

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Coline Milliard, 'Serial Collector: Artist Alexandre da Cunha on Taste, Gentrification, and the Poetics of Concrete Mixers', *ArtInfo*, September 4, 2012

Rio-born, London-based artist Alexandre da Cunha has a unique knack for turning banal objects into intriguing and poetical visual statements. In his hands, a parrot-printed beach towel stands as a flag for a fantasy faraway (and a tongue-in-cheek critique of the West's craving for exoticism); coconuts are given a Brancusian air, and deckchair canvases pose as Buren-like geometrical abstractions.

In his latest solo show, currently held over Thomas Dane Gallery's two spaces in St James's, da Cunha continues his knowing splicing of the high and low with a series of canvases kitted out with protruding straw hats, and emptied concrete mixer drums displayed on plinths like ancient artefacts. Just before rushing back to Brazil to install his contribution to the forthcoming São Paulo Biennial, da Cunha discussed his latest series of works with ARTINFO UK.

You've long been working with mundane objects. What attracts you to the idea of the everyday? I've never considered myself as a maker. I see my practice more as the one of somebody who is surrounded by stuff that exists - I just place them in a different way to make the viewer possibly aware of the use of those objects in everyday life. It's almost as if they were words, ready, and I just re-arrange them.

How did you start on your hat "paintings," which combine vibrant monochromes and straw hats - or sometimes just a piece of hat - sawn onto the canvases?

Collecting is very much part of my processes. Often I start collecting stuff not knowing if they are going to become works or not. I started collecting these massive hats because I was really intrigued by their forms, and the way they were so stupid and silly. I was initially thinking of making a sculpture that could be folded into different shapes. Because of that, I started gathering hats, editing them, and separating them in different categories, according to colours, and places where they come from - which is how it works with many objects.

What's particularly striking in this series - and in most of your production - is the way you use items that can be considered as kitsch to create an elegant, minimal aesthetic. This body of work has clear links with the history of geometrical abstraction, both in the West and in Brazil with neoconcretismo, for example.

With these found objects, and especially the ones that you call "kitsch," I'm always very careful to avoid making the work sound like a comment on someone else's taste. My approach to these items comes through shapes, and colours - and although I am interested in their cultural use and the narrative that they have, I treat them as if they were pure shapes. Very often when I make a piece, I

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have quite classical references. With these pots, the labour they refer to is not very nice: it's rough, and ugly. I tried to treat them to pull some beauty, or elegance, out of them.

Shown on plinths, these concrete mixer drums have something of the archaeological artefact. Was that something you had in mind from the start?

Yes. Before I did this work, I was taking a lot of pictures of cement mixers, and people using them. Going from home to the studio, I could see more and more developments, and people building houses. I also like the way this is really accessible. It's a small, portable concrete mixer that pretty much everyone can use. That idea of a very accessible interference with architecture is something I was interested in.

I initially collected a lot of images of those objects, and I haven't managed to do anything with the images, but I was intrigued by their use. It's a reminder of something that is happening around you, gentrification, etc. I also like that conversation between the idea of ruins and archaeological sites and something which is happening now. It's almost as if we were talking about some ancient civilization but we are living in that civilization now.

Could you tell me about your title?

The title "Full Catastrophe" was taken from a film, "Zorba the Greek." When I was making the drums, I was watching this film and at some point the main character talks to the other guy who is telling him that he's not a proper man, or whatever - and he answers by saying: "I am a proper man, I have a house, I have a wife, I have kids: the full catastrophe." I was thinking about those things, in relation to gentrification, renovation, people buying new houses, or expanding their flats. Visually the pots have this look of being like fragments, or parts of a destroyed site or something. They are containers: some have something inside and some are empty. I like the idea that the word "full" also refers to volume - so it became the title of the works, and the title of the show.

"Alexandre da Cunha, Full Catastrophe," August 31 - October 3, 2012, Thomas Dane Gallery, London