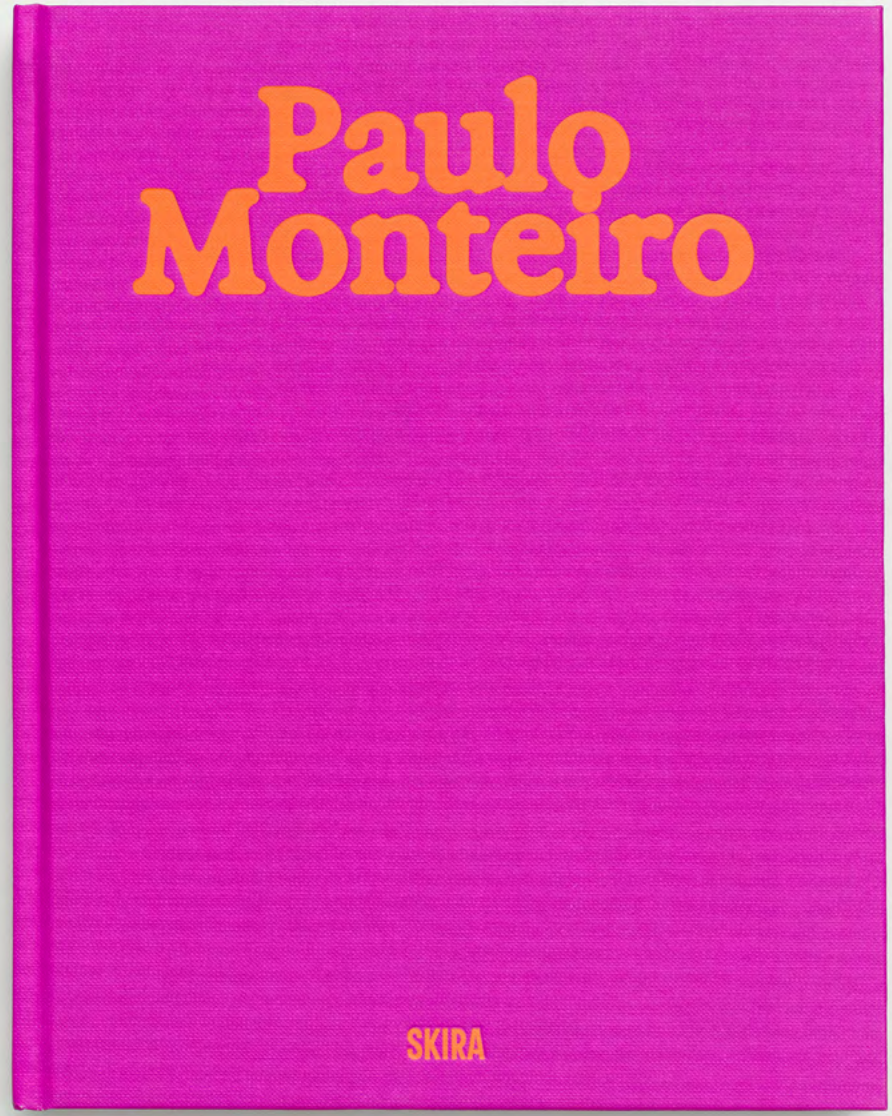
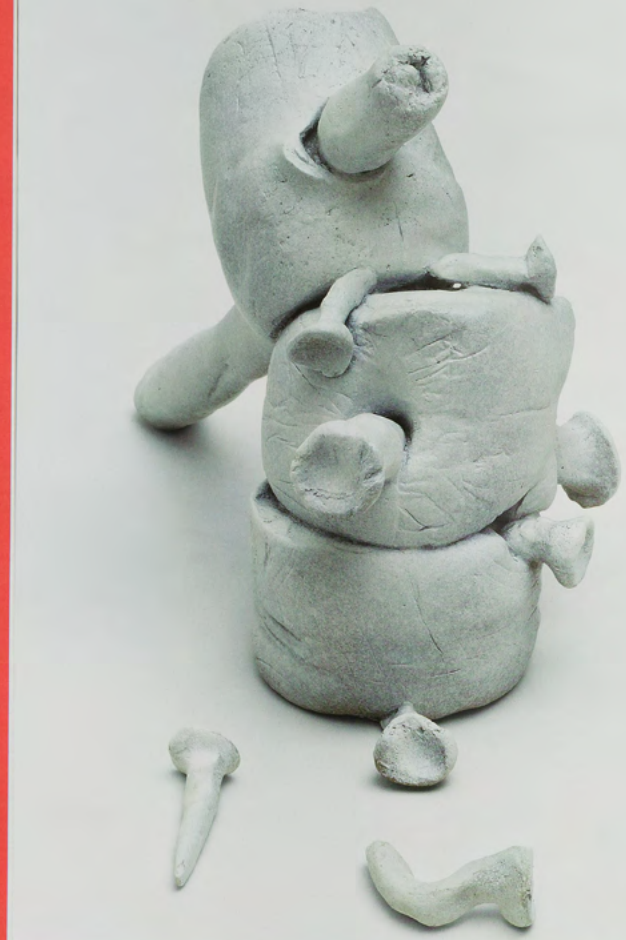

