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Photo-Portrait, Photo-Painting: Identities of Cariri Foto-Retrato, Foto-Pintura: Identidades do Cariri

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The present visual essay, shot on 120mm film, presents portraits of masters of popular culture in Cariri. Among those recorded are Chico Alagoano (of *fotografia lambe-lambe*, street photography); Mestre Nena, *bacamarteiro* (festive blunderbuss-shooter); Mestre Antônio Matheus of the Reisado dos Irmãos; and Dona Maria, a former midwife from Horto. The same photographs were recreated in the form of photo-paintings, produced using traditional techniques with prints on silver salt photographic paper, pastel painting, and liquid pigments, by two photo-painters, the last in Ceará: Mestre Júlio and Mestre Mirialdo. In this process of understanding portrait work in the interior of Ceará, with the presence of two different photo-painters, it is possible to establish the plurality of the craft in the region. The recording of this process aims not only to demonstrate the technique but also to deconstruct an imaginary of “doll-makers”, an imaginary that has spread around Northeastern photo-painting. Mestre Júlio and Mestre Mirialdo, when painting the same photographs of masters of popular culture, develop different techniques, allowing, in a rare way nowadays, a comparative analysis of this type of work. One can note the refinement of their work in the complex form of production that is photo-painting, where the entire portrait is produced from black-and-white prints of the client’s face. This essay aims to capture the viewer’s attention, thereby fostering a greater interest in the subject.

Keywords: memory, portrait, photo-painting, fabulation, visual essay

Foto-Retrato, Foto-Pintura: Identidades do Cariri

Este é um ensaio visual analógico em filme 120mm de retratos de mestres da cultura popular no Cariri. Para ele, foram registrados: o Mestre Chico Alagoano (de fotografia lambe-lambe); o Mestre Nena, bacamarteiro; o Mestre Antônio Matheus do Reisado dos Irmãos; a Dona Maria, antiga parteira do Horto. As mesmas fotografias foram refeitas artesanalmente em forma de foto-pintura, com impressão em papel fotográfico com saís de prata, pintura a pastel e pigmentos líquidos, por dois foto-pintores, os últimos do Ceará: Mestre Júlio e Mestre Mirialdo. Nesse processo de entendimento do trabalho de retrato no interior do Ceará, com a presença de dois foto-pintores diferentes, é possível estabelecer a pluralidade do ofício na região. O registro desse processo visa não somente demonstrar a técnica, como desconstruir um imaginário de “fazedores de boneco”, que se disseminou sobre a foto-pintura nordestina. Mestre Júlio e Mestre Mirialdo, ao pintarem as mesmas fotografias dos mestres da cultura popular, desenvolvem técnicas diferentes, possibilitando, de forma rara nos dias atuais, uma análise comparada desse tipo de trabalho. É possível notar o refinamento do trabalho dos dois, em uma forma de produção complexa que é a foto-pintura, onde se pinta todo o retrato a partir de impressões a preto e branco do rosto do cliente. O presente ensaio pretende chamar a atenção de quem vê essas imagens de forma a se interessar mais pelo assunto.

Palavras-chave: memória, retrato, foto-pintura, fabulação, ensaio visual

Descriptive Memory

Since 2018, in the Cariri hinterland, a series of 120mm images has documented portraits of masters of Cariri who are bearers of popular knowledge, performers of the *reisado* (Northeastern Brazilian folk theatre), midwives, practitioners of popular photography, and festive blunderbuss-shooters, among others. This work, which started at that time, continues to the present day. Thus, this essay stems from a prior interest: the interest in recording these people, with elements drawn from the iconography of the locality itself.

The choice of the 120mm format is not accidental. In the Cariri region, it was common for so-called “itinerant photographers” to use large format for recording people. These photographers, now popularly known as “lambe-lambe”, worked in public squares and made the photograph directly on photographic paper, without using acetate film. Their format was larger than the standard 35mm. In this essay, I chose to use what is called “medium format”, in reference to the large format used by popular photographers. Moreover, it is also a way to streamline the process, as it is easier to make copies for photo-painting afterwards from a larger material.

“Popular Cariri photography”, as it is known, expresses itself and manifests

primarily in photographs of votive offerings, by street photographers and their sets (or photos), the operators of monacles, and the photo-painters. From 2005 onwards, these styles and photographic works began to disappear. Competition with digital photography, the arrival of colour photographs, difficulties in acquiring materials for their work, among other factors, have contributed to and accelerated the extinction of these practices. Few masters still live today, and even fewer can transmit this knowledge.

