



ARTISANAL CONCEPTUALISM: STARTING POINT

*Sometimes, I think that those cool people
have no spark to conquer
if your coins can buy it
they forget about the artisanal.*
—Pity Álvarez

In the early '80s, Marcelo Pombo started to make art related to the underground and gay culture under the dictatorships in Argentina and Brazil. Both dictatorships were part of Operation Condor and systematically planned state terrorism, which included the theft of babies—with the concealment of their true identity—and the disappearance of people. The dictatorships guaranteed the alignment of the Latin American armies with the foreign policy of the United States.

Marcelo Pombo's trip to Brazil in 1982 was a true *Starting Point*. He decided to go to São Paulo to evade the possibility of joining the Argentine army to fight in the Falklands War [Guerra de Malvinas] against the United Kingdom. There he explored the nightlife and the gay culture with their cruisings. In São Paulo, he drew ethnographic fantasies with soft pencil strokes, portraying scenes of sexual sociability with a new dissident political imagery. His drawings portray zoomorphic humanoid characters with mouse noses, duck heads, and humanized animals in the forms of snake penises and fish with human genitalia. Subjects of fluid genres enjoy their drives for love and death in Edenic scenes of sex, terror, pleasure, and pain. Homoerotic images of everyday life are hidden in their escapades, sublimating in prohibited spectacles and commercialized bodies. Pombo stages an erotic genealogy of the monstrous, the insubordinate, the lustful, the depraved, and the bizarre—those who overflow from the institutions of the discipline of the body.

The characters in *Dibujos de San Pablo* [The São Paulo Drawings] reveal the plots that articulate human impulses and instincts, mapping political and sexual intensities through ethnographies, urban tours, and snapshots of abnormal and marginal trajectories: posthuman beings, crowds, vagabonds, and monsters of carnivalized and grotesque everyday life. The drawings result from walks, conversations, readings, and experiences guided by the belief that despite the repressive aspects of society, there is an element of creative resistance to these structures. Thus drawing history can be understood as a tool of resistance that blurs the stories of power. Pombo is an artist of the minorities alien to normalization, such as children, the insane, and animals; of the invisible, the silenced, the declassified, the degenerate, the non-binary, and those without a future.

Dibujos de San Pablo [The São Paulo Drawings] contain the politics of things that were born a little before their time. They are making the marginalized visible. The drawings display aesthetic elements of the American underground comic of Robert Crumb, heir to the gay pulp fiction from the '20s through the '50s. The drawings evoke the aesthetics from publications such as *Physique Pictorial* by Tom of Finland and the Spanish *El Víbora* with *Anarcoma* by Nazario, but they are mixed with a childish and naive style reminiscent of Walt Disney and Max Fleischer animations. Psychedelia also converges with hippyism, the covers of Argentine rock records by Juan Gatti, popular surrealism, and activism fanzines. Pombo's drawings trace the ideals of art, such as deformity, confusion, and unintelligibility, with a camp sensibility, from accessible sophistication to popular aesthetics. His drawings establish a dialogue with the culture and politics of his time, forging a dialectic between Marcel Duchamp and Jorge Luis Borges, Andy Warhol and Manuel Puig, Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, Néstor Perlongher and Osvaldo Lamborghini, and Susan Sontag and María Moreno.

Marcelo Pombo, upon his return to Argentina in 1983, learned about gay activism and joined the Gay Action Group (GAG) in 1984, which was made up of Óscar Gómez (former member of the Homosexual Liberation Front from 1967 to 1976), Jorge Gumier Maier (artist, journalist of *Expreso Imaginario*, *El Porteño*, *Cerdos y Peces*, *Fin de Siglo*, and curator of the art gallery at the Ricardo Rojas Cultural Center), linguist Carlos Luis, dancer and choreographer Julio Olmos, sociologist Gustavo Gelmi, actor and filmmaker Facundo Montenegro, and textile businessman Alejandro Kantemiroff, among many others. GAG was a discussion, action, and social exchange group that published a magazine on politics and sexuality. GAG appeared on June 14, 1984, in Parque Lezama in Buenos Aires, together with the CHA (Argentine Homosexual Community), Socialist Alternative for Sexual Liberation, which was a diverse collective that worked within the Movement for Socialism (MAS), and independents against police edicts, violence, and discrimination. The goal of the assembly was to commemorate the Stonewall riots in New York. GAG presented itself with a handmade flag showing its motto: "Let's bring sex to the government and pleasure to power."

In 1985, Marcelo Pombo illustrated the second edition of *Sodoma* magazine that discussed disobedience, prostitution, lesbian and gay movements, sexuality in prisons, raids on gay places during the "democratic" leadership in Buenos Aires, and the persecution of homosexuals in Cuba.

In the context of civil strife and the visibility of the gay community, at a time when the appearance of AIDS was associated with homosexuality, Pombo's work entered the Buenos Aires art scene. From his black and white drawings of the eighties, Marcelo Pombo switched to "light pink" [*rosa light*] in the second exhibition at the Rojas gallery: it is the political aesthetic of dripping anal vs. the cum shot. As Gumier Maier's curatorial text states:

In Pombo's work, a joyous idea of design prevails, the effort to do something with something, a found object or an unmarked reproduction of the plots of great art. Escaped from the shot as a blank field for the expression of the subjective, escaped from the shot as a screen where mysteries are revealed, he ignores the triumphant breaths, the bell of history in favor of more mundane and everyday fantasies (...) Dysphony of understanding, an emptiness that levels, with elegance between cynical and indulgent, Pollock's pattern with a textile print (...) a concert of vulgarities to speak with art, a plurality of graces where, however, the cryptogram of the valuable, the sacred, is always treasured, after the dilettante ways the valuable, the sacred, not enclosed in opacities but suspended in its brightness. The ritual of beauty as a luxury, voluptuous. An artifice.

