



ALBANO
AFONSO

SELF-PORTRAIT AS LIGHT

INTRODUCTION

Some of Albano Afonso's most intriguing work involves him radically perforating the surfaces of historical works of art including Manet's *The Luncheon the Grass* (1862) and Goya's *The Third of May 1808* (1814). But while the constellations of holes with which he riddles these iconic reproductions may at first seem horrifying to the art history purist, Afonso's process ultimately reveals a second painting through the porous surface. In so doing, two discrete entities bleed into a singular composition and forge an unexpected synergy – shedding autonomy to form something captivatingly in-between. Such is the enigma and opportunity of collaboration, where two partners erase their edges to cobble a shared space where one is seen and understood through the other.

Self-Portrait as Light is co-curated by the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) and 21c Museum, bringing together our organizations for the first time to co-present the Brazilian artist's first solo exhibition in the U.S. Afonso's practice transforms traditional genres—landscape, still life, and portraiture—into a multi-faceted, multi-media meditation on

physical and psychological perception. The gardens Afonso maps and mutates dissolve dichotomies between the wild and the domesticated, the organic and the artificial, while the shimmering constellations animate the twinned mirrors of interior and exterior space.

CAC Director and Chief Curator Raphaela Platow adds, "Afonso is one of Brazil's foremost artists, a generous human being, and has together with his life partner and fellow artist Sandra Cinto created one of the most unique private Art Academies for aspiring artists in Sao Paulo called Ateliê Fidalga. The way both he and Sandra participate actively in the international art world and at the same time share their knowledge and network with others who aspire to have careers as artists is deeply admirable. We are thrilled to co-host this exhibition with our neighbor 21c Museum Hotel – a timely exhibition that is poised to provide a miraculous experience to our audiences."

- **Steven Matijcio**, CAC Curator

- **Alice Gray Stites**, Museum Director and Chief Curator, 21c Museum Hotel





ALBANO AFONSO: GROUP-PORTRAIT

The self-portrait lives as a staple in virtually every Western art museum, spanning a multitude of eras and alcoves, projecting the gazes of self-assured artists as they stare out and remind us of their ongoing standing, singularity and influence. It is the iconic gesture of affirmation, materializing one's presence in object form and immortalizing the image with which the artist wishes to be revered forever more. Most self-portraits executed between the Renaissance and 20th century share a recognizable lexicon: picturing the painter in his studio, brush in hand, surrounded by the tools of his trade as a canvas waits nearby, poised for the next masterful act. This is the great artist as simultaneous sitter and surveyor, subject and author, speaker and receiver – swathed in a fortifying feedback loop that announces idealized individuality and his (less often, her) membership in the exclusive club known as art history. Yet as the 20th century progressed and various avant-garde movements began to break from existing rules, the once proud tradition of the courtly portrait was shattered as a relic of bourgeois obsolescence. In its place a de-centralized, multiplied understanding of the 'self as many' became our presiding paradigm: ushering the individual from face to face, role to role, in a masquerade ball that has only accelerated in the digital era. Online access and worldwide reach allows the Internet's ever-growing populace to inhabit any number of alter egos at once – seeding paradoxical terrain where exhibitionism and abandon proliferate behind the veils, proxies and pseudonyms this environment provides. The copious individual cycles through a variety of selves depending on the ensuing time and day, sliding across identity as a spectrum rather than a state. In the process, the once irreproachable singularity of the self-portrait yields to a more temporal, transitional face.

The Game after Caravaggio, 2006
Photograph
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

Masks are the ostensible antonym of the self-portrait, disguising one's "true" identity behind a fabricated façade. These false faces are, however, equally present in sacred, cultural and practical contexts – living as vehicles of sociological behavior that many anthropologists cite as crucial to the development and understanding of humanity. As catalysts for expression, empowerment and fantasy masks are vessels for an imaginative experience that the wearer may simultaneously conceal and desire – temporarily quieting one's given face to liberate a persona lurking within. The word itself aptly has a number of etymological origins, one of which includes the Spanish *más que la cara*, which translates to "more than one face", or "added face." Masks were also vehicles to exceed one's existing social rank, such as those worn in Greco-Roman feasts for Bacchus and Dionysius (c.200BC) where ordinary controls on behavior, class and decorum were suspended in the name of revelry. When early man wished to climb even higher, masks were used to broach the spirit world and associate the wearer with deities that imbued their actions with divine aura. In ancient Rome these spirits included deceased family members whose faces were cast in wax and turned into masks that would be performed by actors during funeral rites – mimicking their gestures while singing praise to their memory. In so doing, the past was brought to the present, the dead could frolic, and the living were multiplied across time.