Votive offerings photography is a practice containing aspects of popular religiosity, which was expressed in sculptural votive offerings. The latter are usually sculptures of body parts, made in wood, which mimic an illness or a request for some grace. When the devotee's request is fulfilled, they demonstrate their faith to the saint by presenting their "vow". Thus, the sculptural votive offering represented both the person and their illness. This conception soon extended to photography. Pilgrims still have the custom of making full-body images, or images of the body part that received the blessing (for example, a hand, a chest, etc.), and leave these photographs in the saint's shrine or the house of miracles.

Alongside this, there were the monacles, which were photographic devices containing a 35mm film, developed in positive, and which required the viewer to approach the "monocle" to see the photograph inside. Such a device had a magnifying glass at one end, enabling the image to be viewed.

This research focuses on engaging with these professionals, learning from them how they practised their craft. In the first instance, it aims to reproduce this knowledge exactly as it was practised in its time. From there, in a second moment, it seeks to update these practices. This visual essay presents a glimpse of the research conducted in the field of photo-painting.

Essay

The first sequence of photographs consists of four images. In Figure 1, the depicted are: Chico Alagoano, a former street photographer; Mestre Nena, a festive blunderbuss shooter; Mestre Antônio Matheus of the Reisado dos Irmãos; and Dona Maria, a retired midwife from Horto.



Figure 1: *Chico Alagoano and Mestre Nena (top); Dona Maria and Mestre Antônio Matheus of the Reisado dos Irmãos (bottom)*
Credits. Tiago Pedro Pereira, 2018

These masters were chosen for their engagement with manual and popular knowledge. They are recognised locally and at the state level as cultural masters. Consequently, they are bearers of knowledge transmitted orally (most of them are illiterate or semi-literate), passed down from generation to generation. Photographers in the region also shared their knowledge through daily practice.

The images were captured using a medium-format 120mm camera. Developed using traditional techniques, the same material was then reproduced analogically on paper suitable for photo-painting and delivered to Mestre Júlio, a nationally

renowned photo-painter. Figure 2 presents the master's work.



Figure 2: *Chico Alagoano and Mestre Nena (top); Dona Maria and Mestre Antônio Matheus of the Reisado dos Irmãos (bottom)*
Credits. Mestre Júlio, 2024

The same 120mm images were sent to a second artist, the photo-painter Mirialdo, based in Juazeiro do Norte, producing a new essay presented in Figure 3.



Figure 3: *Dona Maria and Mestre Antônio Matheus of the Reisado dos Irmãos (top); Mestre Nena and Chico Alagoano (bottom)*
Credits. Mestre Mirialdo, 2024

Mestre Júlio and Mestre Mirialdo are both from Ceará. As seen in Figure 1 and Figure 2, their works exhibit distinct traits, as the same photographs resulted in different photo-paintings — distinct interpretations. It is worth noting that they also use other materials: Mestre Júlio works with pastel paint, whereas Mestre Mirialdo prefers liquid paint, adding some details with a brush. These material differences produce images that do not coincide, but the most characteristic distinction between them is stylistic — colour, skin tone, clothing,

and background. Opposing gazes appear in many details.

This simple work demonstrates the plurality of the craft, which once included many studios in the Northeast region, each with several masters, each with their own style. Daily production in these spaces reached 100 photographs. It was a collaborative effort: one person reproduced the pictures, another made the clothing, another focused on hair, and yet another refined the details of the image. Because the work involved many stages, each mastered by only one person, the death of an individual could cause the loss of the entire process, as no one else could perform their part. Finding masters who know all the stages is rare, as the process involves a black-and-white print of the person's face, with the remainder of the image created by the artist. The photo-painter intervenes and creates a new image, as can be seen in the following figures (Figure 4, Figure 5, Figure 6, Figure 7, Figure 8, Figure 9, Figure 10, Figure 11, Figure 12, Figure 13, Figure 14, Figure 15 and Figure 16). Figure 17 and Figure 18 present photo-paintings, respectively, by Mestre Júlio and Mestre Mirialdo.