Paulo
Monteiro
SKIRA

Paulo Monteiro

EDITED BY GERMANO DUSHÁ

SKIRA



12
Paulo Monteiro: The Movement of the Dot in the World
by Germano Dushá

28
A Sensual Cosmos
by Yann Chateigné Tytelman

38
Works

190
Paulo Monteiro in Conversation
by Marta Papini

202
End Matter

Paulo Monteiro: The Movement of the Dot in the World

GERMANO DUSHÁ

There are, indeed,
things that cannot be put into words.
They make themselves manifest.
They are what is mystical. – LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

Untitled, 1984
Graffiti on paper
21 × 29 cm
8¼ × 11¾ in.

Matter shudders. From its deep concentration in a single point, new movements spill over. It undergoes impulses, cuts, twists and folds. It stretches into lines. It rises, falls, and spreads out. It draws paths and gives contours to prominences. It turns inside out. Soon it seeks its destiny, surging into an unlimited space... Pouring itself into infinity.

●

Paulo Monteiro's trajectory is intertwined with a generation of artists who emerged in the 1980s, while Brazil was still under the yoke of a civil-military dictatorship, but had already begun a cultural and political transition that would culminate in the end of that regime. In the arts, this context sparked discussions of a certain return to pictorial practices after more than two decades with formal experimentation at the centerstage of the country's artistic production. Having gravitated around conceptualism or manifestations directly engaged in the political debate, a number of young artists were once again inclined towards drawing and painting as their means of expression. After all the ruptures, expansions, and inventions of the previous years, steeped in a confused and troubled socio-political and economic context, these new works were born in an

atypical atmosphere. Artists used less noble materials, preferring whatever was at hand; and aesthetic predilections and themes were less defined, the various genres of interest became blurred, and improbable combinations were made: abstraction and figuration, humor and dismay, improvisation and rigor, screams and silence.

Born and raised in the city of São Paulo, Brazil, Monteiro made his first artistic forays as a teenager, around the age of sixteen, with the self-oriented and independent creation of comics. Inspired aesthetically by the likes of Robert Crumb, Gilbert Shelton, George McManus and Luiz Sá, and ideologically and strategically by punk zines, Monteiro began collaborating with some publications and circulating what he created in the form of pamphlets among friends, printed at low cost and delivered from hand to hand.

