

Independent

Paolo Salvador: Indigenous Identities in the Natural World

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There is a Peruvian legend about the origin of an island. A mother and daughter run toward the ocean and horizon and get transformed into a body of land. That kind of poetic relationship to nature and myth is the emotional and aesthetic source material for the paintings of Paolo Salvador. Represented by Peres Projects, the 2019 Slade graduate's work has emerged a perfect fit for the post-pandemic search for artwork that explores ideas around beauty, the natural world and indigenous identity.

Salvador's process is instinctive. "My work is very intuitive and emotional," he explains. Yet he is nonetheless methodical and even traditional. He conceives his paintings in writing, working on groups of paintings concurrently. Then he experiments with figurative pose and gesture in life drawing classes. These initial drawings are developed into composition and then he approaches a canvas. "From this moment things can either be super controlled or be chaotic. It feels like a sort of trance where the materials and painting become a sensitive object. All future decisions come from my daily encounters and reflections on moments from my life," the artist notes.

The artist's indigenous Quechua identity – one of a broad selection of Andean and Amazonian peoples in Peru – has strongly informed his approach to art. "Understanding and constructing identity is embedded into my practice, a process of discovering and rediscovering that is implicated in a lot of the work," Salvador notes. "I

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grew up in the 90s, when Peru had just come out of a period of terrorist conflict and had entered into a decade of dictatorship that distorted realities and culture. It was then followed by the emergence of the internet and globalization. These experiences have had a huge impact on how people engage with their culture. The crisis made thousands of Peruvians migrate to find a better future. But it has also created a new sort of folklore, which draws from older histories.” The artist began to travel around Peru and engaging with traditions and the Andean and Amazonian perception of the universe – what the artist calls *comosvision*. “Nature is part of a unit (culture, economy, society, religion), they respect and coexist with it, and it is also sacred to them. But a lot of that knowledge has been oppressed.”



Narrative and myth lead his work. His figurative paintings connect to pre-colonial South American legend and oral history. Passing stories down through generations was a way to preserve culture, and something the artist experience from his grandparents, religious schools and local people. “These stories, which lack time or location, allow you to fill in the details, and because figurative painting can be both magical and realistic, I can easily free my imagination to fill in that empty space.”

Salvador trained in Lima, in an art school established by an Austrian artist in the 1950s. “It was in many ways a very traditional program which focused on the study of light and colour, heavily rooted in western art history and methodology. Over the course of the 6 year BA program, we were there practically every day for the whole day, with theoretical courses in the morning, art training (painting, sculpture, design) during the day and then at night we had life drawing sessions.” Two years after graduating, he moved to London to do his MA, deconstructing his approach and rethinking art. “The Slade really allowed me the opportunity to explore my practice in a different way, to deconstruct my beliefs and mannerisms and to re-learn how to look at art. Living away from Peru has also helped me to reflect on my identity, culture and how I have been engaging with it.”

Obsessed with animals since childhood, Salvador attended a school for 11 years which had a zoo breeding endangered species. “My memories of all the different birdsongs in the morning, or the birds flying into our classroom and escaping from their designated areas, are unforgettable experiences,” he recalls. “I’ve been attacked by vicuñas, pursued by paujils and swam with bufeos.” He learnt to model human and animal figures through anatomy training, which grew into working with source imagery from internet. The physicality of the figures he depicts is vital to unpicking the meaning within his works. “Those postures, attitudes, or even fast movement potentially have countless symbolic meanings.”

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Salvador's work is brimming in symbolism, arguably reflecting the early 20th century neo-expressionist artists as much as Peruvian cultural history. The artist is also drawn towards a fantastic, dream-like possibilities of symbiotic human-animal relationships. "These animals become totems, they represent knowledge, history, tradition, ferocity, wisdom, healing, protection and stability," the artist points out. His figures ride white and black jaguars, carry fox-like animals on their shoulders, sing and howl with dogs. Large cats are the most repeated motif. They seem to reflect some sense of community or collectivistic idea.



It is interesting that from a distance, in Europe, Paolo has become increasingly drawn to the dream-like stories and myths of Peru. His subjects are resistant to the legacy of colonialisation in some way. "There are still strong ancient beliefs that still exist from before Spanish colonisation. They had to merge it with religion in order to change peoples beliefs, by creating a syncretic hybrid belief system. I find it really interesting to try to identify, break down and unravel those lost meanings," he observes. The crosses on every major hill in Lima, a reminder of both Catholicism and the indigenous reverence to the apu.

The colours and materiality of Salvador's clay pigments has a very specific effect. He discovered Kremer Pigmente raw materials at the Slade. Pigments, primers, binders are ongoing areas of research. "I hope the viewers experience it as a tactile form. Every pigment has a particular behaviour once it binds with an oil. I respect the nature of each mineral and the role that it plays on the canvas in terms of colour and material," the artist muses. He uses clay-based pigment for the skin of his characters. humid grey sky in Lima, London or Berlin. There is a humid haze to his spaces.

There is something slowed down and atmospheric in Paolo's work. "I am interested in how we perceive the world, and how art can act as a mirror for our realities. Perhaps due to the time we live in, there are many impulses that can distract us from the real experience." Salvador invites his viewers, and himself, to cry and laugh in front of his large canvases. This is work that allows emotions and questions to rise up.