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A vista particular (The Private View)

Ricardo Lísias

Translated by Zoë Perry

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In which we learn about the artist, José de Arariboia, and his work. Two supporting characters make an appearance: Donatella, an art dealer, and Biribó, a drug dealer. We are told that Arariboia is acting more distracted than usual. An incident is announced, but it will occur only in the second chapter, illustrating our narrator's excitement. Night falls in Rio de Janeiro.

I

José de Arariboia strolls slowly down the street and, looking both ways before crossing, decides to wait on the corner. The light cycles two or three times between red and green. He would rather stand there and watch the storefronts. José de Arariboia has walked this neighborhood for many years. He's always lived in Rio de Janeiro, in Copacabana, but each day he uncovers some new detail in the area's architecture, a dash of artlessness in an advertisement, a little something that exposes unrealized possibility. Perhaps this is Rio's key feature: an incomplete beauty. A color we never noticed.

If we're going to define José de Arariboia, he is this quiet, unruffled fellow who's attentive to details and wedded to urban living. An artist inextricably linked to the subject of big cities, a critic once wrote. He was not overjoyed by the review. Exaggerated enthusiasm, the kind you can see on a man's face, is not a typical reaction from him. Not to imply any interest apart from that of common courtesy, José de Arariboia thanked the critic in a quick email, saying he agreed with the words he'd just read. Let's try to grab a coffee sometime.

II

Turning 35 just one month ago, José de Arariboia has already developed a singular body of work, with his own trademarks and an awareness of his intentions and limits. Another critic has stated that he is an artist with soft strokes, gentle lines, and muted colors, employed with plenty of personality in his medium, which clashes with his recurring theme, the big city. In another brief, polite e-mail, Arariboia expressed his thanks for the generosity of the review. Thank you.

For his age, he'd already amassed a fair number of reviews and critiques, though he had not yet been the subject of any more intensive study. His gallerist, in the meeting they'd had that same afternoon, explained that what he lacked was a solo catalogue. Such a catalogue (particularly its commissioned introduction), would take his work to a new level. And that's not all, Donatella went on, offering him another cup of tea. Santander has already agreed to sponsor the catalogue, in exchange for just two paintings. Reserved as always, Arariboia expressed his gratitude, confirmed he would sort out the details in the days to come, and declined more tea. It's getting dark and he intends to walk home. It's a nice way to unwind, Donatella agrees, walking him to the door.

III

Anyone who saw that man walking would never guess he'd just heard such good news. You would never believe from his long face and absentminded footsteps that virtually all of José de Arariboia's dreams were about to come true. His first solo exhibition will be held at the Rio de Janeiro Museum of Art, strategically around the same time Georges Didi-Huberman is scheduled to give a series of lectures in the building's auditorium. The idea is to snag an introduction for the catalogue from Didi-Huberman himself. Donatella sees no reason for the famous French intellectual to refuse. Before long he'll be at the Centre Pompidou.

At the corner of Sá Ferreira with Our Lady of Copacabana, a part of the city that moves José de Arariboia to such an extent it appears in many of his paintings, the artist does not draw anyone's attention. Only the realtor, in front of a real estate agency, notices him stopped there at the light, not crossing the street. The light has already cycled through green and red three or four times. Five, when a doorman decides to ask if everything's all right. Arariboia answers with a bashful wave (he never smiles because of the dark stains on his front teeth), turns around, and decides to go down Sá Ferreira.

IV

It took awhile for the realtor to locate in his memory the owner of that face: José de Arariboia, the boy who likes to paint and is always mooning around the neighborhood. The owner of the dry cleaners next door motions with his neck as he's shutting down the shop and nonchalantly mentions that he knows him. Isn't that the banker's son? That's him, with that same old long face.

In the area for nearly fifty years now, the two like to have a beer before going home. Proud of their own memories, they discuss little events from the street's history, reminisce about its illustrious inhabitants and colorful characters, and some times dramatically recount some more unpleasant incident, particularly when someone else comes over to join them. Rio de Janeiro's known violence never crosses their lips. They make a point of showing they're of a different generation. Their stories don't include the beach, either. Rio's urban fauna is what interests them.

Those who know José de Arariboia know he lives in the direction opposite the one he took tonight. So far no one has noticed him walking toward Pavão-Pavãozinho. At this time of night, the entrance to the favela is bustling.

V

He's a little more distracted than usual, the realtor will conclude, after watching the clip from the YouTube video that will play back part of Arariboia's journey between Sá Ferreira and the moment he gets lost inside Pavão-Pavãozinho. But that's a few days away still. The first video, however, everyone will watch later that very night. Except for its protagonist, who will only find out what's going on the next day.

The narrative is moving faster than José de Arariboia's feet. Calm, he seems to notice every detail of the trade surrounding the entrance to the favela, the people's faces, and the filthy exterior of the building where he stopped. The condominium's security camera is clearly recording his face, which is great for YouTube. Everyone will agree, after watching the video, that he does not appear impaired. A bit more distracted than usual, for sure. José has always been a little spacey, one of his cousins will say at a family gathering after watching the video, well aware his uncle would never miss an opportunity to say all artists are like that.

I've distanced myself from my protagonist once again: he is not anxious in the least.

[...]

In which, accused of giving away the story, I alter (against my will) my role and will now address a few sub-plots. The main one will be that of Marina dalla Donatella.

Ever since she ended their working relationship, Marina has been unable to let go of Zé Arariba. She checks his Facebook profile five or six times a day, then types his name into Google and pores over each article. So she found it very strange to read he would continue his work using the favela as his medium. Good lord, painting the favela different colors has already been done by so many artists. Is no one advising this kid?