Figure 4: *Photo-painting of Chico Alagoano*
Credits. Tiago Pedro Pereira, 2024



Figure 5: *Photo-painting of Chico Alagoano*
Credits. Tiago Pedro Pereira, 2024



Figure 6: *Photo-painting of Chico Alagoano*
Credits. Tiago Pedro Pereira, 2024



Figure 7: *Photo-painting of Chico Alagoano*
Credits. Tiago Pedro Pereira, 2024



Figure 8: *Photo-painting of Chico Alagoano*
Credits. Tiago Pedro Pereira, 2024



Figure 9: *Photo-painting of Mestre Nena*
Credits. Tiago Pedro Pereira, 2024



Figure 10: *Photo-painting of Mestre Nena*
Credits. Tiago Pedro Pereira, 2024



Figure 11: *Photo-painting of Mestre Nena*
Credits. Tiago Pedro Pereira, 2024



Figure 12: *Photo-painting of Mestre Nena*
Credits. Tiago Pedro Pereira, 2024

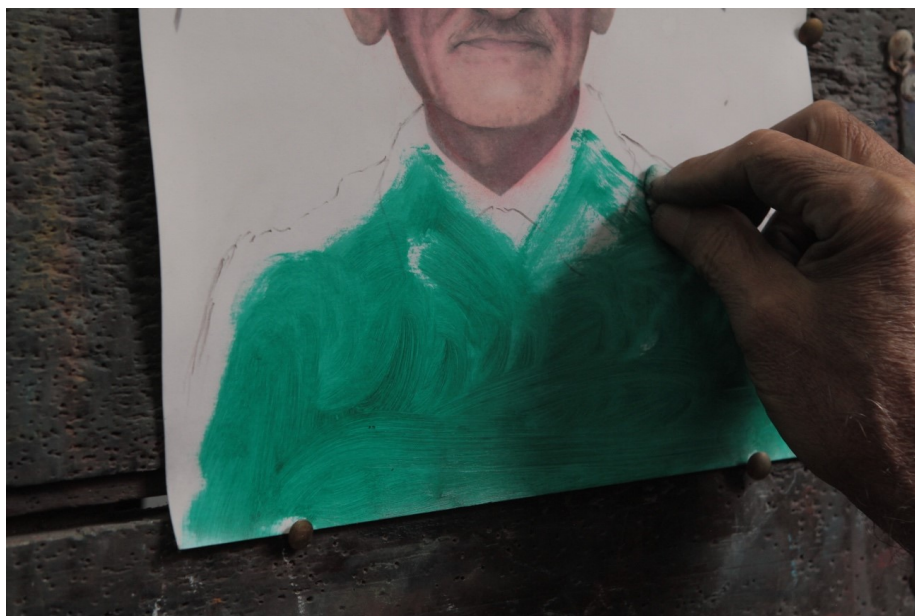


Figure 13: *Photo-painting of Mestre Nena*
Credits. Tiago Pedro Pereira, 2024



Figure 14: *Photo-painting of Mestre Nena*
Credits. Tiago Pedro Pereira, 2024



Figure 15: *Photo-painting of Mestre Nena*
Credits. Tiago Pedro Pereira, 2024



Figure 16: *Photo-painting of Mestre Nena*
Credits. Tiago Pedro Pereira, 2024



Figure 17: *Photo-paintings by Mestre Júlio*
Credits. Tiago Pedro Pereira, 2024



Figure 18: *Photo-paintings by Mestre Mirialdo*
Credits. Tiago Pedro Pereira, 2024

This style of image became very popular in the Cariri hinterland because it was affordable and appealed to the local population. Itinerant vendors would travel through the territory offering the service, collect images from clients' documents, and send them to the photo-painting studios. Months later, preferably during harvest season, they would deliver the completed photo-painting and collect payment. Even today, examples of this craft can be found in rural homes.

Certain aspects of photo-painting remain captivating. One of them is that it is an art based on fabrication. Photography, influenced for many years by various theories, tended to prioritise truth. The *that was* Barthesian (Barthes, 1980/1984) and became canonical in defining what was considered a "correct" photograph. Photo-painting does not concern itself with these issues; it is primarily concerned with fabulation, creating a new identity for the subject according to the client's preferences. It is a photography of wishes. The client chooses how they want to be remembered, selecting clothing, hair colour, skin tone, and eye colour. This was one reason it was historically regarded as a minor art. Today, it is recognised that this judgement was mistaken — it is an art that helped depict the majority of the humble population, preserving the faces of those marginalised by official history, the faces of workers (Benjamin, 1940/1994), the true engines of history.

Biographical Note

Tiago Pedro Pereira is a doctoral candidate in Communication at the School of Communication, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). He holds a master's degree from the same institution. He graduated in Philosophy from the Federal University of Ceará (Brazil). He completed a postgraduate course in Film at the International Film and TV School of San Antonio de los Baños (Cuba) — specialising in Documentary.

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