

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Studio International

Luiz Zerbini – interview: 'I treat a painting as an oracle'

Joe Lloyd

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Ahead of his delayed new exhibition at Stephen Friedman Gallery, Brazilian painter Luiz Zerbini discusses urbanity and nature, the power of geometry and the secret life of paintings.



Image: Luiz Zerbini (2020). Courtesy Luiz Zerbini and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Photo: Pat Kilgore.

In his 2018 treatise *The Life of Plants*, the Italian philosopher Emanuele Coccia argues for a botanically centric view of the world. Plants, he writes, “transform everything they touch into life; they make out of matter, air and sun what, for the rest of the living, will be a space of habitation, a world”.

The work of the Brazilian artist Luiz Zerbini (b1959) seems to concur. “Plants”, says Zerbini, “are the most incredible and interesting beings in this world. They are responsible for our existence. I owe a lot to them.” The lush paintings that comprise *Fire*, his forthcoming exhibition at the Stephen Friedman Gallery in London, teem with vegetable life. Some are observed as if from nature; others tessellate into rhythmic patterns. In *Árvore do Viajante* (2020), the eponymous tree stands front and centre. Its branches reach across an otherwise rigid grid, itself filled with patterns that are alternatively cellular and corrugated, vernal and autumnal. Towards the bottom, a pair of fallen leaves floats through wavy lines of white and blue as if on water.



Image: Luiz Zerbini, *Árvore do Viajante*, 2020. Acrylic on canvas, 200 x 200 cm (78 3/4 x 78 3/4in). Copyright Luiz Zerbini. Courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Photo: Pat Kilgore.

Since 1982, Zerbini has lived in Rio de Janeiro, a city crowned with natural beauty. His early figurative work appeared in the landmark 1984 group show *Como Vai Você, Geração 80?* (How are you, 80s Generation?) at Rio's School of Visual Arts. In the late 90s, in part inspired by the rigid modernist architecture that characterises his country's metropolises, he began to move towards abstraction. His works since have moved between both. *Concrete Jungle* (2011), for instance, which featured in Zerbini's 2018 South London Gallery exhibition, *Intuitive Ratio*, showed a busy scene in front of a grid mosaic. The abstract assemblage of tiles becomes both a subject of the painting and part of its machinery.

Fire continues this dance between observed and created, loose and rigid, natural and man-made. Zerbini says: “Culture and nature, urban architecture and nature. I am trying to create friction between them to make fire.” Zerbini recently visited Pantanal, an area on the Brazilian borders with Bolivia and Paraguay, characterised by wetlands, flooded fields and unique flora and fauna. In works such as the 6-metre long *Happiness Beyond Paradise* (2020), one can get lost in the whorl of verdure, a thriving rainforest of leaves and light.



Image: Luiz Zerbini, *Happiness Beyond Paradise*, 2020. Acrylic on canvas, 300 x 600 cm (118 1/8 x 236 1/4in). Copyright Luiz Zerbini. Courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Photo: Pat Kilgore. Collection of Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo.

For all the joy of these works, *Fire* also contains shadows, not least that of the burning Amazon, a mounting calamity. “Art, as everything, is political,” says Zerbini. And the majority of the works in the exhibition were created this year, amid the pandemic. He has remained industrious throughout the crisis.

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"I got the virus in March, and immunity made my life simpler," he says. "I could keep going to the studio, which saved my sanity. I could also get out of the city with my family and make some small outdoor paintings like I used to do in the 80s." Zerbini also worked on illustrations for Coccia's forthcoming book, *Metamorphoses*.

This industriousness seems likely to continue into 2021. As well as *Fire*, Zerbini is preparing for exhibitions at Sikkema Jenkins Gallery in New York, the Museo de Arte de São Paulo and Lisbon's Centro Cultural de Belém, and working on two volumes of his work, including a monograph, *Botanica*, collecting his recent monoprints.

Zerbini spoke to Studio International from his home in Rio de Janeiro

Joe Lloyd: What led you to take up painting?