In his early twenties and spurred above all by Philip Guston, whose work he had seen up close at the 16th Bienal de São Paulo of 1981, Monteiro decided to take up painting as a regular occupation. The marriage of sophisticated pictorial practice and the spontaneity of the daily cartoon production in Guston's work was a decisive stimulus to Monteiro's own art-making. For him, the North American artist's works created a representational field of peculiar verve: bold strokes that establish a heady—and not infrequently, morbid and obscure—mixture of urban chronicles, absurd figures, and shapeless masses. Capable of concomitantly reconciling the total freedom of abstraction, the acid figuration of satire, the colossal tradition of the still-life, and the cartoonish banality of comics, Guston made an acute contribution to his time. He gave contours to a century built on excruciating historical accumulation, immersed in the great political projects and in a globalization process that engendered mass culture and the great metropolises. This was the missing link, the spark that ignited Monteiro's experimentations.

Between 1983 and 1985, alongside high school friends Carlito Carvalhosa, Fábio Miguez, Nuno Ramos, and Rodrigo Andrade, Monteiro formed the legendary collective studio Casa 7. The quintet met at the Colégio Equipe, a progressive institution founded in 1968 which became known for the artistic success of its alumni, such as filmmaker Cao Hamburger, artist Leda Catunda, and the Titãs—one of the most prominent rock bands of Brazil in the last decades. In this sense, Casa 7 was a space for intense exchanges, and the experience lent its components, all in their twenties, a certain sense of unity. With shared spaces and shared creative scope, they came as close to a music band as young painters could aspire to be. In the few photos that document this period, they pose with the same swag of their counterparts on stage chanting provocative lyrics over simple yet intense musical compositions, common to post-punk and new wave bands.

Paulo Monteiro's studio at Casa 7, 1986

Untitled, 1984
Enamel on kraft paper
210 × 120 cm
82⅝ × 47¼ in.

Although the experience at building number 7 in Vila Judith on Rua Cristiano Viana lasted less than three years, it was potent enough to forge a perennial bond of friendship and to leave a mark on the personality and the later production of all its members. They shared more than a roof: in their personal accounts of this experience, they commonly refer to both the support and the harsh criticism they dealt each other, in an atmosphere of instigation but also of tensions and sometimes weariness.

References, techniques, and aesthetic orientations were devoured in communion. Aspects of the transition from Abstract Expressionism to Neo-Expressionism, the return of figurative painting, and the dawning of the information age all came into play. At this point, Guston was the main mentor for the whole group. Not only for his inventive aesthetics, but for his political stance, his muralist practice, his collaboration with Mexican artists, and for the courage and integrity with which he undertook his choices and tackled thorny issues, very much in tune with the situation of young people living in a country in the tropics, jaded by the authoritarian violence of the military. Together they also looked at the work of other American painters, such as Julian Schnabel, and at the Transavantgarde, as the critic and art historian Achille Bonito Oliva called the Italian movement at the turn of the 1970s to 1980s led by Sandro Chia, Enzo Cucchi, Francesco Clemente, Marco Bagnoli, and Mimmo Paladino. After periods marked by modernism, conceptual art and minimalism—which they

A Sensual Cosmos

YANN CHATEIGNÉ TYTELMAN

On April 24, 2024, I set foot in the Mendes Wood DM's gallery space in Brussels. I was attending the opening of "The Color of Distance," Paulo Monteiro's solo show, for which I had written the exhibition text. As I stepped into the large, two-floor gallery, I discovered the exhibition I only knew from the conversations I had had with the artist, and from some pre-existing photographs that composed the documentation I used for my writing. The show generously featured almost sixty recent works by Monteiro, and was beautifully arranged in the Mendes Wood DM's spectacular space, which offered vast and luminous rooms for the diverse ensemble of paintings and sculptures the artist had created for the exhibition. At first, I paid scant attention to the way the artist had elegantly arranged the show to vie against and sometimes playfully engage with the imposing, luxurious and characteristic woodwork ornaments that covered the walls of the gallery. Some instinctive urge made me hasten in search of a particular work that had stuck in my mind. This was a small painting—better described as a wall-work composed of oil paint covering a small rectangular piece of wood, a dense and colorful object only a few centimeters high and wide. I needed to examine the piece, as if it harbored some missing information, as if the meaning—or more precisely my own lack of understanding—of the artist's oeuvre, which I had until then tried to comprehend remotely, would finally be revealed and explained once I had seen this artwork in real life.

