



Gustavo Nazareno

*Orixás: Personal Tales
on Portraiture*

OPERA GALLERY



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FOREWORD

In the realm of contemporary Brazilian art, few voices resonate as powerfully as that of Gustavo Nazareno. Evoking a deep sense of cultural identity, Nazareno's striking paintings and charcoal drawings transport us into a world that contains resonances from all corners of the cultural and spiritual worlds. With this exhibition, titled 'Orixás: Personal Tales on Portraiture', Nazareno embarks on a journey through the intersection of mysticism, ancestry, religious symbolism, and the complex fabric of his Afro-Brazilian identity.

Nazareno's work brings together a diverse gamut of influences, impressing on the viewer the connectedness of seemingly disparate elements, from artistic and cultural canons to the artist's own life experience and spirituality.

The body of work presented in this exhibition is centered around *Orixás*, deities of Afro-Latin vernacular religions. During the Atlantic Slave Trade between 1540 and the 1860s, Brazil imported more enslaved people from Africa than any other country in the world. In turn, religions such as Candomblé, Santería, and Voodoo emerged in Brazil. They reflect the multifaceted cultural and spiritual identity of the African diaspora in Brazil, blending Yoruba spiritual traditions with Catholicism and spiritualism. They can also be understood as a form of resistance against a colonial regime whose goal was religious hegemony.

As such, the *Orixás* emerge from, and are shaped by, a historically contingent patchwork of influences. Nazareno's work can be understood in the same way. As well as culture and religion, they also draw on fashion photography, Renaissance painting and contemporary artists such as Peter Doig and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. Merged in his work, this ahistorical network of connections feels natural. The clothing worn by the figures in his oil paintings, for example, is equally inspired by haute couture and traditional religious clothing. At Nazareno's hand, it forms part of a unique visual language that pays equal homage to the past and present.

In this body of work, Nazareno not only celebrates the *Orixás* but also asserts the power of Blackness, spirituality, tradition and identity within contemporary discourses. His visual language, at once ancient and modern, brings forth the unseen, honoring those who have long been marginalized and who have fought for the survival of their cultures. 'Orixás: Personal Tales on Portraiture' is a testament to the strength of memory, the beauty of resistance, and the ever-evolving Brazilian identity.

Gilles DYAN
Founder & Chairman
Opera Gallery Group

Isabelle de LA BRUYÈRE
Chief Executive Officer
Opera Gallery Group

Giulia LECCHINI
Deputy Director
Opera Gallery London



GUIDED BY EXU: THE CREATIVE ODYSSEY OF GUSTAVO NAZARENO

Exu is the key. In the Afro-Brazilian religion of Candomblé, every ceremony begins with an offering to Exu, the deity of crossroads, opportunities, and communication. Exu opens the pathways between the physical and spiritual realms, making him an essential figure in any ritual. For Gustavo Nazareno, Exu was not just a spiritual guide, but also the catalyst for his artistic career. The story of Nazareno's rise in the art world is deeply intertwined with his connection to this powerful *Orixá*.

In 2018, Nazareno found himself at a crossroads. Born and raised in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais, he was unsure of how to break into the art world. Minas Gerais, with its rich cultural heritage and baroque architecture, had shaped his artistic sensibilities, but it was not the place where he could launch his career. Depressed and without a clear path forward, Nazareno was on the brink of despair. That is when his aunt, recognizing his potential and the need for a change, interceded. She gave him just enough money to move to São Paulo, arguably Brazil's art capital, where opportunities were more abundant.

Arriving in São Paulo without a penny to his name, he had to sink or swim. With no steady income, he found refuge in a *terreiro*, a sacred space for Candomblé ceremonies. In exchange for a studio, he painted images of *Orixás*, the deities of the Afro-Brazilian pantheon. This arrangement provided him with temporary stability, but it was far from secure. Eventually, a disagreement with the priest of the *terreiro* left him without a clear path forward.

It was at this low point that Nazareno turned to Exu, seeking guidance and inspiration. Desperate and determined, he created two charcoal drawings on cheap school paper as an offering to Exu. The act was both a plea for help and a declaration of his intent to persevere. Shortly before, he had attended a performance by Grupo Corpo, a renowned conceptual ballet troupe based in São Paulo. The choreography of Grupo Corpo, combined with the spiritual guidance of Exu, ignited a creative fire within him.

