

## ***Jardim do Império***

Délio Jasse

Opening: Saturday, March 22, 4pm - 7pm

March 22 - May 17, 2025

### *Délio Jasse's 'Imperial Garden', or The Garden of White Delights*

Délio Jasse has been a dedicated archival researcher for artistic purposes. He has delved into various kinds of visual and textual colonial and postcolonial archives to examine the complex ways in which the histories of European colonialism have left enduring legacies in their wake. Fascinated by the material, mechanical and chemical processes of analogue photography and other printing techniques like silkscreen, Jasse has also been highly committed to thinking about the manifold histories of the photographic medium itself. He has paid special attention to photography's colonial histories, including those related to its uses in ethnographic and other (pseudo)scientific classificatory knowledges (geological, botanical, zoological, etc.), territorial occupation, economic extraction, urban and rural planning, developmental propaganda, political surveillance, military warfare, as well as media and popular culture. In particular, Jasse has examined the visual record, often kept in private archives, of colonial white leisure, that is, of an outdoor life of hunting, partying and sunbathing, conjuring the white fantasy of a paradise on earth – 'The Garden of Earthly Delights' for (mostly) whites (to quote from the title of the famous 1490-1500 triptych by the Dutch Hieronymus Bosch which, on view at the Prado Museum in Madrid, contains its own cautionary tale of the hellish price to pay for delusional white excess that a sparse Black presence was, very likely, only meant to reinforce).

Jasse exposes the subjective positionality of the white photographic gaze in settler colonial contexts not only when such gaze captured the lives of the colonized (variously represented as: ethnographic specimen to be preserved as atemporal authentic; assimilated subject, permeable to progress and civilization yet never fully equal; post-abolition yet still enslaved mining and farming labour force; Black female nude, objectified and exoticized either as primitive picturesque unworthy of desire or as hypersexualized, easily consumable body or, ambivalently, as both). Jasse also reveals how the white gaze visually constructed whiteness itself, by drawing our attention to archival images in which Portuguese settlers depicted their own pleasurable lives in the tropics – a segregated playground of sorts, the setting for a wealthier, warmer and freer lifestyle than the one in the poorer, colder and more conservative metropole. At times, the white lens is also that of Portuguese soldiers conscripted to wage the 1961-1974 'colonial war'/ war of liberation in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau, for whom such a colonial playground became a complex, both

deadly and sensuous military arena, turning many into traumatized perpetrators while politicizing a few (namely, the ones who would overthrow the Estado Novo regime in 1974).

Jasse then reworks the selected archival images through various processes of visual and material experimentation, notably through formal and colour highlights, with which he interrupts the colonial visual narrative, redirecting the viewers' attention to details of Black life, subjectivity and agency that the white framing dismissed as unworthy of foregrounding. Jasse's use of superimposed and juxtaposed archival text (sometimes retrieved from the written backs of settlers' and soldiers' photographs and postcards, from their aerograms and other colonial documents; other times found in anticolonial, postcolonial or contemporary sources, like more recent letter and passport stamps, magazines and newspapers) becomes yet another critical strategy with which to guide the viewers' focus beyond the original white gaze and framing. By superimposing and juxtaposing visual and textual archival references, Jasse creates palimpsestic opacity, abstraction and fragmentation to disrupt colonial archival documents' and documentary photography's claims to representational transparency and epistemic objectivity, critically exposing colonial violence while trying to avoid its visual reenactment. He underscores the very materiality of the colonial archive and photography to disclose both the colonial power at play in representation and the ambivalent anxieties that such power play symptomatically betrays. Jasse's artistic interventions show how the colonial archive and photography may be critically read through inventive, and even fictive, creativity to suggest other possible, counter-hegemonic readings (as one may read the few Black presences in Bosch's mostly white earthly paradise beyond the proto-primitivist trope of exotic lust).

Being Jasse an Angolan and Portuguese currently based in Italy after many years of Lisbon-based struggle to access full citizenship and Portuguese nationality (finally obtained through the acknowledgement of his Portuguese ancestry), his interest in colonial histories and their diasporic, migratory, postcolonial, globalized and contemporary afterlives is also a deeply personal matter. Such interest is prompted by his own individual history, the history of his own familial ancestors, and the broader collective histories of the cities, countries and continents where he was born and has lived: from his native Luanda to his adopted Lisbon and Milan, between Angola, Portugal and Italy, Africa and Europe. This multifaceted personal and collective cartography becomes visible in Jasse's work, which has more recently included references to the oft-neglected histories of Italian colonialism in Libya, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia and to their contemporary legacies, as well as references to the colonial histories of other Portuguese-speaking African contexts like Mozambique, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau and São Tomé and Príncipe.

However, Jasse's more recent work also acknowledges how pre-, colonial, anti- and post-colonial African histories have always been shaped by border crossings, notably given the imperial imposition of the artificial cartography established at the Berlin Conference (1884-1885). Jasse thus includes archival instances opening onto the histories of French colonialism in Algeria and Belgian colonialism in present-day DRC (Democratic Republic of the Congo, former Zaire), and

southern African circulations between colonial Mozambique and apartheid South Africa, among others. Without neglecting the specificities of each context, Jasse considers how the various European colonial projects shared the similar aim, for which they competed, of access to all sorts of resources for the economic benefit of their elites – a reality that, now being propelled under new globalized guises by new (alongside the same old) agents of so-called progress and development, is far from over.

Back to Lisbon, Jasse's 'Garden of Empire' also invites local and visiting viewers to recognise the enduring coloniality at work in the city, the country, the continent and beyond. In Lisbon, former imperial gardens (where colonial botanical specimens were kept, studied and enjoyed, and the empire was advertised and celebrated through colonial exhibitions with humans on display) have become some of the hotspots of a tourism-based economy sustained by a precarious labour force who cannot access decent housing. Indeed, racial capitalism's imperial gardens for exclusive delight have always been gated, their borders policed, and their trespassing punished, allowing the exploited labour force, on which they rely, to come in only through the back door. Compared to other European colonial nations, Portugal came to historically occupy a somewhat paradoxical position as both a peripheral colonizing power and an underdeveloped (or even primitive) seaside garden, picturesquely enjoyed by northern Europe. Since the end of both the dictatorship and the empire in 1974-1975, their monumental urban remains have continued to feed the conception of a (comparatively) benevolent colonial past to be celebrated and, more recently, the gentrifying logic of an intense mass and luxury tourism. Jasse's 'Garden of Empire' reminds us that, rather than having been simply dismantled, old fences have actually been replaced by more sophisticated and powerful new walls.

Ana Balona de Oliveira, March 2025.