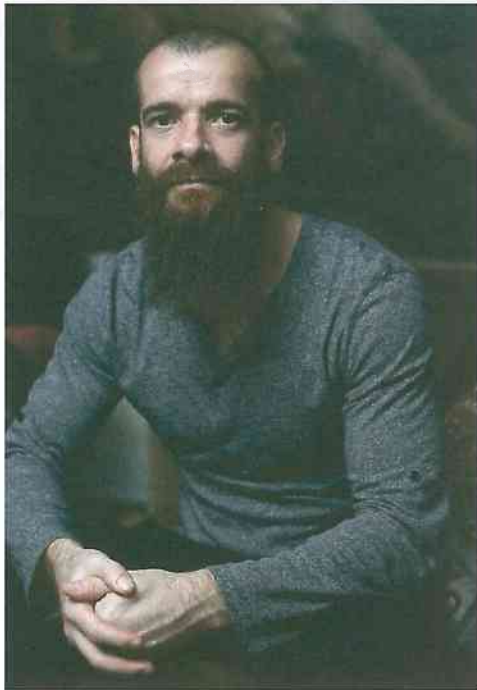


César Santos

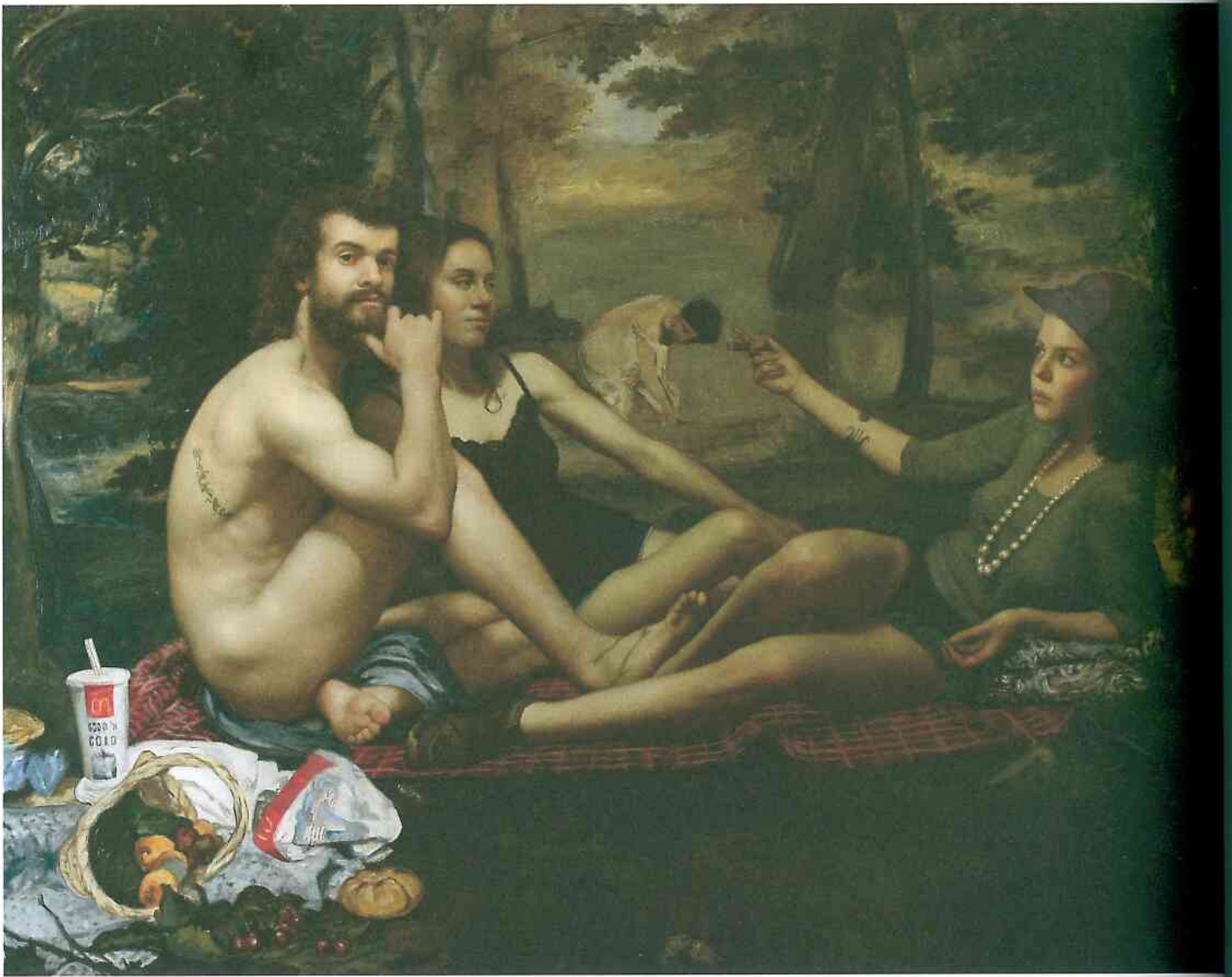
Old Masters New Brushes

*Does the history of art repeat itself? In 1512 Michelangelo did something unprecedented on the ceiling of Sistine Chapel. It was the birth of **The Creation of Adam**, probably the most important piece in the history of the human creative skill. The most replicated piece in history too. After more than five hundred years, the moment of two fingers almost touching reappears. This time it's not another poor reproduction found at a local tobacco shop next to fake Burberry print umbrellas and eclectic scarfs decorated with the London Eye and the Pisa tower. This time it's oil on canvas, 53 x 34 inches big. The air feels as electric as in the original, and it's going to explode out of the canvas anytime. God is statuesque and pale as he has to be but, where is Adam? Instead a young, blond, naked woman with rosy nipples is sitting on a leather armchair that was in fashion at dentist waiting rooms some time ago. She stretches her creamy body and a pipe is hanging in the air, right next to her lips. The pipe's uncanny resemblance to its famous ancestor, René Magritte's **Ceci n'est pas une pipe**, makes everything more confusing. It's **Re-Creation**, a painting by César Santos.*

Words by Liucija Adomaite
Portrait by Jason Hanson



César is a man of contrasts. He's a sports enthusiast, a scholar of Realist and Classical painting trained both in a contemporary art school in the United States and a classical academy of Fine Arts in Florence. After all, he is a Cuban living in Miami. César's canvases are full of contrasts, too. He travels back in history – anywhere from Renaissance to Modernism – takes the elements he wants and brings them back to do what he wants. Essentially, the juxtaposition of disconnected details opens the way to a whole new perspective on how we perceive the state of modernity. Syncretism is the magic word to name it when the time, the idea, or the brushstroke are no longer a barrier.



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Liucija Adomaite: What did you do today, boxing or painting?

César Santos: Actually I've just finished a painting so from now on I'll probably be training. I don't train boxing as much anymore, I'm more into cross-fit now. I still do a lot of punching back though. I've never lost an official boxing fight, but it was at a very low level. I might not be a world champion, because I never got to do it seriously, but I got a gold medal in Europe in 2008 and it was the first fight that I won.

LA: One wouldn't normally imagine a painter wearing red fighting gloves. There's a great contrast between these two practices. Do sports and arts, after all, have something in common?

