

mission failed,

says a note written in between two fragments of a drawing made in Cruzeiro do Sul , Acre. What did he mean, or rather, what did he want to remember, the artist-cum-traveler Virgilio Neto when he wrote those words? Impossible to know for sure, because it is the very nature of his work to accumulate small, independent pieces on the same sheet of paper that gradually become the mapping of ideas had over a given interval of time, in a certain place, with particular state of mind. Virgilio Neto created hundreds of such papers, which, despite their affinity to cartography, are closer to the scrawling, confused portolan charts used by navigators to take note of their courses than the simple and static pages of school atlases.

Still, it is in our character to search for meanings and narratives in all the events we encounter. Why not do it with a note scribbled in the humid heat of a small big city (only 80,000 inhabitants and the second largest in the state of Acre) and, moreover, named after a constellation that can be seen only in the southern hemisphere of the planet? The conquest of the interior of Brazil is a promise as ancient as its “discovery”, the result of the assumption that no autochthonous civilization should arise from there, but rather it should be implemented by a wave of colonial occupation that would overflow from the edge of the Atlantic Ocean and would leak into the midwest and north of Brazil. In this story, the Amazon rainforest, with its generous quantity of water and woods, were always more resistant than the cerrado. Instead of the immensity of a sky without obstacles, there was a densely-filled area without gaps. If there was ever the expectation of building a mirror of European cities in the heart of the jungle, the interior of Acre represents the pinnacle of a heralded failure.

Cruzeiro do Sul (the Southern Cross), the constellation, is one of the metaphors for the pilot plan of Brasília, the city where Virgilio Neto, originally from Goiás, graduated as an artist. Cruzeiro do Sul, the city, is a territory opposite of the planned modernist city. Thus, even if unintentionally, the artist’s move to the north created a metaphor of the failure of reason, logic and modern calculations. Mission failed .

They say, in other parts of Brazil, that Brasilia is a city that makes it difficult for its inhabitants to create anchors of belonging and presence. That may be so for tourists who express wonder at the condensed syntax of the city. The work of Virgilio reveals something a bit different: Brasilia’s plan was designed into him and he carries it around, making him, inalienably, a foreigner who needs shortcuts – handdrawn – to connect to the new places he inhabits.

The attempt in the exhibition Ausente Presente (Absent Present) is to emphasize the moments in which the artist’s condition as a Traveler functions as a protoscientific method of connection to the places, its territories and cultures, perfecting its pitch through his note-taking, his short traces, pens, paints, crayons and varied papers. Berlin (Germany), Banff (Canada) and the aforementioned Cruzeiro do Sul are the three mirror images of Brasilia that were covered and recorded. Of these, the most recent was what led to the understanding and formation of the series. At the foot of Tunnel Mountain in Banff, Virgilio Neto perceived the immensity of the deep strangeness he felt as he drew. It is so natural, that only at the last stop does the traveler understand the journey that he had been on, made clear due to an unusual characteristic of Canadian culture that embraces the constant reminder of a massive and potentially hostile landscape to those who do not know how to traverse it.

Before the works presented here, the eye flows from a river to a snake, from groupings of people to mountains, from a collision of the bodies of two athletes to the interior of a museum - varying emphases in the sea of images in the drawings, which are selected and arranged so as to suggest typologies, analyses and syntheses. Instead of drifting thought and visual wandering that are easily associated with the map-drawings of Virgilio Neto, here he adopted the attentive posture and slowness of researchers. But beware, this does not mean that the dispersed and fragmented drawings of the artist give themselves completely to the editing guidelines applied to them. His line is too fickle for that. The gap between words and drawings is too obvious to be ignored. And, most importantly, the occupation of the paper and the density of the lines and the fields of color are always a testament to an intuitive attention to the composition of the drawing, which does not allow the images to hollow out to some form of scientific objectivity. That the eye may, therefore, navigate between islands of images and dock itself in their narratives, all the while suspicious of any certainty about their typological statements - as, indeed, one ought to be with all things.

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