Those two drawings became the foundation for a series he titled *Bará*, named after the corporal manifestation of Exu. This series was his breakthrough, his entrée into the art world. *Bará* quickly gained recognition and became a central part of his artistic identity. The series has been featured in all of his major exhibitions, both in Brazil and internationally, including his latest showcase 'Orixás: Personal Tales on Portraiture'. In this exhibition, *Bará* forms the nucleus around which the entire exhibition revolves, symbolising the crossroads at which Nazareno's career began.

The success of *Bará* not only solidified Nazareno's place in the art world, but also set the stage for the meticulous and deeply personal creative process that defines his work. With this series at the heart of his artistic journey, Nazareno approaches each new project with a dedication to storytelling and spiritual self-discovery. His creative process begins not with a paintbrush, but with a pen. He starts by writing fables inspired by Afro-Brazilian cosmologies, crafting narratives that often position him as a protagonist within these mythic worlds. These stories are a form

of world-building in which Nazareno blends the realities of Afro-Brazilian deities with his own imaginative interpretations, laying the conceptual foundation for his artwork.

As his ideas take shape in writing, Nazareno transitions into the next phase of his artistic practice: garment construction. While primarily recognized as a painter, his work extends far beyond the confines of the canvas. Making clothing by hand is deeply intertwined with his art, forming an interdisciplinary dialogue between fashion and visual storytelling. In Candomblé, religious attire, known as *axós*, holds profound spiritual significance. Colours, silhouettes, and movements are closely tied to the *Orixás*. For instance, his depiction of Oxalá features a beautifully draped white cloth, symbolising peace and serenity. This sacred connection between clothing and spirituality is mirrored in other Afro-Diasporic religions such as Vodun and Santería. For Nazareno, creating garments is more than an artistic endeavour; it is a spiritual practice that honours these traditions, linking the material with the divine and the ancestral.

From constructing these garments, Nazareno progresses to sketching — a process in which the physicality of his creations begins to inform his canvases. He starts this phase by using a manikin as a body form, a foundational tool enabling him to study and manipulate the human figure in relation to his designs. He pays careful attention to the movement and interplay of light on textiles, often working by the soft glow of candlelight to capture the subtle behaviours of fabric. This meticulous observation enriches his sketching process, as he transfers the dynamic qualities of his garments into his paintings.

‘Orixás: Personal Tales on Portraiture’ is a testament to Nazareno’s multifaceted talent. It features a diverse array of works, including landscapes and still lifes, but there is a predominant focus on figurative paintings depicting the *Orixás*. *Orixás*, revered in Afro-Brazilian religious traditions, symbolise various aspects of nature, human qualities, and ancestral wisdom. Nazareno focuses specifically on representations of Exu, a deity associated with communication, trickery, and crossroads, who serves as an intermediary between humans and the spiritual realm. However, Exu is not the only figure from the rich Afro-Brazilian pantheon that Nazareno brings to life in his paintings. His work also features other *Orixás*, each with their own unique stories and attributes that resonate within the Afro-Brazilian spiritual landscape. Among these are Shango, the powerful Orixá of thunder, lightning, and fire, who represents strength and justice; Oshun, the goddess of love, fertility, and rivers, who embodies beauty, sensuality, and the nurturing aspects of nature; and Oxalá, the most revered Orixá, often associated with creation, peace, and wisdom.

In Nazareno’s portrayal, each of these deities is imbued with a distinct visual language that honours their original significance while bringing them into a contemporary context. Older deities, such as Nanan, Shango, and Oshun, are depicted with a sense of reverence and solemnity; their poses are hagiographic, reminiscent of classical religious iconography. These figures are presented with an almost sacred aura, their forms exuding a timeless quality that speaks to their enduring power and influence within Afro-Brazilian spirituality.

By contrast, the younger deities are depicted in more dynamic and modern poses that draw inspiration from icons of fashion photography such as Irving Penn, Richard Avedon, and Steven Meisel. These poses are not just about physical movement but also about capturing the spirit of these *Orixás* in a way that feels alive and relevant to today’s world. The fluidity and expressiveness in these depictions reflect Nazareno’s ability to merge traditional religious motifs with contemporary artistic practices, creating a visual narrative that is both rooted in history and attuned to the present.