CS: They have me in common (laughs). I can definitely see similarities. Painting is kind of competitive. Honestly, people don't really need it and in a way you have to be out there constantly measuring your opponent, which is the art world, and see how you can strike.

LA: When I was a kid I wanted to be a rock star, but my family got me into karate. Bible says, "Man cannot live by bread alone." In Lithuania we have a saying that goes, "You won't get bread from art." What was your upbringing like? Did your parents ever try to put you into sports so that you'd have more decent, so-called proper career?

CS: Now that you said that, this is the similarity to boxing – if you are not one of the best, you won't make a living. Even for a boxer it isn't a very profitable career. As a painter, you have to be the best too. It's not like a lawyer that can work here and there, or a doctor that everybody needs. Since I grew up so poor, I went with the American idea. As soon as I got into America, I knew that I had to follow what I love, without thinking if it's a trend or if it gives me money. I believed that when you provide a service, the free market responds with money for you. My mum and my dad let me go with it, they didn't force me. The rest of my family made a bit of fun of it, saying "Oh, so you are an artist?" But that's okay.

LA: Aren't you the one first artists who applied the syncretism term to the artistic practice?

CS: Yes, I think so. I've seen others using it, but not as constant.

LA: Syncretism is a melting process of different approaches, styles, ideas. Essentially it transfers the information from a particular subject and puts it in another particular subject. However, before this, the clash of opposites has to emerge. What interests me is, what happens at this moment of clash? Maybe a new form of art is born? Some sort of creative bio-product that is completely out of this world, something that wasn't there before?

CS: More than a new form of art, I'd say a new version of art. It is hard to invent something new and I never did it on purpose, but I realized that just being honest and responding to my time, I have an advantage that none of the masters had. They cannot live my time. If I just present things that are unique about my time, and I try to be the best in representing it, then I have that advantage immediately. It allows me to create something new that hasn't been done before. I was able to represent different periods of art and have a dialogue within them in one canvas for the first time – it was something that nobody really did before, because everybody belongs to only one particular period.

LA: In that case, would you consider yourself superior to them?

CS: I'd say that I'm more confused.

