

The studio as painting

PAULA RAMOS

What does a painter do? Paint. Certainly the clearest, most direct and certain response is that a painter paints. Or, bringing the statement closer to the field of the visual arts, a painter is someone who practices the art of painting. Antônio Augusto Frantz Soares (1963), or simply Frantz, artist, defines himself as “a painter who does not paint”. Rhetoric may be able to deal with this semantic problem, but the situation requires a more reflexive position.

The works in this book carry the signature of Frantz. And they are paintings. Some of them use the traditional support of canvas on rectangular stretcher, others unfold into pages of books, and some are attached to the surface of paper. Common amongst them is an interest in the matter of painting, the memory of painting, reflection on what painting is. The debate is not confined to a intimate discussion between Frantz and himself, or to sporadic conversations with other painters and art critics; it takes place within the work itself, work that is the driving force of unease, which appropriately and vigorously incorporates the restlessness of the artist, together with the rhythms and experiences of the space in which it occurs, the studio.

Looking at Frantz’s current work, what is it we see? In general terms they are marks, nodules, viscosities, footprints, highlights, drips, runs and colour, a lot of colour: subtle, moody, intense and luminous. The amalgamation of these elements is governed by a strange harmony, balancing weights and producing confrontations between tones and stains. Devoid of any thematic or figurative connotations, the starting point for the paintings is the way the artist’s eye collects the sensory experience and offers it back to us as poetics. But that does not prevent

the dominant abstraction of the painted surfaces from allowing identification of forms that relate to waves, clouds, constellations or dreamlike landscapes, triggering the perceptual and imaginative capacities of the spectator. There are many ways into the “Frantz universe”, and there is no doubt that the materiality and formal richness of the paintings are fascinating in themselves. It might also be possible to discuss his work based on its plastic exuberance, together with its dialogue with the tradition of art history itself. But that approach would leave out what most interests the artist and what makes his works particularly unusual: the process.

Here we come back to the initial paradox of this text. Frantz is a painter who does not paint. He used to paint a lot, that is true. In the giddy 1980s he showed in all the salons he applied to and collected some important awards. His career includes almost 30 solo exhibitions and more than 70 group shows, mainly of painting and mainly in the 1980s, which is also evidence of the recognition he enjoyed on the art scene. But suddenly the artist stopped. He stopped producing what he had produced so far; he stopped exhibiting; he stopped being part of the art scene. Many people would say that he became lost. He would say that he was finding himself.

This started during a period when Frantz began a degree of withdrawal in late 1990 while staying for three months in the north German town of Kiel. To protect the floor of the studio in which he was working, he lined it with paper. And this covering gradually accumulated remnants of his actions, marks indicating the artistic route through that “battlefield”. At the end of that period he recognised that the randomly stained floor covering contained more expressive and revealing potential than what he had been doing intentionally. With the papers in his luggage and occupying his mind, he returned to Brazil to experience radical changes not

just in his work, but also in his personal life, which demanded reflection and a lengthy pause.

Voluntary exile

Many people consider Frantz's ten-years self-imposed exile to be excessive, but how can one measure the time required to understand what really drives and motivates us? In the case of this artist, as he saw no sense in simply producing and exhibiting new works in the marketplace, he began to think, like Sisyphus at his enormous task, about the specific nature of painting and what makes someone an artist. With his characteristic boldness and freedom, he faced what was, more than anything else, his own impasse. And he had the courage of recognising amid the rubbish of the studio vivid and vibrant manifestations of painting, which had so often seemed in its death throes in the discussions of theorists and even in the practice of artists.

In the mid 1990s Frantz followed the custom he had adopted in Germany and lined the studio where he was teaching. There, on a weekly basis, he would receive about six students, each with their own space and characteristics. Laying out metres of cotton canvas on the floor and on the walls, he made time his ally. The same time needed for observing, questioning and maturing perceptions was the time needed by the canvases to receive the impression of so many gestures, to accumulate residue and consolidate experiences. Some of the earliest coverings remained fixed to the room for months, but some remained for years. At a given moment, the artist decided that they were ready. And so he began to make "his paintings". Carefully pulling them from the walls, he cut them up and organised them, in a meticulous editing process, pointing out parts that would be fixed onto stretchers and those which would later be formed into books.

This stage of the process was highly solitary for years. It was Frantz with himself. More recently, other people have accompanied the removal of the canvases: privileged observers, witnessing the initial selection, examining how the artist deals with the material, demystifying it precisely to cast a new eye over things. If we consider that the initial canvases in Frantz's studio-laboratory are walked upon, often perforated, sometimes with marks from cigarettes, shoes and dirt, then it means saying that in a way that the paintings are also walked upon, perforated and stained.