This kind of pan-historical gathering echoes through the work of Albano Afonso, who has spent the past 15 years re-engineering the self-portrait from a declaration of individuality into a tapestry that embraces interconnectedness. In that time he has produced over 30 self-portraits, the earliest of which obscured his face with the blinding burst of a camera flash. By turning his lens towards a mirror and allowing light to take center stage, Afonso thereby cedes the composition's focal point to his artistic medium rather than the glory

of his face. Rather than the painter playing sun to his orbit of brushes and materials, Afonso literally and figuratively steps back: positioning his hands so that it appears he is holding up light as a glowing talisman, resting upon his shoulders like a mask. Light is the element which makes vision and the very process of photography possible and it is positioned here as such, as maker and muse, moving from implicit infrastructure to conspicuous component. The ensuing self-portraits also plumb various levels of visibility and art historical underpinning – presenting Afonso in the spirit of his predecessors. As he draws upon iconic renderings of palmists, card players and the play of mirrors by the Baroque master Caravaggio and the enigmatic surrealist Rene Magritte, Afonso allows sleight of hand to trump surface and stability. The fixed pose and flag planted firmly into history succumb to contingency as Afonso's portrait floats fluidly across every ensuing frame, multiplied and molten.

Face value is rendered as folly and a variety of figures gather within the frame of the self/portrait, thereby setting the course for Afonso's expansive body of perforated Old Master portraits to follow. In each we strain to see the artist staring at us through the holes of his heroes' self-portraits, creating a porous space where the visual identities of both artists fuse into one. These hybrid visages can consequently be read as iconoclastic exercises of the Oedipus complex – where the son must eviscerate the father to escape his shadow – but Afonso appears unable, and more so, *unwilling*, to shed the vestments of his artistic elders. As such, these pieces percolate and gather into group portraits, inseparable and interwoven like an extended family bloodline: speaking in a collective voice to the artist not as individual, but as aggregate.

As Afonso casts the bones beneath our skin in shimmering crystal, conflates canonical paintings and refracts the landscape into kaleidoscopic play, he insistently complicates the integrity of both the surface and the self. His images and objects are unabashedly open, convoluted and interdependent – eschewing the artifice of autonomy to forge an inclusive tissue where layers bubble, rise and live. And while these conditions are admittedly present in every work of art that has, is, or will be made, rarely are they so explicit. With every added mask, ghost, reference and relative, the richness of Afonso's holistic enterprise swells – seducing our gaze and evading our capture like the sparkling dance of the disco ball. His is a self-portrait without stasis or sovereignty.

- **Steven Matijcio**, 2015

ALBANO AFONSO

Albano Afonso (São Paulo, 1964) lives and works in São Paulo, Brasil. He graduated from Faculdade de Artes Alcantara Machado, Sao Paulo in 1990. Afonso's first solo show was presented in 1993 at Centro Cultural São Paulo. His work has since been exhibited at museums and galleries worldwide, including Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Niterói, Brazil; Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, Brazil; Mercosul Biennial, Porto Alegre, Brazil; Cuenca Biennial, Ecuador; Kawasaki City Museum, Japan; Museu de Arte Contemporâneo Español, Spain; Open EV+A, Limerick, Republic of Ireland.

The art of Albano Afonso is included in the collections of Colección Fundación ARCO, Spain; Centro Galego de Arte Contemporânea, Santiago de Compostela, Spain; Coleção Gilberto Chateaubriand, Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, Brazil; Inhotim, Centro de Arte Contemporânea, Brumadinho, Brazil; BES Collection, Lisbon, Portugal; University of Essex Collection of Latin America Art, Essex, UK; and 21c Museum Hotels, US.

Together with Sandra Cinto, Albano Afonso is the founder of Ateliê Fidalga, an organization that supports and advises young artists in Brazil.



Founded in November 1939 as the Modern Art Society, the Contemporary Arts Center was one of the first institutions in the U.S. dedicated to exhibiting the art of our time. In May 2003, the Center relocated to its first free-standing home, the Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art, designed by Zaha Hadid. The CAC focuses on new developments in painting, sculpture, photography, architecture, performance art and new media, presenting 6-8 exhibitions and 15-20 performances annually. Throughout its distinguished history, the CAC has earned a reputation for stimulating thought and introducing new ideas by presenting the work of diverse artists from around the world, including Robert Mapplethorpe, Jasper Johns, Nam June Paik, Pablo Picasso, Tara Donovan, Kara Walker and Andy Warhol.

