

Definite and Pressing Problems

Justin Randolph Thompson

Opening: Saturday, March 22, 4pm - 7pm
March 22 - May 17, 2025

Definite and Pressing Problems - An Echo

The echo is never a neutral and finished repetition, but rather an act of re-signification, a strategy of resistance to the trajectories of history. Those narratives that are officially recognized tend to consolidate a single perspective, on the contrary, the echo is configured as a device of dispersion and multiplication, a zero vector that destabilizes the centrality of the source with the capacity to amplify marginalized voices. The exhibition *Definite and Pressing Problems* is configured as an investigation into memory, an active listening experience that invites us to tune into the frequencies of a dissonant history made of echoes and reverberations. The exhibition presents itself as a site of temporal stratification, in which cycles and patterns of history pulsate, waiting to be recognized. Justin Randolph Thompson operates precisely in this tension between presence and absence, between the historical document and the speculative imagination, between what has been and what could have been.

Using everyday materials – conference reports, newspaper clippings, telegraph fragments and also shoe polish, quilt fragments– the artist constructs a language of assemblage that does not limit itself to recovering forgotten episodes, but questions the very possibility of narrating the past without giving in to the preordained hierarchies of official historiography. His practice, as elaborated for *Definite and Pressing Problems*, his first exhibition in Portugal, is rooted in what poet Melvin Tolson called the “merry go round of history” and in a critical reflection on the inheritance of a lineage of Pan-African conferences like those organized by Du Bois Thompson’s work expands beyond the confines of the archival evidence to connect with a broader dimension of radical idea making and acquaintanceship, intertwining elements of his own family biography – in particular the mythical figure of his geologist grandfather Randolph Bromery– with a reflection on the epistemic value of the self and the collective. How might we understand the nature of this operation? The form of a theatrical dramaturgy comes to mind. Thompson’s paintings, in which emblematic figures such as young men supporting elders on their shoulders seems to evoke the epic classicism of Aeneas and Anchises, but are part of a entangled web of references in which Western tradition is simultaneously recognized and dislocated. The title of one painting series in the show, *The Crisis of the Black Intellect* opens a semantic fracture that catapults the visitor into another space of meaning: who is the artist questioning, himself or the viewer?

From this perspective, Thompson's paintings investigate the shortcomings of intellectuality in contexts like that of negritude of notions of global Blackness, problematizing the construction of paternity through a metaphorical analysis that could recall Derek Walcott's reinterpretation and references to the relationship between Anchises and Aeneas, as well as Harold Cruse's classic *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967). The artist's provocation manifests itself in his ability to produce a crisis within the viewer, imposing a reflection on the ways in which cultural references are codified, transmitted and reinterpreted. This is not a simple erudite game, but rather an act of intellectual resistance that destabilizes the authority of canons and opens up new possibilities of meaning.

The painted sound based sculptures amplify this tension, enveloping the viewer in a rhythmic landscape that questions the commodification of black thought. The theme of "recall and repetition", referring to historical congresses such as the one held in Lisbon in 1923, is intertwined with a reflection on cultural transmission and the resonance of the diasporic experience. The overlapping of materials, voices and signifiers becomes a method to deconstruct the monolithic nature of the archive and to rethink the relationship between orality, writing and memory. In this stratification of meaning, Thompson's work reminds us of the thinking of authors such as Édouard Glissant and Saidiya Hartman. If the latter, with her *Wayward Lives*, explores deviant lives that escape imposed categorizations, Thompson elaborates a poetics of dispersion in which the imperceptible becomes perceptible, absence becomes matter, silence, an echo. The exhibition, then, is not only a reflection on memory, but a device that generates a reverberation capable of destabilizing our way of inhabiting history. The artist orchestrates this exhibition with rigor, directing a chorus of voices that propagate through time and space, questioning the sedimentations of the past, the fractures of history and the possibility of building narratives that are not simply repetitions, but acts of resistance, transformation and reflection.

Jermay Michael Gabriel, March 2025.