Keeping my interaction with other visitors to a minimum, I slowed my pace and surveyed the whole show, scanning the surfaces, walls, doors, cabinets, tablets, floors. Finally, I spotted the target of my obsession from an angle, moved closer and stood for a little while in rapt contemplation. It was in a room on the first floor of the gallery, hanging on a section of white wall above a disused fireplace. I liked the contrast between the modest simplicity of the work, and the sheer bulk of the decorative protuberance below it, a defunct assemblage of marble, black bricks, and white stucco. But I needed to focus on the object itself. I really had to examine the work, and it didn't look at all as I was expecting. My written presentation had initially insisted on the artist's deployment of mass, fluidity and resonance. I described this specific work, and the other ones that belong to the same series—or *ensemble*, since they are all similar in appearance though vary slightly in shape, composition, dimensions and proportions—as very small, concrete paintings, looking like distillations of their own medium. To me, then, they evoked thick pieces of dried paint, pieces of pure colored abstract reality.

The composition of the work relies on a few elements. While the front side of the support is painted using luminous yellow, the sides are painted in reddish orange. The texture of the wood is visible beneath the paint, which is rapidly applied on the surface and remains slightly transparent. On the top and bottom of the "frame," four small heaps of dried yellowish white oil are liberally distributed. They mark the limits of a rectangular shape: those at the top of the work sit loosely posed on the small painting, while the other two at the bottom are glued to the surface. A similar compositional strategy is used for the other works that belong to the same ensemble: front and side facets

slightly falls down on the right side of the painting and is animated by discrete oscillations. In relation to the first one, whose composition, title and colors directly refer to the realm of the aquatic, the second could also be read as a view of the sea, or a landscape with dramatic orange skies above. The red "dots" act like beacons, placing—once again—the emphasis on the border in the middle of the colored planes. The red signs that seem to float and inhabit the separation are like targets: their role is an invitation to look exactly at there—at the center of the field, where the sea, land and sky part ways—and dive into it.

In the most recent paintings, this division of the colored surface remains, but the horizon that used to mark the middle of the plane is replaced by an oval shape. In fact, the horizon might not be substituted per se, but could be considered as the same thing, a line that progressively transformed from a vibrating, waving zone, to a colored oval that opens a new space at the center of the canvas. The dots are circumscribing the limits of the oval field, like an invitation, not only to pay attention to it or to look at it, but to enter it. To immerse oneself into it. In the small paintings, the dots marked the distance between the limits of the micro rectangular color field that has been applied on the wooden surface, as if the painting tried to compress itself until it would not be visible anymore. This experience of the perceptual limits of color invites the viewer to look around and zoom in, coming closer into focus, in a choreography that creates a sort of dynamic, polyrhythmic dance. In the sculptures, the color that surges from within acts as a bait: it attracts the viewer's gaze, and confounds the reading of the objects: things, materials, weight dissolve into a fluid world of chromatic substances that make them float in a sensual space. In the "oval" paintings, what was once a clear straight line dividing earth, water and air, becomes a halo, a radiation.