LA: It might seem that syncretism could also be used as an alternative method to make a collage. Putting all those different elements from various artistic periods onto a canvas surface can easily be misinterpreted as eclecticism.

CS: Yes. Syncretism is different from eclecticism. I'm not just using different aspects of painting or different acclimations of painting just because I need them, like in an eclecticism, just to use them. My aim is to represent everything as honestly as it were originally represented. Let's say, if I use a classical figure, I'm using it as pure as possible to be able to put it side by side with something contemporary that has nothing in common, in order to create a contrast for the viewer to enjoy. It's on purpose. That's the difference.

LA: In that sense, you provide the viewer with the pleasure of experiencing surreal things that otherwise wouldn't be possible in reality. You could never see McDonald's scattered around in the corner of Le



Déjeuner sur l'Herbe by Manet, or in any 19th century Impressionist work. But in your version of it, *Picnic in Central Park*, it's absolutely fine.

CS: Exactly. But maybe it would be possible if they had McDonald's at that time.

LA: Or a black man kissing Vermeer's girl with a pearl earring.

CS: That's a multicultural mix that says, "Oh, look at this pure Dutch girl, let's make it contemporary and give her all fun that she's probably missing."

LA: In another one of your works you painted yourself as a murdered French revolutionary leader, Jean-Paul Marat, from the painting by Jacques-Louis David. However, the action of Marat's death, that is you, takes place in a white cube. On the wall, there's the controversial spot painting by Damien Hirst, among others. What's the narrative here?

CS: It was a reference to how boring contemporary museums can be to the general public. It was pretty much saying, "I'm kind of bored to death" at the front desk. And this is happening with millions of dollars worth of art behind me. It's mainly supported by museums which get a lot of government funds, that don't deal with the free market.

LA: Traditional classical art is directly influenced by heroic events, historic contexts, symbolic and mythological perspectives. It has never been normally present in the domain of modern discourse. Have you ever thought that when you reinterpret the original paintings of masters they might lose their grandiose meanings? What if they're altered?



CS: I present it as a visual effect. I don't deal with the meaning of either contemporary or classical art. It is a visual syncretism. In the end it's like a game of contrast, a play.

LA: The viewer immediately notices that you are everywhere in your paintings. Do you have an urge to turn yourself into one of the characters, to be a part of the party?

CS: Well, it first implies a lack of male models (laughs). But it's also the fact that artists in general are pretty egocentric. Imagine, you're doing something in your house and once you take it out of your house you expect people to buy it for a really high price. Even with the most humble attitude you get used to your mind thinking that you're so valuable. Painting myself in those paintings is an act of immortalising myself as an artist. Many painters did that, though – Rembrandt, Caravaggio painted themselves into a lot of their compositions. I ask my wife to take a picture of me in this and that position, and I just play a role.

LA: One of the things that strike me about your paintings is the sense of playfulness, a joyful charm, the lightness of the hand. Those traits are rather unusual for the classical school of art. In your version of Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, you replaced Jesus with this young, almost naked...

CS: Model. According to the story of painting, the model comes to the studio where Rembrandt is painting and she's just showing off her tattoo and people are kind of looking at it, so that's what it is.

LA: Why did you paint the pink underwear with the Hello Kitty logo on top of her pink underwear?

CS: I did it so that people would be sure that it is happening nowadays. It's a contemporary touch of our time.

LA: Do you mean that your paintings could be mistaken for the originals? Have you ever tried to fool people that way? If people would ever get confused around this subliminal similarity with the original...

CS: No, it's not my intention to fool people in terms of who painted it. I'm just trying to be honest to those paintings. The thing is, if I'm going to talk about something, I'd better know what I'm talking about. So if I'm gonna make fun of some technique or some painter, I have to be able to have the voice backed up by my skills.

LA: So you're not being too serious.

CS: Yes. It's like The Beatles – taking art to a lighter level.

LA: You are also an artist of the realist school. Has it ever occurred to you that viewers tend to judge the quality of realistic skills by its level of pristine resemblance to a photograph?

CS: Once I painted a portrait and I posted it on Facebook. The people were going crazy about it, everyone liked it and so on. And one guy said, "I don't know why you did this, why didn't you just take a picture." And I replied to him, "Well, if I would have taken a picture, you wouldn't have commented on this." I mean, when you look at paintings from the past, they have something false about it, something cartoonish. You can tell from a distance that my paintings are just paintings.

LA: What's the reason of such artificial effect in the works of old masters?

CS: It's mainly because photography gets only the surface of things, and painters have to work on the structure of things. The moment you start painting a building, an arm or a face, you start simplifying it to the level of, "OK, so the head is egg shaped, and this part has to go dark because it's in the back." All these arbitrary decisions conceptualise the form, and you build it from the inside out.

LA: Once and for all, realistic painting was not killed by photography?

