

MANUEL AJA ESPIL
WORLDS OF EXILE

AUGUST 3RD - OCTOBER 14TH, 2023

HUTCHINSON MODERN
& CONTEMPORARY



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MANUEL AJA ESPIL: ELEVEN PATHS TO PLANETARY EXILES

I may confess that I never read Ursula K. Le Guin's novels and short stories, which fascinated the best minds of my generation. A few commentaries shared by fervent readers conferred Le Guin's dystopic narrative with a subtle aim for challenging the patriarchal machinery of science fiction. Her stories unleash the repressed demons of our current world. But my narrow understanding of the author's contribution to the genre, which confronts rational thinking and defies some cognitive certainties, distills eerie images kept in my memory from Andrei Tarkovsky's films, such as *Solaris* and *Stalker*. Like in Le Guin's fictions, the old Soviet-Era films typically featured a male protagonist who undertook a dangerous journey that allowed him to complete a psychological or existential self-analysis. Only recently, encouraged by the literary yearning of Argentine artist Manuel Aja Espil, I began to read about Le Guin's interrogation of what defines the human status in order to interpret the narrative layers of his new series of paintings completed in a post-pandemic world. The idea of redefining the human is timely: when AI is taking over the open ends of the creative fields and science preserves the promethean dream after Freud. These undeterred realities bring a paradoxical principle to the present, one that has shaped the origins of painting as both absence and presence, the very evidence of light and the projection of unfathomable shadows. Is painting essentially human?

Presumably, Aja Espil's thematic inclination towards Le Guin's blend of science fiction and gender trouble prompted the division of the paintings in two classical categories: landscape and portraiture. He often merges the two through a fictional alibi, which transforms the pictorial space as a theatrical setting where the chance encounter of things, nature, and people take place. Conceding that Aja Espil is a painter who avidly read Ursula K. Le Guin, his interest aroused when he was about to leave

his country shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. During his move from the South to the North, he composed a series of eleven middle and large-sized oil on canvases, featuring extraordinary scenes representing a series of animals with human qualities, or simply depicting natural environments of seemingly exoplanetary worlds composed with a chromatic palette reminiscent of the tempered light and rapid yet precise strokes of artists from the turn of the century in the Rio de la Plata who chronicled wars and gauchos. *Invasion of Wilkes Land*, the only collective scene from the series, represents a group of extravagant characters who congregate for no apparent purpose other than chatting in the middle of the wilderness, evoking a carnivalesque ritual conceived by James Ensor. The scene furnishes little information about the gathering, which creates a wacky illusion of a catastrophe. Some paintings surreptitiously depict the unstated colors of the physiognomy of nature advanced by Johann Moritz Rugendas, a German traveler-painter who created an outstanding scientific fiction after Alexander von Humboldt. Rugendas ventured to paint in plein air before the term was coined in France. In parallel, Aja Espil's paintings interrogate the present with crucial questions posited in a world in permanent transit:

What about those canvases that adorn the in-between spaces? The room at an Airbnb, the shelves in a hotel room. There was a painting hanging on the bed side of the wall, and I thought that it should represent the process of resting and its connection to dreaming and reality. Or what about the paintings that represent primary pleasures: to look at the glare of fire at home. To read until falling asleep under the shade of a tree. To sleep with cats. A glass of wine at dusk. To look at a landscape encouraged by the birds and breeze.

Except for the land of Patagonia seen from a satellite, the remote spheres of the Moon and the

Earth as well as some fantastic landscapes that evoke surrealism, a few paintings presented at Hutchinson Modern & Contemporary by Aja Espil propose a hypothetical space, which is signaled by almost imperceptible yellow curtains. The artist created different scenes: the soliloquy at the gas station, the stubborn act of painting in the barren southern plains, and the gender inversion of Goya's Maja at a motel room, which demand their own place to develop a particular type

of narrative imagination that combines different temporalities and their local groundings, often symbolized through technological outdated artifacts (ATMs, jog sticks, boxy video monitors) or simply declared through the presentation of a natural environment that does not make sense. These paintings offer a renovated storytelling for dystopic fables, embracing deadpan humor and drama, showing us art as a map of our own failures and exiles.

Gabriela Rangel



Manuel Aja Espil in his Madrid studio, 2023.

WORLDS OF EXILE



Invasion of Wilkes Land, 2023

Oil on linen
56 3/4 x 72 1/2 in
144 x 184 cm



World of Exile, 2023

Oil on linen
56 1/4 x 41 in
143 x 104 cm



Force Majeure, 2023

Oil on linen
41 x 56 1/4 in
104 x 143 cm



Maja Reading, 2023

Oil on linen
41 x 56 1/4 in
104 x 143 cm



Patagonia, 2023
Oil on linen
45 5/8 x 32 5/8 in
116 x 83 cm



Contemplation, 2023
Oil on linen
45 5/8 x 32 5/8 in
116 x 83 cm



Inspiration, 2023
Oil on linen
45 5/8 x 32 5/8 in
116 x 83 cm



The Break, 2023
Oil on linen
45 5/8 x 32 5/8 in
116 x 83 cm



Moon, 2023
Oil on linen
23 5/8 x 24 in
60 x 61 cm



Azymetrikah, 2023
Oil on linen
12 x 10 5/8 in
30 x 27 cm

BIOGRAPHY



Earth, 2023
Oil on linen
11 3/8 x 11 3/8 in
29 x 29 cm

Manuel Aja Espil was born in 1987 in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Originally an aspiring filmmaker, he abandoned his initial plan and enrolled in the Artists' Program at the Universidad Torcuato Di Tella in Buenos Aires (2016). Aja Espil's most recent paintings include seemingly malformed caricatures, lacking identifying features, such as gender, race, or personality, who are derived from characters of childhood cartoons, comics, and movies. His work depicts imaginary universes that are a fusion of European and Argentine historic pictorial tradition and contemporary iconography.

