipa Prize 2017 finalists' exhibition. A set of five pairs of frames and screens, distributed in space and hung on the walls, establishes at the same time successive dialogues and confrontations.

The first relationship can be noticed between each diptych. On one side, a non-framed canvas; on the other, a framed plate of iron, standing in for a mirror. The raw cotton canvas absorbs presences. They are parts of the body, but may as well be emotions and family or cultural memories. Every mark and every memory, positioned to the left, disappears on the right, demanding an image that we can make of ourselves by means of the rusty plate. A mirror that barely reflects an image is the shield of vision, a reflection that does not serve exteriority, suggesting we look within ourselves.

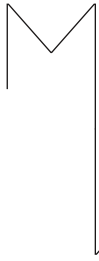
A link is also created between the diptychs in space. The title of the series warns us that we are in an environment, and must examine it. We must notice its broad context. For a moment, we see a specific place in the room. Architecture's historical legacy of the 'halls of mirrors' is related to their design and use as the venues for political meetings and assertion of power. However, as a decorative structure, it also produces devices and metaphors for the illusion of what we see, according to our position in the room. In this experiment, partly invoked here by the work, when the body changes position in space, visual perception is also changed.



The work entitled "Variações especulares – Narciso"; ["Specular variations – Narcissus], positioned at the back of the room, on the wall between two confronting rows, highlights the issue of ambivalence of dialog and occasional clashes. It is as if the object played back everything that it absorbs. It refers to the multiple points of view generated by the positioning of the body. On closer examination, if you stand in front of the oratory frame supporting the iron plate, the spectral mirror invokes the subject's individualization. Now, in this intimate relationship, you can ask if there is something that you are able to see. Upon the suggestion that it is impossible to see anything out of the image blur, the search for a self-image in the reflection questions the concepts of original or learned memory. Strictly speaking, the word 'specular' is related to anything reflecting light, an assumed evaluation, or even a vague consideration about something or someone. It is related to the concept of opinion based on one's own ideas and interests. As a state of flux, flashes of the present appear as a way of questioning the possibilities of cognitive transformation about circumstances of 'being in the world'. The artist himself who says in his poem, as if in prayer:

path  
I am path  
I shall be  
be me  
without anticipating  
see me

Written language is a recurrent manifestation in Antonio Obá's artistic production process. In his early works, this can be seen in his interest in calligraphy drawing, then it comes back as the testimonial or, at times, almost descriptive content he gives to some titles, or even through the inscription of words over his works. In many of his words, as in the poem above, he reveals how much the impelling force of its production is based on wanting to keep up with the others, being in their shoes, repositioning himself and seeing what there is in fact to be seen but is not immediately presented. Critical reviews, even if by means of art, are perhaps for just a few men of faith.



**Antonio Obá**  
Press and Selected Texts

Text published on the occasion of his solo show  
“*Pele de Dentro*” at Mendes Wood DM New York, 2018



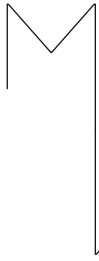
The works that Antonio Obá has been developing over the years, a selection of which are in this exhibition, pass through various languages of the visual arts, such as his exquisite drawings that point out the exquisite mastery of line, shadow and composition; the arrangements we can understand as assemblages or objects; installations whose atmospheres incorporate sacredness; and finally his sweeping performances utilizing his own body.

Always well executed formally, his works are the result of thorough research, relentless artistic practice and the revisiting of his ancestry. His arrested thoughts about the body occupy his being and his processes of unveiling and revealing, of reconciling himself with his own lineages. His poetics denote an immersion within his interior self, evoking other beings from the visible and invisible world; which constitute him as a human being, living being, animal being.

At first glance, we encounter the sacred in Antonio Obá’s works, in the more everyday sense, as he activates Judeo-Christian liturgical iconography. However, as we approach other works, we are encountered with the layers of Africanism, more precisely situated between the spiritual and cultural heritages of the Iorubá and Bacongo peoples, who are revealed through a narrative impregnated with meaning for Afro-Brazilians, dialoguing with the memory of the painful crossing of the Atlantic Ocean.

These layers are also revealed by the adopted name of the artist. Antonio, references Santo Antonio (Saint Anthony), not after Saint Anthony of Pádua, but Saint Anthony of Categeró, born in Northern Africa in the 15th century. A black enslaved man, he was taken to Sicily, where he dedicated himself to protecting the poor.