WORKS EXHIBITED AT CAC

Albano Afonso (Brazilian)

Self-Portrait with Dürer, 2001
Perforated photograph on photograph
Collection of Susana & Ricardo Steinbruch

Self-Portrait with El Greco, 2001
Perforated photograph on photograph
Collection of Rita & Marcelo Secaf

Self-Portrait with Goya, 2001
Perforated photograph on photograph
Collection of Eduardo Leme

Self-Portrait with Rembrandt, 2001
Perforated photograph on photograph
Collection of Andrea & Jose Olympio

Self-Portrait with Rubens, 2001
Perforated photograph on photograph
Collection of Andrea & Jose Olympio

Self-Portrait with Titian, 2001
Perforated photograph on photograph
Collection of Helio Lauar

Self-Portrait with Tintoretto, 2001
Perforated photograph on photograph
Collection of Helio Lauar

Self-Portrait with Velázquez, 2001
Perforated photograph on photograph
Collection of Andrea & Jose Olympio

Paraíso, 2001-2005
Perforated photograph on photograph
Collection of the Bank Itaú Collection, Brazil

Self-Portrait with Light, 2001
Photograph
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

Self-Portrait with Yellow Light, 2002
Photograph
Collection of Miguel Chaia

Self-Portrait with Light, 2002
Photograph
Collection of Miguel Chaia

The Prove I, 2001
Photograph
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

The Reproduction after Magritte, 2001
Photograph
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

Self-Portrait with Light, 2003
Photograph
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

The Palmist after Caravaggio, 2004
Photograph
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

Still Life, 2006
Glass and wooden box, mirror on
human body anatomical skeleton model
and light projector
Collection of Laura Lee Brown &
Steve Wilson, 21c Museum Hotel

The Game after Caravaggio, 2006
Photograph
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

It's a Matter of Time – Judith and Holfernes,
2006/12
Perforated photograph on photograph
Collection of Sergio Carvalho

It's a Matter of Time – Samson and Delilah,
2001
Perforated photograph on photograph
Collection of Sergio Carvalho

It's a Matter of Time – 02 and 03 May, 2008
Perforated photograph on photograph
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

It's a Matter of Time – Lucretia, 2008/12
Photograph
Collection of Sergio Carvalho

Pendulum, 2010/2014
Crystal, bronze, anatomical model, mirrors
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

Paradise, September 2011, Rio de Janeiro,
2012
Photograph
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

*Crystallization of the Brazilian Landscape –
after Righini, A Tapir in the Brazilian Forest*,
2012
Photograph
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

Making Stars, 2014
16 Photographs
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

Maps, Rio de Janeiro, 2015
8 Photographs from the “Maps” series
Dry point on photograph
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

Crystallization of the Nature, 2015
Crystal
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo



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ALBANO AFONSO: ENCHANTED REALISM

Daydream transports the dreamer outside the immediate world to a world that bears the mark of infinity.

Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

The enchanted land- and light-scapes Albano Afonso conjures in his multi-dimensional art belong to the realm of the daydream: consciously conceived, shaped by imagination, suspended in fantasy and experienced in lived reality at once. Duality is a hallmark of Afonso's poetic practice, which transforms art's traditional genres of landscape, still life, and portraiture into dazzling, multi-faceted meditations on physical and psychological perception. Photographer, sculptor, installation, and light artist, Afonso is a contemporary alchemist of art history: his layered landscapes and bejeweled bones dissolve dichotomies between the organic and the artificial, between figuration and abstraction, between light and shadow, between interior and exterior space. Journeying through bodily, earthly, and celestial spheres, Afonso's immersive, experiential art extends the pictorial emphasis on light in Old Master painting through Impressionism and the 20th Century art of light and space to pose challenging questions about identity, time, and mortality.

A femur, a clavicle, along with other human body parts covered in mirror or rendered in bronze, and suspended alongside crystals, are activated by a pendulum and further animated by a projection in Afonso's room-size installation, *Anatomy of Light I*. The title applies to the artist's entire oeuvre, as light—natural, painted, projected—is his central subject; here, the anatomy is predominantly human, but the forms are composed as much of light as they are skeletal bodies. As writer Caue Alves notes, “to place mirrors on bones is also a way to make them disappear. And thus they become more of their surroundings, more of everything they reflect.” German artist Otto Piene's *Light Ballets* (1959-2014), composed of sculpted and mirrored forms that cast

light and shadow, are an evocative precedent for *Anatomy of Light*, as Piene also sought to transform the physical into the immaterial, and to reference the celestial.