Nazareno’s artistic journey is deeply rooted in his heritage. His first home of Minas Gerais is a region known for its rich cultural history. The artist’s Afro-Brazilian heritage comes from his family, originating from the comunidade *quilombola de Jaguará* in the city of Nazareno — from which he takes his surname. A quilombo is a settlement founded by self-emancipated, formerly enslaved people, and these communities are emblematic of the continued fight for freedom and autonomy. The quilombos of Minas Gerais, like many others across Brazil, were sanctuaries for those who escaped the brutal conditions of slavery, places where African cultural practices, spiritual beliefs, and social structures were preserved and adapted to the New World. For Nazareno, this connection to a quilombo — a community that embodies resistance, self-determination, and the enduring spirit of Afro-Brazilian culture — is a profound source of pride. It is from this lineage that he draws inspiration.

Minas Gerais is also renowned for its baroque cities, such as Mariana and Ouro Preto, which stand as enduring monuments to Brazil’s colonial past. These cities, with their winding

cobblestone streets, grand churches, and monumental palaces, were constructed largely by the labour of enslaved African people, whose artistry and craftsmanship were instrumental in shaping the region’s architectural landscape. The influence of these artisans is palpable in the intricate details that adorn the baroque facades — from the elaborate carvings on church altars to the delicate sculptures that grace public squares. Their work, though often unrecognised and uncredited, laid the foundation for what is now celebrated as Brazilian baroque: a unique fusion of European artistic traditions and African creative ingenuity.

This legacy of African craftsmanship is not merely a historical footnote; it is a living tradition that continues to inspire contemporary artists such as Nazareno. In his work, he draws heavily on the Afro-baroque aesthetic, blending the opulence and grandeur of baroque art with his queer identity and the rich cultural symbolism of Afro-Brazilian history. Baroque style, with its emphasis on drama, movement, and emotional intensity, resonates deeply with Nazareno’s artistic vision, their echoes visible in his works that are both visually captivating and rich in narrative depth.

One of the most significant figures in the Afro-baroque tradition is Aleijadinho, a master sculptor and architect whose influence can be seen throughout Minas Gerais. Born Antônio Francisco Lisboa, Aleijadinho was of African descent and faced numerous challenges due to his race and a debilitating illness that severely limited his physical abilities. Despite these obstacles, he rose to prominence as one of Brazil’s most important colonial artists. Nazareno finds a profound connection to this artistic lineage, seeing in Aleijadinho’s work a

reflection of his own journey as an artist. The imaginative tableaux and intricate details that define Nazareno's paintings are a continuation of the Afro-baroque tradition, reinterpreted through the lens of contemporary Afro-Brazilian culture. Nazareno's tableaux vivants serve as a bridge between the past and the present, honouring the legacy of the enslaved artisans who built Minas Gerais, while also asserting the ongoing relevance of their contributions to Brazilian identity. In this way, Nazareno's work both preserves and revitalises the rich artistic heritage of Minas Gerais.

Just as Nazareno connects with the artistic legacy of Minas Gerais, he also deeply engages with the spiritual traditions that have shaped Afro-Brazilian subjectivities. His exploration of Afro-Brazilian spirituality is intricately tied to his personal identity and experiences. As a queer individual, Nazareno finds in Candomblé a belief system that is inclusive and welcoming of LGBTQIA+ identities. Unlike Catholicism, the predominant religion in Brazil, Candomblé embraces fluid identities, which play a vital role in the ritual possession that is central to the religion's practices. In his paintings, Nazareno delves into the queer potential within Afro-Brazilian religions, embracing and celebrating themes of fantasy, embodiment, and transformation. He draws inspiration from his observations of queer popular culture and the vibrant ballroom scene, seamlessly incorporating these elements into his artistic vision. Through his art, he creates a unique and powerful dialogue that explores and honours the intersections of queerness and Afro-Brazilian worldviews.