CS: I don't think it is an issue. At the beginning artists were trying to find this naturalistic expression, and suddenly camera captures stuff in front of them so easily, so they were kind of, "Oh my God!" But now the camera does the opposite of the painting. You have the whole world in front of you. With the camera you have to isolate and take everything away to be able to select the piece of nature which you have little control over, other than the subject. The lighting and everything is already there and the camera just reacts to it. For the painter, there's an opposite concept. You have nothing on the canvas, the canvas is completely blank, and you have to take things from the world, from different places, from your mind and put it on the canvas. I think they're totally different things.

LA: Regardless of the fact that you are a modern artist, you revisit Rembrandt, Calder, Velazquez, Bacon, Jacques-Louis David or Caravaggio, to name just a few, on a daily basis. Then you take the particular elements, subjects, composition, techniques from them and bring that all back to your canvas. You put it all in a very new perspective, under a whole new light. Is this a method to interpret, imitate, recycle or rescue what's been done before?

CS: The purpose is to rescue the techniques on how to represent the human form that have been developed long before us. Because even though these people had little technology compared to what we have now, they studied humanity at a different level and that aspect needs to be revived. Today people want to turn the world into a new place and kind of start it from scratch, as if we've never existed before. I don't believe that. On the contrary, when I paint I add to this reality everything that previous generations created before us.

LA: What's your view on the relevance of such revisiting? What if the content appears too outdated for our spoiled white cube audience?

CS: My goal is to motivate other artists to also try it, be-

cause it's so much fun and it's a reality. What happens to a lot of living artists is that they went through different trainings and now they're either opposing the contemporary art or opposing classical art and its training – that is happening all over the world. For example, Art Basel is all about how we live in a very flashy moment of time and people want to show off all this gold in the art world. But if you love the much more intimate part of art that is classical art, then you have to go in depth and study humanity, figure, anatomy, and combine it all. For me it is a sustainment to say that this is happening, a call to embrace everything and make it stronger, to make the art world more complete and stop playing games such as, "Oh, no, this is outdated" or, "Oh, this is the new thing."

LA: Would you call it a tribute to the old masters? Maybe even a homage?

CS: Definitely. I believe I'm kind of respecting them again. Because they were so abandoned. They were made fun of and people never questioned the value of those artists. But this is the fine art, this is our world and this is where we came from. It has incredible value but people don't study it. The fact that schools don't teach classical art and don't teach the technique shows that even teachers don't know it. They keep creating that idea that people shouldn't care about it and it is really pure ignorance.

LA: Still classical and academic painting skills are highly admired today. Don't you find it interesting? I wish to think of it as a sign that for first time we are missing real things.

CS: Well, that's the point of mastered execution. In order to be appreciated in the time of artistic abundance, the artwork has to be done at a very high level. Maybe if you were Pollock you could get away with throwing paint around. But it's not about the skill, it's about the idea. Now it is the time to show what humans are capable of in terms of technique. At least that's my goal, to get the viewer's attention visually by offering skills that are hard to see in human development. Everything that takes time to execute and develop will be appreciated in the end.

LA: Once you compared art with poetry. You said that a poet learns how to grammatically write a sentence first before making a poem. As an artist you had to learn to control tools in order to represent a thing. This is a very academic approach to creativity. On the other side there's the conceptualists, dadaists, abstractionists, the avant garde – just think about Duchamp when he took a piece of urinal to an exhibition space and named it a Fountain. Today many

still use this example as a way to illustrate the loss of traditional expectations for what goes under the label of art.

CS: Those were chaotic times of transition and experimentation. Wars and post-war eras created all this abstraction, and those were perfectly legitimate expressions. Artists tried to see beyond history, everybody was revolting against the academy and the status quo. However, as time passed, people got comfortable with their lifestyles and a lot of money came about. Collectors started appreciating all that resistance and made a big deal out of it. But now we have to rethink art constantly.

Contemporary academies tell artists what to do every time. "Oh, look, Duchamp did this and that" and they follow that conceptual idea without questioning. But what is it that I can do to create a new type of art? In my case it's easier. I just go back to history and I get whatever elements I think were strong in the arts back there. Why abandon it? Just because Duchamp and all this series of artists disregarded it or made fun of it, doesn't mean that I have to do it too. I just think it's important to question everything. And I do feel that I'm a contemporary artist especially because of that.

LA: If you had a chance to meet one of the old masters in your studio, who would it be?

CS: William Bouguereau. He is a magician to me. I made more copies of him than of any other artist and there's still some mystery left on how he managed to do some stuff.

- 1 *First Tattoo.*
- 2 *Picnic in Central Park.*
- 3 *The Master's Studio.*
- 4 *The Three Graces.*