Afonso's dazzling theatre of starry light and nuanced shadow expands upon the artist's own *Natureza Morte* series, which presents mirrored body parts in clear glass boxes, set in dark spaces and illuminated to create the reflections and refractions which become even more dynamic in *Anatomy of Light*. While referencing the centuries-old *memento mori* of still life painting, Afonso's figurative sculptures are animated as abstractions that transcend death. As Alves writes, “When two fragments of mirrored bodies reflect each other an infinite hiatus is formed... These reflections dissolve the body's bone structure and transform it into light.” The resulting immersive environment places the viewer within a starry sky, offering access to the infinite through the ephemeral projection of light.

Shadows dance with and within the sparkling light as well, in a spectrum of darkness which at times obscures the identify of the forms: do we perceive a human limb, a tree branch, a merging of both? *The Man and the Tree*, part of Afonso's *Illuminated Pictograms* series (2010), presents a semi-recumbent figure with a tree growing from his torso. Flesh and muscle, bark and branch are drawn in wire, dotted with microlamps—points of light, rather than mirrored projections. The breadth of Afonso's engagement with luminosity correlates to the science of quantum mechanics, to the study of how light, at the atomic and subatomic level, behaves like both particles and waves. Light, in Afonso's *Pictograms*, glows in points, while its reflections, refractions, shadows move through space in his installations, where the resident skeletons become mirrored particles. Reality—the imperceptible reality of microscience—is manifest in Afonso's art, interwoven with magic and metaphor to make visible what is unseen.



Paradises, 2012
Photographs on aluminum
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo



Illuminated Pictograms – The Man and the Tree, 2010
Photograph, lamps, light bulbs, thread, and mdf
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

Below ground level in *The Man and the Tree* is a photographic landscape, a genre deftly manipulated in several bodies of Afonso's work that examine the nature of perception. For Afonso, "landscape, especially the garden, is the stage to develop the human drama," says critic Paul Reis—the drama of what and how we see. *The Garden* series consists of groupings of photographs taken in public parks, botanical gardens, and other urban and suburban sites all over the world. Some images include one or more figures, and many suggest human presence through absence, while other photographs are framed in color or perforated with holes; a monochromatic image appears here and there, emphasizing a particular hue in the landscape. While the location and date are sometimes included in the title of a particular *Garden* (as is also true in Afonso's *Forests*, *Maps*, *Constellations* and *Landscape Crystallization* series), the aggregate of images undermines geographic identity. Views of ponds, trees, grassy lawns seen in contrasting light and shadow repeat, shift in scale and focus, and on occasion are interrupted by squares of color or perforations, rendering these landscapes enigmatic fields of mystery. The specificity of a time and location is negated by the suspension of time therein; Afonso dislocates the known to redirect our vision toward the unknown, or unknowable. Critic David Barro observes that in Afonso's landscapes, "all feeling of recognition is deactivated by the fragmentation of the setting. It is as if time is stopped, space contained...Deep down they are no more than deconstructions of the landscapes that are still left to us to inhabit... That is why he delves into the invisible and the visible, into the edge, into the parenthesis, into the fissures."

Fissures are presented as material as well as metaphor in the *Garden*, *Forests*, and *Paradises* which feature perforated photographs on aluminum. The dotted holes appear as portals of light in these layered and shimmering landscapes, and recall the mirrored surfaces of Afonso's skeletal forms, linking light,

nature, and the body. The mirrors situate the viewer within an image, while simultaneously enacting a profound displacement. Afonso utilizes the mirror as understood by philosopher Michel Foucault, as a utopia: “I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space... I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives visibility to myself.” The mirror shows us to ourselves, reveals the hidden, while reproducing infinity.

Repetition of form, color, and imagery are utilized to further explore the duality of the visible and invisible in Afonso’s *Maps*, *Constellations* and *Landscape Crystallizations*. Lines drawn in drypoint on the dark surfaces of landscapes appear as ray tracings mapping the movement of light across space, form, and time in Afonso’s *Maps*, uninterrupted by the frame of a diptych or a minimalist column of opaque color. The unfiltered sky above Sao Paolo is reproduced in the multi-panel color fields of *Constellation, Sao Paolo, Summer Days 2004/5*. Working in the tradition of the Impressionists, Afonso captures nature’s imagery at scheduled intervals over a period of time. Using a camera, rather than a brush and paint, the spectrum of hues in this register of skylscapes—blues, yellows, browns, pinks, and more—reflect both the sunlight and the electrical light that illuminate cities around the clock today: natural phenomena are now both organic and artificial. Like James Turrell’s skyspace environments, Afonso’s pictorial *Constellations* immerse the viewer in color, and in the range of sensations those colors evoke.

