

José Gamarra

El Teatro de la Jungla

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Press release

* *The Jungle Theater*

José Gamarra
L'Expectative, 2021 (detail)
Acrylic on canvas
150 x 150 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Xippas



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Anthological exhibition, works from 1969 to 2024

Opening on December 26, 6 pm
Curated by Manuel Neves

We must return to the forest which is the source of our words, the reliquary of the signs and forms that haunt us. Not knowing if it threatens us or is favorable to us.

— Édouard Glissant

In José Gamarra's painting *El progreso de una ayuda* (The Progress of an Aid) dating from 1969, we see a US Air Force bomber plane dropping a multitude of objects related to the war industry onto an exotic tropical landscape. The title of the painting, charged with cynicism and irony, defines its narrative tone: American foreign policy cannot dissociate progress from war. Likewise, in the work *Amigos* from 2021, a fairly recent work included in the exhibition, we observe, within a sumptuous representation of the jungle, three main figures: an animal, a human and a mythological being, and two creatures observing them. In both works the jungle is the scenery and the space where a story unfolds. In the first painting, we observe the witness and the victim of an imperialist policy, in the second — the only possible space where these beings, real and imaginary, can coexist: "The law of the jungle" and "The Jungle Book".

The second chapter of this travelling anthological exhibition by José Gamarra, first presented at Xippas Paris earlier this year, arrives in Uruguay. Entitled *The Jungle Theater* (El Teatro de la Jungla), it features works spanning the last 50 years of work of this unique artist with an outstanding selection of paintings and drawings.

José Gamarra was born in Uruguay and after living a few years in Rio de Janeiro and participating in the Venice Biennale (1964), he settled in the Paris region in the mid-60s. The first series of works created in France embraced some of the aesthetic guidelines of the Narrative Figuration group (Adami, Arroyo, Arnal, Castro, Cueco, Días, Fromanger, Rancillac, Recalcati, Telemaque). Gamarra participated for some time in the comings and goings of this heterogeneous figurative group, associated with the imagery of the media, comics and entertainment industry, which in some way embodied the highly politicized atmosphere that existed in Paris in the 60s. During the 1970s, the representation of nature and in particular the tropical jungle progressively gained more space in the artist's pictorial compositions. Entering the following decade, the representation of the jungle becomes more sophisticated on a formal level and occupies almost all the space of Gamarra's paintings.

José Gamarra's artistic project being focused on painting, but also including the practice of drawing and graphic production developed since the late 1960s, introduces the representation of the jungle or jungle as a possible scenario for human development. Jungle, forest, selva is for the artist a scene of all conflicts and all agreements, a fundamental space of human action, the primordial scenery of myth and fable, the impenetrable mystery of the unknown. In this infinite and mysterious setting, the artist presents unusual stories, where diverse characters, members of different cultures and historical periods, coexist and interact: The Pope and Superman, the Spanish conquerors of America and mythological animals, Yanomami and American marines. The jungle scenery is the witness and the victim of all these conflicts and at the same time it is a space of ontological resistance and resilience, perhaps the last possible one. Like all great creators, Gamarra's artistic project is not only contemporary because of its relevance and creative originality, but also because it continues to project images that reveal fundamental issues and questions.

Nature, culture, society and politics, the geography where life originates, the living space of entropy and the home of negentropy, this fragile and at the same time resistant space is perhaps the last limit that nature offers to the human being and his culture. The last border.

– Manuel Neves

José Gamarra is one of the most important artists of Uruguayan origin. Born in 1934 in Tacuarembó (Uruguay), he lives and works since 1963 in Arcueil, France, and has acquired an international reputation.

At the age of 16, he participated in the National Salons, then entered the Fine Arts School of Montevideo where he studied painting and engraving. In 1959, he obtained a scholarship from Itamarati, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brazil, to study engraving at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro with Johnny Friedlaender, and painting at the Institute of Fine Arts in Praia Vermelha with Iberé Camargo.

After a year in Rio, he was appointed professor of painting and fresco at the Alvares Penteado Foundation in Sao Paulo. The four years he lived in Brazil (1959-1963) were fundamental in his artistic consolidation. In 1962, he participated in the III Biennial of Young Painters of Montevideo and the III Biennial of Young Painters of Paris, where he won the painting prize and a scholarship from the French government.

His curiosity and the need to see original works led him to Europe. The European experience would be fundamental from the moment he arrived in France in 1963. The artists in Uruguay were influenced by the Torres García school, a very rigid school with a dark palette. "In Europe, I saw the explosion of colors," says Gamarra.

In Paris, he found another creative dynamic, his view of the American continent changed,

he observed and penetrated Latin American nature. The painter evokes various eras, events, characters and objects: conquerors of the discovery of America, indigenous people, the armed conflicts of the 70s with helicopters, planes and tanks. The deep green of the landscapes, the precision of the details, the incognito characters in defensive, attacking or anguished positions, surrounded by animals and objects, create drama and lyricism. The exuberant vegetation is a kind of novel where the magical jungle landscapes describe an entire aesthetic and social universe. Social commitment and concern for the preservation of nature have long been central themes of his intense artistic activity. José Gamarra has always believed that it was possible to live in harmony with nature, the ecological message is an integral part of his work.

José Gamarra's work is part of prestigious public and private collections, such as the Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA; Metropolitan Museum of Art New York, USA; Rockefeller Foundation, New York, USA; Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris, France; National Library of Paris, France; National Fund of Contemporary Art (CNAP) Paris La Défense, France; Museum of Contemporary Art of Val-de-Marne (MAC/VAL), Vitry, France; Rothschild Bank Collection Zurich, Switzerland; Museo de Arte Moderno Buenos Aires, Argentina; Museu de Arte Moderna Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, among many others.