

Press Release

José Antonio da Silva

Frieze Masters

9 - 13 October 2024



Jóse Antonio da Silva, *Queimada [Burned]*, 1971

At Frieze Masters 2024, Cecilia Brunson Projects presents the paintings of José Antonio da Silva (1909-1996, Brazil) in the *Spotlight* section, curated by Valerie Cassel Oliver, which seeks to foreground pioneers of the 20th century. This is the first UK presentation of the artist, whose position at the foundations of Brazilian modernism has long been overlooked, and precedes his first international solo exhibition, touring institutions in France and Brazil in 2025.

An eccentric and charismatic figure with a distinct vision, Silva was the first self-taught artist from Brazil's rural, labouring classes to have a marked impact on the nation's modern artistic identity. Silva began his career as a painter only at the age of 37, before this working as a labourer in cotton, sugar and coffee plantations, cattle farms and railroads. The agricultural landscape prevails as his most captivating subject, with his characteristic use of perspective and high horizon lines bringing focus to the earth, both a land of riches and one forever reshaped and exploited by these industries.

Silva's paintings were included in the first display at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP), built to give a home to Latin American art that would rival the museums of Europe. From 1947, his

work was displayed here alongside that of Van Gogh, Cézanne, Matisse and Picasso. Silva represented Brazil at the 1952 and 1966 Venice Biennales, and his influence on key players in Brazil's art world is known; the master painter Alfredo Volpi had Silva's work hanging in his studio, and the influential critic Theon Spanudis was one of his major collectors.

This was a period of richly diverse and collaborative artistic production in Brazil, the fusion of US-imported abstraction and local visual languages advancing a distinctly Brazilian pathway within modern art. However, the contribution of self-taught artists to these developments has not received the same international critical attention as the movements focused amongst those educated at Rio and São Paulo's art institutions.

Silva's position speaks to a wider discourse surrounding the need to recentre self-taught artists, whose particular sensibilities and undiluted vision have contributed indelibly to the diversity of artistic movements across the globe. Silva embodies a Brazil beyond the wealth of the cities, one saturated with the colours of nature, of red soil and verdant fields, and rich in spirit.

Who doesn't know Silva? Silva is me. Silva is the rural life. Silva is the country life. Silva is the beauty of these green fields ... This is my painting! This is my religion! This is God! Nature is God! This is the wonder that nature itself has created, to enrich, to give joy, wisdom, feeling, reason to those who are the true artists ... Nature is with me and I am with nature. Nature is my god and I am Silva.¹

¹ 'Who Doesn't Know Silva?' Documentary, produced by Carlos Augusto Calil, 1979.

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