In one of the several untitled paintings on view at Mendes Wood DM, the ovals seem to multiply. The observer can try and navigate the composition, but it deviates and enters multiple colored realities. The ovals keep growing bigger. A green one, on top of a rose one, on a dark background that evokes a night sky, seems to glow. It is painted in a way that not only its contours, but also its surface is totally blurred. The picture is destabilizing. It is impossible to have a clear grasp of the work, and it forces the observer to continuously adjust their focus. Four

Untitled, 2024
Aluminum
45 × 76 × 20 cm
17¾ × 29¾ × 7⅞ in.

dots, two red ones above, and two white ones at the bottom of the green blurred shape, seem to suggest, like in some peculiar, hand-painted camera, a focal point. Interestingly, in French, *faire le point* (to make the dot) also means "to focus," as with any optical apparatus. Several other paintings on display present two central ovals, suggesting perhaps that the aim is not to try to *see* clearly at what is presented but to *feel* the things, the colored landscape, the horizon, as if one was blinking, with eyes half-closed—the lights and shapes being decomposed and multiplied by the limits of the eyelids, of the cilia, distorted through the liquid prism of one's tears. One can even imagine that these paintings do not represent something that has been *seen*, but which has been *sensed* with eyes closed: mental images, colored shapes and forms of light that appear behind one's eyelids. Like when one lies down after a long walk, and shuts one's eyes against the daylight, so moving geometric landscapes start to form in the mind's eye. Spontaneous compositions that generate in our psyche while we try to feel a place beyond the sole powers of sight, but using the whole body as a sensor for seeing the colors of smell, the shapes of heat, the lines of sounds.

Ultimately, these paintings by Paulo Monteiro offer an experience of depth, but rendered in pictures. Because how can one represent the complexity, the multiplicity, the ungraspable feelings and memories of any experience of immersion? Beyond the horizon lie worlds that remain invisible. In other words, creating a horizon entails making visible the boundary that separates the visible from the invisible. The horizon is the symbol of what lies beyond, of the invisible, of the incommensurable, and in the meantime, of the ultimate act of seeing. But seeing—and in this case seeing the line that divides the realms in two—is not the only thing that one does while standing before the horizon. This might be why the line moves, divides, multiplies, and finally opens in shapes, and orbs, round forms of color, reservoirs of light that double, triple until they saturate the picture. These paintings propose an experience similar to the one when you try to comprehend the sensation of infinite distance of the horizon while at the same time feeling its tangible, sensible proximity, one outside the mind the other inside the body, and vice versa. This is why it opens, not fully like a door thrown open on the absolute, into which we might fall and lose ourselves, but a door slightly ajar, marking a threshold, inviting us to stand in between worlds, in the midst of things, and enjoy the sensation.

As I walked around the Paulo Monteiro exhibition on that evening of spring 2024, I could feel that each work on show had at least two modes of existence. One that was immediately visible and that one could *feel*, in terms of vital colors, scale, mass, and texture. And another mode that involved a less tangible realm, even invisible. Each work radiated through space, and seemed to have been displayed according to a kind of gentle disorder, obeying a sort of material

Water Middle, 2011
Watercolor
37.7 × 27.9 cm
14¾ × 11 in.

Works

"The Color of Distance,"
Mendes Wood DM,
Brussels, Belgium, 2024

Untitled, 2024
Oil on linen
22 × 15 cm
8¼ × 5¾ in.

Untitled, 2024
Oil on linen
22 × 18 cm
8¾ × 7¼ in.

Untitled, 2024
Oil on linen
180 × 160 cm
70⅞ × 63 in.

Paulo Monteiro in Conversation

MARTA PAPINI

1961-81

MP I would like to go over some of the highlights and revealing moments that brought you to your art today. Let's start from the beginning of your career: you started painting very early. Where were you coming from? What was the context in which you were moving at that time?

PM I used to do some paintings, but my main thing in the late 1970s—I was born in 1961, so I was a teenager then—was underground comics. I had these idols, like Robert Crumb and all the American underground comics authors. This movement was very important for us, and we were in a dictatorship in Brazil, so we tried to do something against the system. Then I started to collaborate with an underground newspaper, *O São Paulo*, which is a left-wing newspaper held by the priests' connected to the *Teologia da libertação* (Liberation theology). It is a movement that began in Latin America, and had many followers in the poor communities around Brazil. They had this newspaper, and I did cartoons for them. I came from this environment, and I was doing some paintings from time to time, not very regularly.