[...]

Encouraged by the results, Arariba had drawn up a new map within two days, with the four areas where the artwork would be installed. Biribó thought it was great and asked for a copy. I'll get my men out of the way. Absolutely not, Arariba replied, vehement, then stroked his hair. The favela has to stay exactly as it is. And the cops have to stop in the same place they always do. In area 2, there will be a label for the police cruiser that usually parks there in the middle of the night to collect their cut. Biribó did not disagree. His three dimples in plain view, he requested a few more days to set up the videos that would be rolling at the exhibition opening. The element of surprise is important for an artist.

It didn't take long, however, for the first problem to rear its head: Pê, the new head of security, explained that his men couldn't get used to the black suits. They're really hot and you can't move around right. Arariba let them all wear the same t-shirts as the guides. But we can't go around handing them out to everybody up here, or the visitors will think everybody's a guide. Speaking of which, training has already begun: there are two shifts of eight teams of high school students getting ready to explain each of the labels Arariba will start putting up on Monday.

VI

1. Family with one son in the drug trade and another in school.

human beings
public collection, 2016.

2. How come it doesn't collapse?

masonry
public collection, 2016.

3. *Aedes aegypti* Farm

mosquito larvae
public collection, 2016.

4. Men of the drug trade with AK 47 rifles

human beings
private collection, 2016.

VII

1. Arms Depot (some for military use only)

firearms

private collection, 2016.

2. Crack house

Human beings and drugs

private collection, 2016.

3. Mother killed herself after police murdered her son (they lived here)

masonry

public collection, 2016.

4. Bazaar

all kinds of things for sale

private collection, 2016.

VIII

1. Evangelical Church with tithe
masonry and tithe
private collection, 2016.

2. Nowadays they've even got plasma TVs in the favela
Plasma TV
private collection, 2016.

3. Children running, like anywhere else in the world
children
public collection, 2016.

4. Drug runners
adolescents
private collection, 2016.

IX

1. So that's what it's like in the favela?

tourists

public collection, 2016.

2. Place where the police take their cut

deserted lot

public collection, 2016.

3. Library where poetry workshops are held

books and poet

public collection, 2016.

4. Beautiful view over Rio de Janeiro

Rio de Janeiro

public collection, 2016.

X

The Pavão-Pavãozinho Community Residents' Association and the artist Zé Arariba
cordially invite you to attend the opening of the exhibition:

COMUNIDADE BRAVA: TURISMO BRASIL

May 24, 2016, 7 pm

RSVP: bravabrasil@gmail.com

In which, outraged, I retreat.

I

The opening of *Comunidade Brava: Turismo Brasil* was a success. True, the invited guests did not show up. But when he noticed a small crowd wanting to go up to the favela, Biribó talked to Arariba and the two, for different reasons, saw no problems. The guides began handing out maps to whoever asked, with or without an invitation. Some people were entertained by the works. Most, however, glanced at one or two labels, thought they were weird, funny, or stupid and went off to hang out in the favela. Biribó had asked his men not to get carried away, to provide whatever merchandise visitors asked for, and even to curb any form of violence. Though it was all still new, everything worked out well. As the press reported the following day, no incidents were recorded in the favela during the opening. On the contrary, the atmosphere was cheerful, playful, and matched the image that the city of Rio de Janeiro attempts to sell to the world. Anyone who saw the artist Zé Arariba could see the contentment in his watchful, bright eyes, even though at no point did he smile or was friendly to someone. He also refused to give interviews.

II

From the outset, overall reception for *Comunidade Brava: Turismo Brasil* was also very good. Initial write-ups highlighted the unusualness of the situation, the artist's attentive eye, his ability to capture the uniqueness of the space, the transformation of sad structures into a convivial space, full of possibilities, and turning that rich slice of reality into some sort of collective enchantment. None of this, obviously, has anything to do with the title of the exhibition, much less with what the artist intended, but these first reactions left him pleased.

Once again social media erupted. The name José de Arariboia, now Zé Arariba, was again the topic of conversation everywhere. Many people say he's just another government straw-man, created to draw the limelight and make the media forget about the corruption scandals. Most, however, drew daggers over a question that arose at the time of his nude sashay to the beach: are we in the presence of an innovative artist or a marketing genius? Opinions were expressed, as always, through memes, spats, links, videos, and long-winded texts full of quotes. As before, our artist decided to keep off the internet.

III

For the first few weeks, *Comunidade Brava* was all over the news. Teams from CNN and RAI went up into the favela to feature some of the artwork. Both networks paused at *Family with one son in the drug trade and another in school* and *Place where the police take their cut*. The reporter from RAI also devoted a few minutes to *Nowadays they've even got plasma TVs in the favela*. Biribó was upset to learn the gringos weren't interested in his videos. On Wednesday, however, the nightly news devoted an entire segment to the exhibition. This time the drug dealer/videographer was able to talk about his creative process. For Brazil's largest television network, however, the most remarkable piece by Zé Arariba was *Aedes aegypti Farm. How come it doesn't collapse?* also caught their eye. Claiming exhaustion, Arariba again refused to give interviews. Biribó is taking care of that part.

With all this buzz, gallery owners, critics, and professors felt safer going into the favelas. Even so, they're arranging to go in groups. Few are brave enough to take their good cameras. Nowadays any old cell phone will do the job. As the guides explained the impressive *Mother killed herself after the police killed her son (they lived here)*, a businessman from São Paulo noticed the excitement on the foreigners' faces in the van.

The above extract was translated by Zoë Perry

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