Nazareno's artistic journey is a profound exploration of his Afro-Brazilian heritage, seamlessly blending black cosmologies and worldviews with contemporary art forms and identities. Rooted in the rich cultural landscape of Minas Gerais, Nazareno's work draws inspiration from the resilient spirit of quilombo communities and the Afro-baroque architecture and decorative arts, while also paying homage to influential figures such as Aleijadinho. His interdisciplinary approach, combining garment construction with painting, reflects a deep connection to the *orixás* and the spiritual significance of Candomblé. Moreover, Nazareno's art serves as a powerful narrative of identity, embracing his queer identity within the inclusive framework of Afro-Brazilian spirituality. Through his technical skill and imaginative storytelling, Nazareno not only pays tribute to the legacy of his ancestors but also revitalises it, creating a body of work that resonates with both historical depth and contemporary relevance. 'Orixás: Personal Tales on Portraiture' marks a significant milestone in his career, showcasing his unique ability to merge past and present, tradition and innovation, in a celebration of Afro-Brazilian culture and identity.

by Jonathan Michael Square

BIOGRAPHIES



SAMUELE VISENTIN

Samuele Visentin is an independent contemporary art curator and art consultant based in London, UK. He has previously curated solo shows with William Brickel, Fabien Adele, Gabriel Mills, Patricia Ayres, Max Xeno Karnig, Sung Jik Yang and more. His mission through his consultancy is to advocate for artists through thoughtfully curated exhibitions and strategic placement of works in private collections.

“One of my strongest beliefs around art’s reason to exist is the result of humanity’s impulse to understand itself and to communicate it through symbols. As a whole, it led populations around the world to shape their many guises into as many forms as humanly conceivable, undertaking different conceptual and technical journeys. From the stencilled hands in the Cueva de las Manos (7,300 BC–700 AD) in Santa Cruz, Argentina to Mark Rothko’s divine washes of light (1903–1970), through the Benin Bronzes (Edo, now Nigeria, XIII–XVI century), a thin red line traverses the course of time and the world over, with the purpose to guide artists to be in the presence and at the service of something greater than the self. The result is a kaleidoscope of transcriptions and representations of a personal sense of divinity that still continues today.

I first became acquainted with the work by Gustavo Nazareno in 2021, on the occasion of his first solo show outside of Brazil. I know more now than I did then, but even when his artistic purpose still hid in the unread press release, my eye was already following the sharp contour of his matte charcoal shapes on smooth white paper, guided by a moon-glow shine that filtered through and revealed to me the outlines of his Bará series.”



GUSTAVO NAZARENO (b. 1994)

Gustavo Nazareno is known for the range of sources that his work draws on, from personal and cultural histories, fables and religious tales to Renaissance painting and fashion photography. His output mostly comprises oil paintings and charcoal drawings, both notable for the artist's deft manipulation of light and dark that recalls *chiaroscuro*, a technique of rendering illumination and shadow dating back to the fourth century. At Nazareno's hand, the dizzying breadth of his reference points, encompassing the cultural and spiritual histories of Africa, Europe and his home of South America, is distilled into enigmatic images that cannot be consigned to a single artistic category or movement.

Born in Três Pontas, Brazil, in 1994, Nazareno moved to São Paulo in 2018 on the advice of his Aunt, a practitioner of the Afro-Brazilian religion Umbanda, who had experienced a vision from a minor deity known as an Orixá. Self-taught as an artist, he has spent the remainder of his career painting and drawing scenes that originate in fables that he writes about Orixás from the Candomblé and Umbanda religions. Within Nazareno's practice, the boundary between faith, fiction and research is intentionally blurred, allowing him to call on all three to inspire his work. Each of his paintings begins with a sketch, which he then recreates in the form of *tableaux vivants*. For these, he dresses miniature wooden mannequins in garments that he creates, influenced equally by Haute Couture and traditional religious dress. When a sense of balance has been achieved, the image is painted, completing Nazareno's elaborate process.

Ambiguity and duality are two cornerstones of Nazareno's work, which seeks to interrogate tensions and similarities within various perceived binaries — fact and fiction, good and evil, God and man. The fables that his artworks reflect are set in a world where Orixás walk among us. "I do write about Orixás that exist, but I usually invent characters as well — not deities, but characters to create this syncretism between the human and divine", he says. His allusions to fashion photography deepen this relationship between spirituality and everyday life, imbuing his subjects' clothing with transcendental resonances.

Nazareno has been the subject of numerous institutional solo exhibitions in Brazil, most recently at the Museum of Modern Art Aloisio Magalhães in Recife (2024) and the Museu Afro Brasil Emanuel Araújo in São Paulo (2023). His work has also been included in group exhibitions at the Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil (CCBB) in São Paulo, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art in New York and the Inhotim Institute in Brumadinho, among others. He will be the subject of a forthcoming solo exhibition curated by Danny Dunson at the DuSable Black History Museum and Education Center in Chicago, scheduled for spring 2026.