Cover of *Papagaio* n. *1*, 1977

MP How was the urban culture being shaped by the lack of freedom?

PM In the late 1970s the regime was becoming more tolerant, but there were still some issues nevertheless. It was depressing. I enrolled at a left-wing school, the only one at that time. People who studied there were children of folks living outside of Brazil because of the dictatorship, those who were in exile. In the streets beyond the high-school walls things could get more complicated, especially if you had to face the police. They might stop you just for having long hair, like I had then, frisk you for drugs... And there was one time they said they knew my school and they knew we smoked marijuana etc... but at the same time, it was a cultural elite: everybody in the school was making music and writing poetry. Everybody was an artist there: I played guitar for many years, and in the years to come, from time to time I would notice someone had became famous and would recognize them from school. I liked to play music, but I didn't enjoy being on stage; I was too shy. That's why I quit music. Painting was more my thing: the work is out there on its own, and I'm not necessarily in front of it.

Untitled, 1984
Enamel on kraft paper
236 × 200 cm
92¾ × 78¾ in.

1981-2000

MP Looking back over your biography, one can single out as a first milestone the 16th Bienal de São Paulo of 1981, where you first got to see the work of Philip Guston upfront. Guston combined satirical drawings, abstractions, and comics with "major" art painting. How did this hybrid language help you formalize your way of making art?

Untitled, 1984
Graphite on paper
30.8 × 40.7 cm
12¼ × 16 in.

PM In 1981 I was twenty years old. I saw the paintings of Philip Guston who had died in 1980, and I immediately felt an identification with his work. Because Guston had links with Latin America, he went to Mexico and learned to do murals and frescoes, influenced by the work of [José] Orozco and [David Alfaro] Siqueiros. So, he had this link to the Communist party, and maybe because of this, I felt we were connected to each other, or maybe because he was painting cartoons. So I decided to be a painter there and then. I came home realizing I had to act on that decision and began to paint. I remember that one early painting that seemed to have strong affinities with Guston's work. The morning after, I woke up and had a second look at it, and realized it was quite different, it was another kind of painting.

MP I'm attracted by this image, it reminds me of some works by Toyen, a Czech surrealist, and *The Way Things Go (Der Lauf der Dinge)* a video from 1987 by Fischli/Weiss. Can you tell me more about it?

PM Yes, I love that video, you're right, there are resemblances. This drawing is from 1984, done after seeing the Guston show. I read a discourse he contributed to the show catalogue, translated to Portuguese, in which he discussed his interest in the moment when a ball is going to fall and roll. He likes this moment of gravity, which is very important for his art. I tried to do something related to that, if you look at the center of the drawing, there's a ball about to fall. Also, I agree that Surrealism has something to do

Fischli/Weiss
The Way Things Go (Der Lauf der Dinge), 1987
Film still

with it. When I was fourteen, I was crazy about Magritte and my output was very surrealistic. I wonder why when we're teenagers we have this link with Surrealism, then we kind of lose it, but from time to time it returns!

MP Between 1983 and 1985, alongside Carlito Carvalhosa, Fábio Miguez, Nuno Ramos, and Rodrigo Andrade, you founded the collective studio Casa 7. What is the most significant memory/anecdote you have of that experience?

PM I started this initiative with some college friends after quitting university. At the time I was applying a lot of material on the canvas, and the surface was thick and bulky. My friends at Casa 7 called it "pintura de casco de tatu" (armadillo-shell painting), as a joke. But six months later they too were painting the way I did: everybody became an *armadillo* painter! I loved the work of Karel Appel and the CoBrA group, their way of painting, and wanted to do something along those lines.

MP Where did you get to see that kind of art?