Solo exhibitions of Aja Espil's work include *Los Viajes (Journeys)*, Grasa Galería, Buenos Aires, Argentina (2020); *Joseph Andreas*, Quadro Arte Contemporáneo, Buenos Aires, Argentina (2018); *Anton Regularis*, Centro Cultural Recoleta, Buenos Aires, Argentina (2017); and *Wanda vs. Azymetrikah*, Imaginario Galería, Buenos Aires, Argentina (2012). Recent collective exhibitions include *Marzo: Mujer, Memoria y Malvinas*, Casa de la Cultura del Fondo Nacional de las Artes, Buenos Aires, Argentina (2023); *Arte en Juego (Art at Play)*, Fundación

PROA, Buenos Aires, Argentina (2022); *Despues de Babel. Traducciones rioplatenses*, Buenos Aires, Argentina (2021); *Terapia (Therapy)*, Gabriela Rangel, Verónica Rossi and Santiago Villanueva, Museum of Latin American Art Buenos Aires (MALBA), Buenos Aires, Argentina (2021); *Bienal de Arte Joven (Young Artists Biennial)*, Centro Cultural Recoleta, Buenos Aires, Argentina (2017); *London Summer Intensive 2017 Showcase*, Camden Arts Centre, London, United Kingdom (2017); and *La Cosa Soy Yo*, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, Buenos Aires, Argentina (2016). Aja Espil has held residencies at the International Studio and Curatorial Program (ISCP) in New York (2022), the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture in Maine (2019), The London Summer Intensive 2017, SLADE University of Fine Arts y Camden Arts Centre, in London, United Kingdom (2017); and the Artists' Program, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, Buenos Aires, Argentina (2016). He was awarded the Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation Grant in 2022; the Stimulus Award from the Asociación Amigos del Museo Rosa Galisteo in 2019; and a Fellowship from the Fondo Nacional de las Artes (National Fund of The Arts), Argentina, in 2018.

MANUEL AJA ESPIL

Born in 1987, Buenos Aires, Argentina
Lives and works in Madrid, Spain

EDUCATION

2016 Artists' Program, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, Buenos Aires, Argentina
2008 Filmmaking, Facultad Universidad del Cine (FUC), Buenos Aires, Argentina
(incomplete degree)

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2023 *Worlds of Exile*, Hutchinson Modern & Contemporary, New York, NY
2020 *Los Viajes (Journeys)*, Grasa Galería, Buenos Aires, Argentina
2018 *Joseph Andreas*, Quadro Arte Contemporáneo, Buenos Aires, Argentina
2017 *Anton Regularis*, Centro Cultural Recoleta, Buenos Aires, Argentina
2012 *Wanda vs. Azymetrikah*, Imaginario Galería, Buenos Aires, Argentina

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2023 *Marzo: Mujer, Memoria y Malvinas*, Casa de la Cultura del Fondo Nacional de las Artes, Buenos Aires, Argentina
2022 *Arte en Juego (Art at Play)*, PROA Foundation, Buenos Aires, Argentina
2021 *Despues de Babel. Traducciones rioplatenses*, Buenos Aires, Argentina
2021 *Terapia (Therapy)*, Gabriela Rangel, Verónica Rossi, and Santiago Villanueva, Museum of Latin American Art Buenos Aires (MALBA), Buenos Aires, Argentina
2017 *Bienal de Arte Joven (Young Artists Biennial)*, Centro Cultural Recoleta, Buenos Aires, Argentina
2017 *London Summer Intensive 2017 Showcase*, Camden Arts Centre, London, United Kingdom
2016 *La Cosa Soy Yo*, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, Buenos Aires, Argentina

OTHER PARTICIPATIONS

2020 *Hable con Ella*, MALBA, Buenos Aires, Argentina
2022 *Manifestación En Foco*, MALBA, Buenos Aires, Argentina

FELLOWSHIPS AND AWARDS

2023 Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation Grant. Montreal (Quebec), Canada
2022 Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation Grant. Montreal (Quebec), Canada
2019 Mention Young Artists Category, Fortabat Painting Award, Buenos Aires, Argentina
2019 Stimulus Award, Asociación Amigos del Museo Rosa Galisteo, Santa Fe, Argentina
2018 Fellowship, Fondo Nacional de las Artes (National Fund of The Arts), Argentina
2017 RADAR, Fellowship, Centro Cultural Recoleta, Buenos Aires, Argentina

RESIDENCIES/ PROGRAMS

2022 International Studio and Curatorial Program (ISCP), Sponsored by Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation, New York, NY
2019 Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture, Madison, Maine
2017 The London Summer Intensive 2017, SLADE University of Fine Arts y Camden Arts Centre, London, United Kingdom

TEACHING

2019 Workshop Medium Medio, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, Buenos Aires, Argentina

BIBLIOGRAPHY

2022 Rodrigo Alonso. *Arte en Juego, una aproximación lúdica al arte argentino* Exhibition catalogue, PROA Foundation, Buenos Aires, Argentina
2021 Mariano Blen Plotkin, Claudia del Río, Gabriela Rangel, Verónica Rossi, Marisa Rubio, and Santiago Villanueva. *Terapia*. Exhibition catalogue, Museum of Latin American Art Buenos Aires (MALBA), Buenos Aires, Argentina

PRIVATE COLLECTIONS

Gustavo Bruzzone, Buenos Aires, Argentina
Steve Shane, New York, NY

COVER IMAGE

World of Exile, 2023

Oil on linen

56 1/4 x 41 in.

(143 x 104 cm)

TEXT

Gabriela Rangel

PHOTO CREDITS

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Artworks © Manuel Aja Espil

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