Pombo is an unlikely artist, not an heir. Of plebeian origins, he began to do public artwork in post-dictatorship Argentina and was part of a cultural sociality of marginal groups until then. With a dissident aesthetic and political position, he rose to visibility with the emergence of the collective of the gay and queer community. Pombo's work critiques the democratic illusion that the marginalized could be included in the system. The poor could conquer the world through artisanal exertion if they reverse and challenge the dominant aesthetic paradigm.

With the end of the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the Washington Consensus, globalization generated new exchanges and cultural consumption, transforming the landscape of cities with graphic and industrial design and the media. In this context, youth cultures emerge as urban tribes, fanaticized and seduced by new commodities as if they were objects of devotion.

In this new environment of the 1990s, the conceptual complexity of Pombo's operations proliferated, including elements that deny certain premises of contemporary art: the incorporation of ornament, the decorative, and the cosmetic to the found object ("ready-made").

His artworks were crafted using the surfaces of objects collected and rescued from the street, then polished, painted, made up, and decorated. It is an aesthetic associated with an ethos of the world of the poor that does not seek revolution, but progress and order, which finds joy in moments of escapism. Pombo's artisanal and therapeutic conceptualism sacralizes everyday objects.

A materially small but visually iconic work, Pombo's art is expressed through the aesthetics of materials, with a notion of beauty as an aesthetic experience that had been excluded from art by the avant-garde. Pombo includes the notion of beauty in the painting object, decorating the common thing with bricolage, exalting a marginal material that, by placing it in its aesthetic field, transmutes it into an allegory of contemporary society.

Pombo's work is "glocal," combining local and global materials and their uses. Globalization is in the imported manufactured materials from China to the Once wholesaler neighborhood in Buenos Aires and the local national and pop culture where he produces his artwork.

The conceptual textiles that Marcelo Pombo presents in this exhibition are ready-made of woven materials, be they fabric or metal. They consist of mesh materials with many threads. Pombo decorates and paints a green polyester curtain with sewn plastic appliqués held on the wall with a nylon rope. An aluminum framed mosquito net decorated with a grid of plastic twigs and pearl trim. A red cotton fabric bought in a commercial gallery dedicated to hot stamping on fabric, on which he printed the Motorcycles logo, with sewn plastic gutters, acetate, and blue leatherette trim with studs on the edges and corners of the canvas. A piece of wood painted with green synthetic enamel with a screwed aluminum and steel structure from which plastic branches and leaves hang, emulating the deciduous pendulous foliage of the tree called Weeping Willow.

In the transfiguration of ordinary things, the object is sacralized—appropriated and intervened with paint and ornaments. It is the frame of a painting thought of as a weft of the fabric where "things" are meticulously inserted. The paintings, as a dichotomous system that marks the limits between the inside and the outside, no longer function as a place of representation but a space of things that are found (chosen and rescued) and intervened with bricolage, creating the oxymoron of the artisanal ready-made: networks where specific precious objects are embedded.

The exhibition concludes with a series of drawings made by Pombo between 2022 and 2023. On the one hand, these five drawings are in dialogue with those of São Paulo insofar as they share an artistic medium. On the other hand, they resonate with his four works from the early nineties in their presentation of weavings as different ways of crossing and linking various resistant materials. The exhibition is complete with an obsessive weaving of lines and plots with ink, colored pencils, markers, acrylic, and tempera on paper. They represent humanized textiles that could be associated with other types of nets, such as biological tissue, due to the effect of the lines of pencils and pigments. There is, for example, an abstract textile character that holds a textile banner, another that weaves its likeness, while a third which holds out its hand to touch the sun.

The three bodies of works (*Dibujos de San Pablo* [The São Paulo Drawings], *Conceptual Textiles*, and his recent drawings) presented at BARRO NY contemplate the long path of Marcelo Pombo's aesthetics from his *Starting Point* in São Paulo to his *Artisanal Conceptualism*. The subjugation of the conceptual by the artisanal is the limit of the baroque and the conservatively aberrant that deconstructs the antinomies of the cultured and the popular, the obscene and seduction, fine arts and crafts, the luxurious and the cheap, nature and culture. For this reason, we agree with Inés Katzenstein that Marcelo Pombo is perhaps the most emblematic artist to break into Argentina in the early nineties.
—Syd Krochmalny



MARCELO POMBO ARTISANAL CONCEPTUALISM: STARTING POINT

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25 Peck Slip New York NY, 10038

DIBUJOS DE SAN PABLO [The São Paulo Drawings] is a series I made at the age of 22 during my stay in that city in 1982. They are small drawings made on cheap paper with inks and pencils, with strokes so faint that they barely mark the paper. They represent a *Starting Point* since, for the very first time, the desire to express myself through my differences became visible. That was my first trip out of Argentina, ruled by an oppressive military dictatorship. In São Paulo, I met some of the most important gay rights activists in Brazil. The following year, back in Buenos Aires, I joined the GAG (Gay Action Group), a radical sexual politics group. Although my time in activism was brief, this experience forever marked my identification with sexual diversity and counterculture, being a constitutive moment both personally and artistically.

Also on display are four works from the 1990s that represent what was central to my art project: using materials and procedures linked to decoration, crafts, and handicrafts through a domestic and joyful practice. Works representing a sense of common and accessible beauty show an intimate and re-sacralizing relationship with art.

In dialogue with the textile framework of these four works, a set of recent drawings made between 2022 and 2023 complete the exhibition. In them, an obsessive weaving of lines and wefts persists in the practice of a devotional craft.
—Marcelo Pombo

* *Dibujos de San Pablo* [The São Paulo Drawings], 1982. Ink on paper, 12.40 x 8.46 in