Luiz Zerbini: I have an old memory from my parents' house when I was a kid. Behind a sofa, where at night my parents used to spend many hours reading and watching the news, there was a table. That table was my place. There was a lamp that lit my notebook, and I drew and painted every day. The change from that time to now was very gradual: I didn't notice when I became an artist.



Image: Luiz Zerbini, *Árvore do Viajante* (detail), 2020. Acrylic on canvas, 200 x 200 cm (78 3/4 x 78 3/4 in). Copyright Luiz Zerbini. Courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Photo: Pat Kilgore.

JL: Why did you choose to name your new exhibition *Fire*?

LZ: To find a good name for an exhibition or even a work can increase the potential meaning of one idea. But sometimes it is not so easy. If I could, I would name all my exhibitions *Spiritual Nature of Reality*, which I believe is the perfect name to define what I want to celebrate with my work. But I have already used it more than once. So, I tried to find another good one.

Some months ago, the world was burning; here in Brazil, in California, in Australia and Indonesia as well, and it keeps on burning. One morning, when I arrived at the studio, I looked at one of the paintings and I saw what seemed to be a flame among the other patterns painted on the canvas. That was when "Fire" came to my mind as a good name. Then I found the size and the sound of *Fire* beautiful, and the meaning powerful.

JL: The exhibition contains some vast works, such as *Happiness Beyond Paradise*, composed of numerous patterned segments. How do you assemble such pieces?

LZ: I've been trying to mix different traditional practices of paintings with my own experiences, using intuition and sensibility. The geometrical movement in South America, mainly in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, was strong, and you can see the power of this tradition reflected in my works' DNA. The challenge is to put figures, patterns, geometric shapes and everything together. That's what I've been doing. The large scale gives you a chance to experience the work in the size they are in reality. The proportion is 1:1, the same size in the painting as in life.



Image: Luiz Zerbini, *Happiness Beyond Paradise* (detail), 2020. Acrylic on canvas, 300 x 600 cm (118 1/8 x 236 1/4 in). Copyright Luiz Zerbini. Courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Photo: Pat Kilgore. Collection of Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo.

Happiness Beyond Paradise is a good example. It is a triptych made of three canvases, each 200m wide and 300m tall, shown side by side. I had travelled to Pantanal, a region in the central area of Brazil, for the first time. There I could see a rich and diverse landscape, full of birds, trees and sky. I returned to Rio inspired by that and painted over some square colourful patterns I had made before the trip. I painted in a free style, but respected the grid by fitting the figures inside the curves and squares, which resulted in a kind of artificial landscape composition, like a collage.

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JL: Some of the works in Fire feature extraordinarily detailed sets of patterns. From where do patterns such as those in *Quadrícula* (2019) derive?

LZ: There are two different kind of patterns on *Quadrícula*. One is made with a foam roller, where I draw, with paint, directly on to the foam roller and then roll it over the canvas. The other technique is putting the paint directly from the tube on to the canvas and then using a simple piece of plastic or card – like a metro or bus card – to mix the paint, like Gerhard Richter does in large scale.

JL: The grid form resurfaces throughout the exhibition, and your work more generally. What drew you to it?

LZ: The feeling I have is that all the world, all the things and thoughts are floating in front of a grid. The grid can be visible or not. Sometimes it is a visual structure of a painting drawn in pencil, sharing the surface of the canvas in squares, where I will cover it with patterns and paint, but on the other hand, it is just an invisible mental grid. It could work just like a structure, where reality is fixed. Even when the grid hasn't been drawn on canvas, if you pay attention to the paintings, you will feel a geometric structure made by horizontal and vertical elements that would work as a grid. Vertical trees, woods, leaves, electric cables, lines suggested by figures. Science and xamãs [shamans] have agreed, for different reasons, that reality seen through a powerful lens is pure geometry.

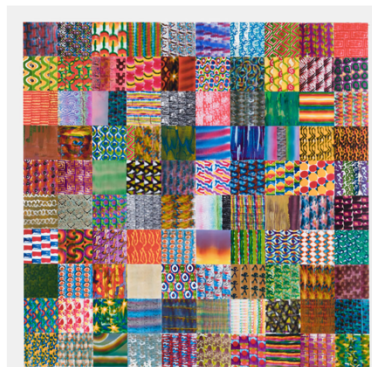


Image: Luiz Zerbini, *Quadrícula Grande*, 2020. Acrylic on canvas, 200 x 200 cm (78 3/4 x 78 3/4in). Copyright Luiz Zerbini. Courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Photo: Pat Kilgore.