The name ‘Obá,’ represents the duality of the masculine and feminine genders. ‘Obá’ was the word for ‘King’ in the Benin Empire of West Africa, founded in the 15th century and destroyed by the British at the end of the 19th century. ‘Obá’ is also connected to the word ‘iabá’, which is the name used for orishas (deities) with female attributes. In nature iaba is identified as the ruler



**Antonio Obá**  
Press and Selected Texts

Text published on the occasion of his solo show  
“*Pele de Dentro*” at Mendes Wood DM São Paulo, 2018

of troubled waters and also as the Iaba River, also known as the Niger River. ‘Obá’ also references the Great Warrior Queen, Xangô’s first wife, an Orisha who rules over thunder and fights with an ‘ofá’ (bow and arrow), sword, and shield.

Thus, Antonio Obá carries names imbued with noble attributes, which together converge in a celebrated religious syncretism. However, this fusion or new interpretation of religious and spiritual practices, denounces the violence of the processes of colonization in Brazil; a mestizo country which is the product of the violation of indigenous and enslaved black women by Portuguese colonizers.

The Brazilian population has an inner diversity and an extreme multiplicity of colors and cultures, unnamed religions and spiritual rituals are practiced, and are marked in the routines of daily chores and family customs. They are the continuation of knowledge which carry touches, lines, smells, tastes, and colors, of customs whose origins are now impossible to trace. The habits of these intimate traditions hide identities, forms of existence that unite the human and the natural being, while not cartographically separating them from the formidable mystery of existence.

Obá’s recent paintings present black men who resemble the artist, but they transcend man and the notion of realism based on the canons of mimesis, the classical tradition. In them, Obá reconnects to his ancestry and revisits his animals, animals that survive in us despite the civil excesses of post-modernity, standardization, and normativity.

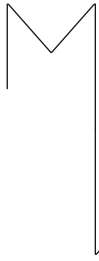
Obá’s paintings utilize tones of faded yellow, pink, blue, and green taken from the facades of rural homes. These homes are lined with a mixture of water, lime and chalk powder, a type of popular dye. Discolored over time, the homes become less uniform in color which attaches them to a historical linearity, to color collectivities and individualities with various tones of being.

The representation of black bodies are entangled in white lines, lace over a brown almost black skin. Over black bodies are the búzios (cowrie shells) of divination games, which also served as coins[1], when occupying the place of the eyes they act as reminders to always see the past. The black bodies with búzios also reference sambaquis[2], accumulated layers of bodies at rest, matter in arrest, bodies that say farewell to this world, bodies that remind us of those who arrived in ships centuries ago.

Drawings, objects, installations, performances and paintings that invite us into the artists intimacy, in a resumption of a feeling, almost instinct, but denser than rationality that allows us to comprehend, which is not exactly about ‘understanding.’

Antônio Obá challenges us to move away from the notion of urban centralities as points where everything happens at an accelerated rhythm towards investigating the re-emergence of our interior. In this encounter, we recognize ourselves in other rhythms, in other beings, in other affectivities, in other intensities, in a communion with the ancestry that composes us, that inhabits us and constitutes us.

If, like black bodies in the world, we often still find ourselves lost and out of place, the works of Antônio Obá announce that the first place to be reconquered is the one that we carry inside us that brings us comfort, performing a game in reverse, in which the reverse is the beginning.



**Antonio Obá**  
Press and Selected Texts

Mendes Wood DM, “Antônio Obá” *Mousse Magazine*, March 25, 2017 <https://www.moussomagazine.it/magazine/matthew-lutz-kinoy-antonio-oba-alessandro-carano-and-francesco-joao-scavarda-at-mendes-wood-dm-sao-paulo-2017>



Mendes Wood DM has the pleasure to present the first solo show in São Paulo by the artist Antônio Obá. The artworks exhibited encompass a diversity of supports and media, such as painting, monotype, installation and performance. The artist incorporates Brazilian religious icons to question a racial and political identity memory.

A number of ex-votos – objects offered to the gods as gratitude for fulfilling a vow – are displayed throughout the room, including ordinary materials, such as horse teeth, horseshoes and nails, amongst others, which, in the context of a syncretic discourse, articulate the proposition of an exchange with the gods.

The idea of a symbolic offering through the ex-votos challenges their own purpose.

These objects of gratitude for a wish granted by a god are, in this case, in the artist’s own words, records of a broken body, manifested in the wood as a stain that cannot be forgotten, but that enable a discussion on the interaction between the ritualistic and historic perspectives that each person carries.

These religious icons, along with the artist’s contemporary experiences and beliefs, establish a network of senses connecting our times with a past deleted by history. The monotypes that imprint the artist’s own body onto canvas reiterate his interest in re-signifying the body in rites and social situations, transfiguring his intentions in the pictorial field beyond the religious signs, raising a discussion about the black body, not only physical, but from a historical and social perspective.

In the field of art historiography, Obá’s work encourages an investigation on the relationships of influence and interchange in the construction of Brazilian culture, the erasing of the black element of the history of Brazilian art that, nonetheless, gives room to an act of resistance and reflection on the idea of a national identity.



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