

# DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

David Kordansky Gallery is pleased to announce a solo exhibition of paintings and works on paper by Francisco (Chico) da Silva, on view in New York at 520 W. 20th St. from October 27 through December 16, 2023. Join us for a panel discussion moderated by Brooklyn Museum Curator of Indigenous Art Darienne Turner with Rio de Janeiro-born writer Gabriella Angeleti, David Kordansky Gallery Artist Liaison Ana Lopes, and El Museo del Barrio Chief Curator Rodrigo Moura, at 5 PM on Thursday, October 26 at our New York gallery, followed by an opening reception from 6:30 to 8 PM.

*The drawing is what the hand gives and the color is what the details ask for. A house is engineering, while painting is autonomy.*—Chico da Silva

The search for an autonomous way of artmaking—both inside and beyond the frame—permeates the visionary work and complex legacy of one of twentieth-century Brazil’s most prolific and important artists, Chico da Silva (b. circa 1910, d. 1985). At once fantastical, dark, joyous, and mystical, Chico’s intricate lines and dotted patterning introduce us to a world of the artist’s own making.

Born to an indigenous Peruvian father and a Brazilian mother, Chico grew up in the Northwestern state of Acre, where his childhood was shaped by the dense Amazonian rainforest as well as the catechizing agendas of the area’s European missions. While it’s speculated that the artist’s father was of the Kashinawa or Huni Kuin group, the degree to which Chico, who identified simply as *caboclo*, felt connected to his indigeneity is unclear. Following his father’s death, Chico and his mother moved to Fortaleza, where they settled in Pirambu, an impoverished neighborhood made up primarily of migrants united by the shared political struggle for housing and stability.

Chico’s first known engagement with art was here, in the 1940s, when he began using black charcoal and natural pigment to draw murals on the exteriors of fishermen’s houses. These works caught the eye of Swiss art critic Jean-Pierre Chabloz, who,

positioning himself as the “discoverer” of the “primitive” painter, assumed a complex role in Chico’s subsequent career, one simultaneously promotional and paternalizing. Chabloz introduced Chico to the gouache, paint, paper, and canvas that soon became his primary materials, and championed Chico’s work to the international art world, facilitating widespread recognition that would culminate with Chico representing Brazil in the 33rd Venice Biennale in 1966.

Reconsidered today, Chico’s exuberant, sophisticated paintings shatter the oppressive categories to which they were once relegated. Graphic, often mythological or enchanted representations of creatures and Brazilian flora are made surreal through his bold colors, intricate line work, vivid patterning, and exaggerated features like elongated claws, tongues, and beaks. Other elements of anthropomorphized figures—like open mouths receiving food, large, spellbound eyes, and floating appendages—connect nature to humanity, situating all of life within a broad cosmology of the artist’s own making. This narrative approach to painting, apparent throughout Chico’s career, allowed him to link life in a poor urban area to a realm of dream and fantasy. As he once noted, “These worlds that I paint are not memories from the time I was a boy. This is called imagination, occult sciences, astronomy...” While Chico didn’t depict stars or planets, the astronomy that his works evoke suggests a larger, non-hierarchical interconnectedness in which organisms floating in the deep sea mirror matter drifting through outer space.

If the expression of his worldview through visual means came second nature to Chico, so, too, did his choice to integrate his community into the making of his increasingly in-demand work. In the early 1960s, Chico established the Pirambu School, an informal workshop in which local artists and curious neighbors learned Chico’s techniques, worked as paid collaborators, and, with his support, developed their own bodies of work. The communal ecosystem of Pirambu was inherently symbiotic: while the exact number of participants remains opaque, it’s known that five key artists—Babá (Sebastião Lima

da Silva), Claudionor (José Claudio Nogueira), Garcia (José dos Santos Gomes), Ivan (Ivan José de Assis), and Chico's daughter Chica (Francisca Silva)—helped streamline the production of Chico's paintings while also making important creative contributions through their ongoing additions to Chico's core typologies. In its most organized form, the studio process allowed each artist to contribute his or her own particular skills to Chico's visions.

From our current vantage, Pirambu seems a radical iteration of an artmaking approach that challenges traditional notions of authorship foundational to the Western canon, including the importance of a work's verifiable authenticity as made by a single individual. In practice, Pirambu echoed indigenous practices of communal making while also sharing obvious similarities with The Factory, which Andy Warhol opened in 1963. But without a conceptual or intellectual framing that fit the expectations of a Eurocentric audience, the larger significance of Chico's project was, for decades, woefully misunderstood.

Chico da Silva's legacy, belatedly reappraised, reveals him to be not only a painter of remarkable skill and breadth, but a practitioner for whom working alongside one's neighbors was the intuitive outcome of a long-established way of life that was centered on communal gathering and the necessary sharing of resources. In forging a practice that eschewed the desires and value systems of a midcentury European and American art world, Chico and the Pirambu School established a sovereign Brazilian art as visually dazzling as it is assertive in its resistance to colonial intervention.

Chico da Silva has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions including the recent major presentation Chico da Silva e o ateliê do Pirambu, Pinacoteca de São Paulo (2023). Other solo exhibitions include Chico da Silva: Sacred Connection, Global Vision, Museu de Arte Sacra, São Paulo (2022); Chico da Silva – O Renascer 100 Anos, Espaço Cultural Correios, Fortaleza, Brazil (2010); Retrospectiva Chico da Silva: do

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delírio ao dilúvio, Espaço Cultural do Palácio da Abolição, Fortaleza, Brazil (1989), among many others. Group exhibitions include The Sacred in the Amazon, Centro Cultural Inclusartiz, Rio de Janeiro (2023); Fantaisies brésiliennes, Musée International d'Art naïf Anatole Jakovsky, Nice, France (2016); Brasileiro, Brasileiros, Museu Afro Brasil, São Paulo (2005); 33rd Biennale di Venezia, Venice, Italy (1966), among many others. His work is in the permanent collections of Centre Pompidou, Paris; Tate, London; Pinacoteca de São Paulo; El Museo del Barrio, New York; Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates; Museu de Arte do Rio de Janeiro; and Fundação Edson Queiroz, Fortaleza, Brazil, among many others.