



No Martins, *Campo minado (self-portrait) (Mine Field [Self-Portrait])*, 2019, acrylic on canvas, 7'2 5/8" × 14'1 1/4".

## No Martins

JACK BELL GALLERY

In the mid-twentieth century, Brazil's multishaded racial democracy may have looked good compared to Jim Crow policies in the United States, but lately, bolstered by the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro, the "tropical Trump," racism in Brazil has violently worsened. In a country where about half the population is nonwhite, three-quarters of the victims of police killings are black.

This was the grim context for the exhibition "Social Signs," displaying four of Brazilian artist No Martins's large, brightly colored figurative paintings. His black-skinned subjects include a defiant-looking mother standing protectively over her two children in *Dia do descobrimento* (Day of Discovery), 2019, evidently in no mood to celebrate Portuguese explorer Pedro Álvares Cabral's "discovery" of her country. *Após ler as notícias* (After Reading the News), 2020, presents a seated older man in a vivid red sports shirt wearing an inscrutable, unsmiling expression as he lays aside the day's newspaper. In *Estratagema* (Strategem), 2020, identical twins (or clones?) ponder the impossible opening move of a chess game whose pieces are uniformly white. The exhibition's largest work, *Campo minado (self-portrait) (Mine Field [Self-Portrait])*, 2019, showed the standing artist from the back, his hands up against the wall—placing the implicated gallery viewer in the empowered position of a police officer. The artist's prone body is surrounded by a scattered assortment of signs and symbols, including an off-balance scales of justice and a no-entry sign with the artist's own dreadlocked, walking silhouette—in lieu of a generic striding stick figure—inscribed behind the thick red diagonal line.

*Campo minado*, the artist has said, reflects the sense of displacement he feels living in São Paulo, the most populated city in all of South America. In fact, Martins often constructs paintings with figures slightly out of place, on the edge, or decentered. The mother and her children in *Dia do descobrimento* cluster to the left, their feet barely fitting into the picture. The *Estratagema* chess players' wheeled office chairs seem to be rolling gradually off the bottom edge, while the newspaper reader of *Após ler as notícias* sits to the side of the frame, his shirtsleeve partially off-canvas. Martins is influenced by artists such as Rosana Paulino, who in her work draws together textiles, found images, words, and objects to examine the damaging histories behind her experiences as a black Brazilian woman. Although Martins's symbolism can feel at times heavy-handed (the all-white chess set, the traffic light solely equipped with three red signals in *Dia do descobrimento*), his art, like Paulino's, rejuvenates the ongoing critical tradition of collage: a strategy that art historian Kobena Mercer has identified as one favored by Afro-modernists as a means to represent lives "collaged into history by contradictory forces." The artist makes clear that the collage of familiar street fixtures (a CCTV camera, striped yellow-and-black police tape) inserted into *Campo minado (self-portrait)* hardly appear innocuous to a young person of color like himself, but act as warnings addressed directly to him: the unwanted individual literally pictured in the no-entry sign.

In Kerry James Marshall's historical paintings, as Mercer has written, collage is combined with another avant-garde modernist aesthetic strategy: painterly abstraction. Martins also employs abstraction's flattened space, combining it with collage to great effect, in this case to foreground his subjects' strength and endurance. A flat blue-green street scene contrasts starkly with the red-shirted gentleman in *Após ler as notícias*; similarly, the twins' bold attire in *Estratagema*—raspberry-pink caps, white T-shirts, marine-blue pants, high-visibility orange sneakers—stands out against a featureless interior painted dull gray, ocher, and dusty salmon pink. Despite the onslaught of minatory messages—whether pasted on the walls or headlining the newspapers—Martins's larger-than-life figures resolutely refuse to be pushed out of the frame or fade quietly into the background.

— Gilda Williams