JL: I enjoy the relationship between geometry and more organic, curvilinear forms in your paintings. How would you describe this relationship?

LZ: Once I heard from someone somewhere that paintings can talk. I thought it was a metaphor. But with time – spending months and months, sometimes eight, nine months looking at the same painting waiting without knowing what to do – I understood that paintings really talk. After that, I treat a painting as an oracle. The painting gives you everything you need to keep going. All the answers. It shows you the ways, suggests images, ideas, thoughts. It gives you an explanation why you should do that. I have no doubts about that, but you need to be patient. The answers come with time. You need to be open to see and courageous to accept and try. If you act, the answer will be a question. And so on. A painting is the result of a sincere conversation between the artist and his craft. If you have a chance to sit in front of one of my paintings for a long time, looking at the small details, you would certainly have better answers than this one. And please don't be shy. Ask the painting your question, ask everything you want to know and wait.

JL: In the past, your work has often interpolated forms from architecture. What inspired this interest, and does it occur in the works featured in *Fire*?

LZ: Some years ago, I used a photo from the facade of the huge modernist building, Edifício Copan in São Paulo, designed by Oscar Niemeyer, as a model for a painting. That was my first geometrical work based on the idea of a grid.

I believe that, in *Fire*, my interest for big city urban architecture has changed, giving place to another perspective where the structure and design of plants – and also of simple small seaside village culture, with their very interesting and creative architecture – is now playing the main role. Culture and nature, urban architecture and nature – I am trying to create friction between them to make *Fire*.



Image: Luiz Zerbini, *Optocinético*, 2020. Acrylic on canvas, 160 x 320 cm (63 x 126in). Copyright Luiz Zerbini. Courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Photo: Pat Kilgore.

JL: The natural world, in particular plant life, is another recurring motif in your practice.

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LZ: In 1982, I moved from São Paulo, where I was born, to Rio. And here I found the landscape I was looking for without knowing. The urban forest here is wild. I learned with nature, observing the environment. I lived for years beside Rio's botanical garden, where I used to go almost every day. I also have memories from my childhood when I used to travel to small fishing villages by the sea to surf. All these images came back to join me in this new vision of life.

In 2008, I was invited to take part in an exhibition about Domenico Vandelli, an Italian naturalist, who together with Dom João VI, king of Portugal, organised the scientific/artistic expedition to Brazil in the 19th century. For this show, I made my first installation using plants and leaves. For about five years now, I've been working with [art printers] Studio Baren in Rio, making monoprints using real leaves as a matrix, which have opened a new world of possibilities. And, finally, last year I had the chance to occupy the ground floor at the Cartier Foundation in Paris with works, paintings, monoprints and one installation all about trees and plants at the exhibition *Nous les Arbres*.

Plants are the most incredible and interesting beings in this world: the flowers, fruits, the colours and shape of the leaves. The insects, the birds. They are responsible for our existence. I owe a lot to them.



Image: Luiz Zerbini, *Untitled*, 2020. Acrylic on canvas, 50 x 40 cm (19 3/4 x 15 3/4 in). Copyright Luiz Zerbini. Courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Photo: Pat Kilgore.

JL: Do you feel your practice fits into a particularly Brazilian tradition?

LZ: Not really. Brazil is a very big country with a lot of particularities. We are very sophisticated and naive at the same time. Very rich, maybe the richest, but miserable. We have artists such as Hélio Oiticica, Tunga, Vêio and Mestre Vitalino.

JL: Brazil seems to be facing a particularly turbulent time in politics. What are your feelings on the present situation – and should art aspire to be political?

LZ: Like most countries in the world, we are living a nightmare with this unprepared captain elected by the people. Art, as everything, is political.

• Luiz Zerbini: *Fire* will open online on 26 January 2021. The exhibition will open physically to the public at Stephen Friedman Gallery as soon as UK government guidance allows.



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