At first glance, the *Landscape Crystallizations* read as realistic photographs of dense, jungle-like forest environments. In some areas within these monumental images, saturated color and sharp contrasts between light and shadow may at times give way to exaggerated forms: the flat planes of a Cubist geometry emerge among the flora and fauna, the contours of leaves and plants becoming faceted and reproducing like renderings from digital

code—crystallized. Crystals are also featured in *Anatomy of Light I*, where they hang suspended alongside the mirrored and bronze sculptures, casting light and shadow, further dissipating forms into luminous emanations. The power to create balance, to harmonize energies, has long been attributed to crystals, and it is this invisible harmony these landscapes evoke. Photographed and manipulated forms blend and balance, while light—the light of the sun, the light in the mirror, the inner light of human consciousness—radiates in sun and shadow, alluding to the harmony of the bodily, earthly, and celestial spheres. Afonso’s vision of cosmic harmony is derived from the imperceptible physics that shape the micro and macroscopic spaces we inhabit, a reality articulated by neuroscientist Leonard Shlain: “Revolutionary art and visionary physics,” he asserts, “are both investigations into the nature of reality.” Albano Afonso’s realism embeds the figure in the landscape, reuniting the body with the earth in luminous waves and particles, creating a portrait of the universal within the individual, an interconnected self-portrait as light.

Alice Gray Stites, 2015

SOURCES:

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Still Life, 2006. Glass and wooden box, mirror on human body anatomical skeleton model and light projector. Collection of Laura Lee Brown & Steve Wilson, 21c Museum Hotel

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Steven Matijcio

Curator

Contemporary Arts Center

Alice Gray Stites

Museum Director and Chief Curator

21c Museum Hotel



A multi-venue museum, 21c was founded by Laura Lee Brown and Steve Wilson, contemporary art collectors and preservationists who are committed to bringing works of art to the public through innovative exhibitions and programs that integrate contemporary art into daily life. 21c Museum presents a range of arts programming curated by VP, Museum Director, Alice Gray Stites, including thought-provoking solo and group exhibitions that reflect the global nature of art today, site-specific, commissioned installations, as well as a variety of cultural events. The organization collaborates on arts initiatives with artists and cultural organizations worldwide, including North Carolina Museum of Art, MASS MoCA, Contemporary Art Museum Houston, The Barnes Foundation, Creative Capital Foundation, and others. Since opening in Louisville, KY in 2006, 21c Museum has presented more than 80 exhibitions, including *Simen Johan: Until the Kingdom Comes; Cuba Now!; Alter Ego: A Decade of Work by Anthony Goicolea; Blue: Matter, Mood, and Melancholy; Aftermath: Witnessing War, Countenancing Compassion; Seeing Now; Dis-semblance: Projecting and Perceiving Identity; and Wild Card: The Art of Michael Combs, a Fifteen-Year Survey.*

WORKS EXHIBITED AT 21c MUSEUM HOTEL

Albano Afonso (Brazilian)

Anatomy of Light I, 2014

Video, light projector, bronze, crystal, mirror, anatomical model, pendulum and steel cable

Landscape Crystallization, July 2013, Rio de Janeiro, 2014
Photograph

Constellations: São Paulo, summer days 2004/05, 2008
Photograph
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

Illuminated Pictograms – The Man and the Tree, 2010
Photograph, lamps, light bulbs, thread, and mdf
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

Landscape Crystallization, August, 2009, Venice, 2013
Photograph
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

Landscape Crystallization, June 2011, Berlin, 2014
Photograph
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

Landscape Crystallization, September 2012,
Botanical Garden, Rio de Janeiro, 2013
Photograph
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

Forests, 2001
Perforated photograph on photograph
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

Forests – Lisbon 2009, 2009
Perforated photograph on aluminum mirror
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

Maps, September 2013, Berlin, 2015
Drypoint on photograph
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

Maps, June 2011, Venice, 2015
Drypoint on photograph
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

Maps, October 2014, Rio de Janeiro, 2015
Drypoint on photograph
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

Blue Forest, 2008
Photograph
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

Jardim Madrid. Febrero de 2009 (polyptych), 2009
Photograph
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

The Woods, 2008
Photograph
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

The Garden – 01, 2010
Photograph
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

The Garden, 2010
Photograph and perforated aluminum
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

The Lake, 2008
Photograph
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

Paradises, 2012
Photographs on aluminum
Courtesy of Casa Triângulo

The Garden – The Reading I, 2010
Perforated photograph and photograph
Private collection

The Garden – The Bear and the Loner I, 2010
Photograph on aluminum
Collection of Moraes-Barbosa