



Jordan Martins: Plant Strategies
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Jordan Martins: *A Felicidade, or Frivolity as Strategem*

By Gareth Kaye

“A felicidade do pobre parece / A grande ilusão do carnaval / A gente trabalha o ano inteiro / Por um momento de sonho / Pra fazer a fantasia / De rei ou de pirata ou jardineira / Pra tudo se acabar na quarta-feira / Tristeza não tem fim / Felicidade sim”

“The poor man's happiness seems / The great illusion of carnival / We work all year long / For a dreamy moment / To make the fantasy / King or pirate or gardener / For all to end on Wednesday / Sadness has no end / Happiness yes”
– “A Felicidade,” Antonio Carlos Jobim

When I was a child, I wanted nothing more than to grow up and be a blue zebra, and in spite of my current awareness of their dwindling habitat and population numbers I still in no small way harbor that dream in my adult life. Of course, as a child the practicalities never really crossed my mind of how a Zebra would or could be blue – would this be blueness as a metaphor; as a material condition of some chromosomal and chromatic aberration? Or would this be some kind of ill-conceived Blue Man Group–cum–Grizzly man type scenario? How would he survive blue against the dried khaki and yellows of the savannah standing out sharply against the grasses and his peers in the powdery delphinium hue I always imagined? Would he have to become nocturnal as a survival mechanism – rendered all but perfectly undetectable by predators in the blue evening light making him lonely and even more blue?

I haven't thought much about this dream until quite recently, but perhaps what caused this sudden return of this primal desire to be something else was an encounter with a recent painting by Jordan Martins (*Eye Spots, 2019*). A painting with an oscillating ground of blue so salient that it brought back with it an entire fantasy to be simultaneously seen, camouflaged, legible, and obscured all at once – which seems to generally illustrate the logic of most toddlers' demonstrations of attention grabbing antics and subsequent bashfulness clinging to their parent's leg and refusing to make eye-contact once seen. But what genetic characteristics could bring a blue skinned Zebra into being, and to what purpose would that appearance serve? While I am not entirely sure how my Zebra personae became blue, my desire stumbled upon him mid-

image, I walked in and he was there, and from there I have had to consider the problems of his existence, and my desire to manifest those characteristics from the perspective of a voyeur, looking in on something already in motion. Similarly, the problematics tackled in Martins's ongoing series of collage-based paintings, the issue of not starting from the bottom of a surface up, but rather the walking-in-on of a painting – an image in waiting for its logic to be discovered, and its future to be collaborated with.

Like an evolutionary biologist, Martins works backwards to understand what well of information the collage stems from, and how to use that information of a grammar of the image (a genetic structure) of how to predict the image's future. Plant Strategies, a sub-discipline of evolutionary botany, can refer to a number of aspects of plant life wherein an organism needs to make decisions that weigh in the cost of survival. When we acknowledge that plants make trade-offs and decisions, then we must factor into account that they are weighing between opposing necessities, wherein the option left unattended becomes the excess of that which is chosen. It becomes the desire as opposed to the need, but what if the plant chooses wrong? What if, instead of allocating cells and energy to fighting an infection or healing branches that are being predated upon, it chooses to grow instead and stretches itself too thin? In this case, the categorical boundaries between necessity and desire collapse and appearance becomes ontology, and the pursuit of an excessive necessity turns that which was considered frivolous or profligate by its prior exclusion into a dream that would have been worth pursuing. I have no reason to believe



Eye Spots 1, 2019. Oil on inkjet printed cotton/linen, 48 x 32 inches.

plants cannot feel regret – a regret to have made itself stronger, a regret to have bloomed and been promiscuous, a regret to have appeared bigger and so on and so forth. In short, plants too can feel the urge to be a blue zebra, to be something else.

Over a phone call Jordan Martins told me, “I’m trying to give my paintings permission to be promiscuous, or myself permission to be promiscuous with my paintings.” Martins’s surfaces pursue that which is desired, and to conflate that desire as the necessary

ground on which to develop a given set of work allows for a type of painting whose value is invested in the decisions that are pursued between desire and necessity. Through metaphor Martins’s work asks the same question that plants ask themselves – how should I appear so that I might touch something, or something may want to touch me? And on a literal level, the photo-collaged grounds of several of the images repeat, revealing almost a shared genealogy or phenotypical affiliation between works illustrating something akin to Augustinian friar and father of much of the scientific laws of heredity Gregor Mendel’s early experimentation with pea plants and cross pollination. Flowers have to bloom and hope their colors are seductive enough to attract pollinators, or in the case of insectivorous plants: food, recalling the words of Mendel’s fellow countryman Milan Kundera in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: “What is flirtation? One might say that it is behavior leading another to believe that sexual intimacy is possible, while preventing that possibility from becoming a certainty. In other words, flirting is a promise of sexual intercourse without a guarantee.”

Of course, flirtation and eroticism are urgent forms of performances by many living things, but they needn’t be exclusively conflated with sexuality. The promiscuity that Martins works through these paintings operates as a metaphor of course, and when promises and guarantees are differentiated from one another we understand that the difference between the two is hope. A guarantee is a structural figure of a given outcome; it is part of the architecture of a subjunctive future without which that future ceases to be. A guarantee can never be truly removed from its given scenario without the guarantor being revealed to have been a promisor in masquerade the entire time. The ways in which Martins develops the according surfaces of each painting masquerades him as the strategizing plant – where to apply the requisite resources (paint, cells, sugar, time, money). Making the finished image become the product of a desire pursued and fulfilled. I find that Martins’s work celebrates our impulse to be profligate without confusing it with obscenity, keeping them promiscuous but never pornographic, and calling to mind the charged, but chaste eroticism of Alain Delon and Monica Vitti’s kiss through the window in Antonioni’s 1962 film *L’Eclisse*. Should sadness have no end, as Antonio Carlos Jobim proposes, then to masquerade is to strategize in favor of frivolity and the dreams inherent in its pursuit. These are paintings of Martins’s plant strategies, his colorful blooms and sinewy vines. This is his “Blue Zebra moment.” Happiness, yes.



Oxbow 8, 2019 (detail). Oil on inkjet printed cotton/linen, 48 x 32 inches.

Gareth Kaye is a Chicago-based artist, curator, writer and florist. He holds a B.F.A. in Photography and minor in Art History from DePaul University. He is the co-founder and director of Apparatus Projects, a curatorial and publishing project with Julian Van Der Moere, Annie Zidek, Sophie Bell and Josee Langeness. His work has been shown at the DePaul Art Museum, Zakaib Gallery, and UIC. His work has been published by the SEEN, and Chicago Artist Writers. He has curated exhibitions at Apparatus Projects, and ADDS DONNA. He is six-feet, nine inches, and is afraid of heights.

Jordan Martins is a Chicago-based visual artist, curator, and educator. He received his MFA in visual arts from the Universidade Federal da Bahia in Salvador, Brazil in 2007, and is a lecturer at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and North Park University. He is the executive director of Comfort Station, a multi-disciplinary art space in Chicago. Martins' visual work is based in collage processes, including painting, photography, video and installation, and he has exhibited nationally and internationally. His work has been featured in exhibitions at The Mission, Evanston Art Center, LVL3, The Franklin, The Museu de Arte da Bahia, Goldfinch, and Experimental Sound Studio. He was a resident in the Chicago Artists Coalition's HATCH program in 2013. Martins is co-director of the Perto da Lá, a biennial multi-disciplinary art event with international artists in Salvador, Brazil.

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*Front Cover: *Oxbow 6, 2019 (detail). Oil on inkjet printed cotton/linen, 48 x 32 inches.*

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