SÃO PAULO

Jaider Esbell, A conversa das entidades intergalácticas para decidir o futuro universal da humanidade (The Conversation of Intergalactic Entities to Decide the Universal Future of Humanity), 2021, acrylic and Posca pen on canvas, 44 1/8 x 90 1/2".

Jaider Esbell
GALERIA MILAN

Brazilian Indigenous art has stood in a peculiar paradoxical position in relation to the country’s hegemonic culture since Brazilian writer and critic Oswald de Andrade came up with the concept of anthropofagia (anthropophagy) in 1928. De Andrade claimed that Brazilian modernism was unique because it absorbed, or “devoured,” not only Western influences, but also Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian ones. Indigenous culture was thus claimed as a vital primordial source. And yet it remained historically marginalized. That is now changing. Brazilian Indigenous artists are gradually gaining visibility with ambitious exhibitions at prominent institutions. (“Indigenous Histories” is scheduled to open later this year at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand.) As a self-taught artist, educator, and curator advocating for what he calls “artivism”—the idea that art can further the political fight for Indigenous rights, land, and culture—Jaider Esbell, of the Makuxi people, plays an important role in this key cultural moment. Born in Indigenous territory in the northern state of Roraima, Esbell has repurposed anthropophagy in his writings by noting that his being absorbed by the art system also means that he can now affirm his unique identity within it.

“Presentation: Ruku” showcased some sixty of Esbell’s works produced between 2019 and 2021, revealing a practice that has shifted fluently between painting, drawing, mixed media, and performance. Whatever the medium, Esbell’s works evince a potent earthbound sensuousness. For his spare large-scale paintings, he uses natural pigments derived from trees, including a dark tint made from the leaves of a genipap tree—ruku in the Makuxi language—which are commonly used in body painting (Esbell also painted his body with the dye for the opening). These banner-like canvases, hung from the ceiling in the center of the gallery, were painted in buff, ochre, and dark-gray tones. Having been painted on the floor, a few possessed a drippy gestural energy that brought to mind Jackson Pollock’s action paintings; for Esbell, they evoke a “corporeal feeling.”

That elemental pull came through even more forcefully in Esbell’s brightly colored paintings in acrylic and pen. O anúncio do dilúvio (The Announcement of the Flood), 2020, features a prominent bird-skull mask, its beady eyes painted a vibrant coral, above a luminous brocaded body incorporating other forest animals and azure-teal feathers stacked below folded bands of blue. In Indigenous mythologies, birds are revered for communicating between the realms of earth, water, and sky, their mobility bestowing spiritual powers on them. No wonder, then, that the work emanates a pulsating magnetism. At the same time, a certain foreboding creeps in: The figure augurs impending disaster. Indeed, with the Amazon rain forest burning at alarming speed, it’s hard not to detect an encrypted warning.

A similarly daunting message underscores A conversa das entidades intergalácticas para decidir o futuro universal da humanidade (The Conversation of Intergalactic Entities to Decide the Universal Future of Humanity), 2021. In it, billows of green paint, suggesting an exuberant forest canopy, mingle with fine lambent patterns and stary nebulae. This filigreed tapestry also contains outlines of animal heads and eyes peering down from the firmament: a watchful spiritual council, scrutinizing and judging humanity’s malefashion. The lush, undulating abyss has no center, no privileged access point to guide the spectator’s gaze, thus underscoring our