The rules established by galleries and museums generally oblige us to step back from the works and prohibit us from touching them. Frantz suggests a different relationship however, inviting the viewer to examine the often resinous skin of the painting, to sense the smell of the materials, to energetically pull at the pages of books that have stuck together. There are few limits, both in making and in enjoying, and the constant word is experimentation. "Why not?" Frantz asks. Driven by the humility and wisdom of someone who knows that they are always learning, the artist feeds on experiment. And even when the terrain is unknown, he takes risks; after all, the path is made by walking.

Studio-laboratory

In this sense, how can one forget the child Antônio Augusto who tried and tested everything with beakers and test tubes in the school laboratory. How can one not refer to the teenager seeking to discover the properties and function of elements, the chemistry behind the form, who often continued his school experiments in industrious adventures at home?

The constructive empiricism seen in the late 1970s continues, allowing one to say that little has changed from inquisitive child

to restless artist. In a way, some interests even remain unchanged. After all, when it comes to painting, how many people today know as much about materials and processes as Frantz? How many people today know what results to expect from combinations of pigments and assorted binders?

The artist makes no secret of this information, quite the contrary; he also does not consider it a decisive factor in the quality of an artwork. But it is certainly interesting to recall that before embarking on a conceptual twist in his creative practice, Frantz was already a recognised specialist in his craft, deeply versed in the kitchen of painting. It was this knowledge, together with characteristic boldness, which led him to show a painting without support, a painting without a canvas, at the 9º Salão Nacional de Artes Plásticas da Funarte in 1986. This was a layer of acrylic paint, a mouldable, foldable substance existing somewhere between the two-dimensionality of painting and the volume of sculpture, between the gesture of the artist and corporeality of the material. This bold work won the southern-region painting prize and at the same time indicated to anyone paying attention another range of questions which would arise a few years later.

But to return to the studio-laboratory of Frantz, casting an eye over the apparently chaotic scene, the stage for so many players, we come across uncommon situations: the remnants of paint creating a film of colour in the bottom of a tin; a broad brush left in some now-dry paste, removed and leaving its relief; the powerful washes spreading and spilling beyond the boundaries of the paintings in process; all kinds of remnants adding another thickness to the floor covering. Why not painting? Surface-colour, material-colour, layer-colour. More than just the chance record of the inherent processes and possible accidents of art practice, these fragments, these macerated extensions of canvases, contain the memory of painting itself. A

microcosm in expansion, the studio, with its open and unstable order as a repository of sensations, experiences, encounters and conflicts, ends up as the most complete picture.

The studio here is not the reason for the work or the subject of the work, it is the essence of it. Many artists throughout art history have represented their working environments. Since they began to appear in their works in the 16th century, these studios have suggested conceptions of the world and states of mind; idealised and romanticised compositions emerged to enhance the exceptional aspect of that world and, naturally, the person who lives in it. The choice of what to depict, what elements to include or exclude from the scene, is therefore fundamental.

In the case of Frantz the operation is different, not least because the artist's presence is submerged. Which artist, in fact? The marks in this studio-matrix are multiple, collective and to a certain extent also anachronistic, through the merging of various timeframes. And even when Frantz lines individual studios – which he started doing a few years ago –, the aim is not to collect expressions and remnants that identify the protagonists of those spaces; what he is interested in is thinking about is the breadth of the manifestations of painting, which is so striking that the artist could line motor mechanic's workshop or even a factory in which painting processes take place. And why not?

Therefore, although the artist behind the work that interests Frantz to the extent that it always generates heated controversy about authorship, what really interests him is the exercise of perceiving painting, of considering painting. Frantz, the painter who does not paint, uses painting as his leitmotif. This leads us once again into the central issues of the artist's creative practice: on the one hand, the understanding that in addition to being a laboratory, in addition to being the privileged

area of creation, the studio is material, it is the work itself; specifically, the studio is painting. On the other hand, the awareness that as we construct a way of seeing this prodigious and admirable painting we are also at the same time constructed by it. And it will certainly not allow us to perceive the multiple layers of everyday life as we did before. The break has been made.

Paula Ramos is an art critic, researcher and lecturer at the Instituto de Artes da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS). She has a doctorate in Visual Arts, specialising in Art History, Theory and Criticism. She lives and works in Porto Alegre (RS).