PM When I quit university in 1983 my uncle offered me a trip to Europe, so I could learn more about the kind of art produced there. I traveled around Europe for a month, touring Paris, Venice, Florence, and Düsseldorf, and by visiting many museums I became familiar with all kinds of art. I remember

Selected Exhibitions and Collections

Among his recent noteworthy solo shows are: "Paulo Monteiro," Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo, Brazil (2024); "The Color of Distance," Mendes Wood DM, Brussels, Belgium (2024); "Paulo Monteiro," Archipelago, Germantown, USA (2023); "Undefined Inclusions," Pace Gallery, New York, USA (2023); "Paulo Monteiro: Linha do Corpo," Instituto Ling, Porto Alegre, Brazil (2023); "Colors without a Place," Tomio Koyama Gallery, Tokyo (2022); "Paulo Monteiro: The Two Sides of An Empty Line," Lévy Gorvy, New York, USA (2021); "The Empty Side," Zeno X, Antwerp, Belgium (2018); "The inside of distance," Office Baroque, Brussels, Belgium (2016); "The inside of distance," Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo, Brazil (2015); "The outside of distance," MISAKO & ROSEN and Tomio Koyama Gallery, Tokyo, Japan (2017); "Paulo Monteiro," Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo, Brazil (2013); "Coisa Superfície," Centro Universitário Mariantonia, São Paulo, Brazil (2012); "Paulo Monteiro, a Selection, 1989–2008," Pinacoteca de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil (2008).

Monteiro has participated in numerous group exhibitions at institutions and galleries, including "Esfingico Frontal," Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo, Brazil (2023); "Thus spoke the moment," Start Museum, Shanghai, China (2023); "Calor Universal," Pace Gallery, New York, USA (2022); "De Terra e Gás," Casa de Cultura do Parque, São Paulo, Brazil (2021); "Coleção MAC Niterói: arte contemporânea no Brasil," MAC-Niterói, Brazil (2017); "Building Material: Process and Form in Brazilian Art," Hauser & Wirth, Los Angeles, USA (2017); "Casa 7," Pivô, São Paulo, Brazil (2015); "Paintings on Paper," David Zwirner, New York, USA (2014); "*Where Were You*," Lisson Gallery, London, UK (2014); "Betão à vista," Museu Brasileiro de Escultura (MuBE), São Paulo, Brazil (2013); "Nova escultura Brasileira," Caixa Cultural, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2011); "Coleção Itaú Contemporâneo," Centro Cultural Itaú, São Paulo, Brazil (2007); "80/90," Instituto Cultural Tomie Ohtake, São Paulo, Brazil (2007); "Onde Está Você Geração 80?," Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2004); V Biennial of Cuenca, Quito, Ecuador (1997); 22nd Bienal de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil (1994); "Modernité," Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, France (1987); II Biennial of Havana, Havana, Cuba (1986); "Casa 7," Museu de Arte Contemporânea de São Paulo (MAC USP), and Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro (MAM Rio), Brazil (1985); and the 18th Bienal de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil (1985).

His work is present in permanent institutional collections worldwide, such as the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, USA; Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM), Brazil; Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro (MAM Rio), Brazil; Pinacoteca de São Paulo, Brazil; Museu de Arte Contemporânea de São Paulo (MAC USP), Brazil; Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Niterói (MAC Niterói), Brazil; Museu de Arte de Brasília, Brazil; Biblioteca Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; START Museum, Shanghai, China; He Art Museum, Shunde, China; EKARD Collection, Wassenaar, The Netherlands; Kunstmuseum, St. Gallen, Switzerland; University of Chicago Booth School of Business Art Collection, USA.

Portrait of Paulo Monteiro, 2024
Photo by Gui Gomes

"Matter shudders. From its deep
concentration in a single point,
new movements spill over.
It undergoes impulses, cuts, twists
and folds. It stretches into lines.
It rises, falls, and spreads out.
It draws paths and gives contours
to prominences. It turns inside
out. Soon it seeks its destiny,
surging into an unlimited space...
Pouring itself into infinity."