

Almeida & Dale

THE ARMORY SHOW

2023



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Leonilson

1957-1993

The work of Brazilian artist José Leonilson (1957 - 1993) has been recognized for its uniquely personal vision on themes such as identity, human relationships, existential issues, and sexuality. He is widely regarded as one of the main representatives of the group of artists called *Geração 80* [Generation 80], whose work emerged in a time of intense social upheaval in Brazil, proposing a turn toward subjectivity and an appreciation of the "joy of painting". For the Armory Show 2023, Almeida & Dale presents an exclusive opportunity to discover Leonilson's oeuvre through a specially curated selection of works produced between 1980 and 1992 - a year before his death. The selection includes drawings and paintings produced on paper and canvas, as well as embroidery works made on fabric, demonstrating the range of media and the experimental approach adopted by the artist.

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Far beyond its contribution to the renewal of Brazilian art as part of *Geração 80*, Leonilson's work has gained international recognition for its connection to an international generation of artists, mostly active in the 1980s and 1990s and who worked on themes related to intimacy, love, and homosexual eroticism, both in their private and collective dimensions, as well as with issues related to the AIDS crisis during that period. Leonilson's career, at once brief and powerful, ended abruptly with his death in 1993 after complications caused by HIV/AIDS. The artist left behind a sizeable body of work that has secured his place in the history of contemporary art.

This is reflected in his presence in high-profile institutional collections, including all the major Brazilian museums, and international collections such as MoMA, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Tate Modern, Museo Reina Sofia, Centre Georges Pompidou, among others. Leonilson's work has been the subject of recent solo shows such as *Leonilson: Drawn 1975-1993*, presented at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art; Moderna Museet; Malmö Konsthall and Serralves Museum. In the New York context in particular, this presentation brought by Almeida & Dale to the Armory Show

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succeeds the exhibition *José Leonilson: Empty Man*, presented at America's Society in 2017 and which highlighted Leonilson's relationship with the city of New York, many times visited by the artist between the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Shortly after Leonilson passed away, a group of his family members and close friends founded *Projeto Leonilson* - an institution dedicated to cataloguing, preserving, and promoting his work - which has collaborated with Almeida & Dale in numerous projects, including the solo exhibition *Leonilson. Political Body*, curated by Agustín Pérez Rúbio, currently on view at our main gallery in São Paulo. This solo presentation organized by Almeida & Dale offers the audience at the Armory Show the opportunity to discover an eloquent selection of works by one of Brazil's most celebrated artists, whose oeuvre remains strikingly current.

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For the two frightened young men it was like a war, 1980
gouache on colored paper
13 x 18 7/8 in (33 x 48 cm)
(8318)

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In works from the early period one can observe fantastical themes that are very close to the surreal, reminiscent of cosmic and phantasmagoric landscapes. Composing the painting, two figures at the sides of the canvas resemble tree trunks without their canopies. They are wide-eyed and frightened. The first looks up at the sky, dumbfounded, and the one behind him shows an expression of astonishment in the midst of graphics very characteristic of the drawings from those years. Shapes that most resemble plants compose the telluric nocturnal scene seen on the canvas.

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Skin, 1983
acrylic and metallic paint on canvas
57 7/8 x 42 1/8 in (147 x 107 cm)
(13653)

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An ambiguous or contradictory painting by Leonilson. Neither an ecological manifestation nor a defense of animals, it is a good-natured work that turns the skin, its shape and its patterning, into a painting. The pattern of a skin serves as a field and a place for Leonilson to paint two lakes and a brown spot that looks more like a peak or a fissure in the "earth". There is nothing more than the simulation of a jaguar's skin hanging on the wall, decorative, to indicate a hunt or the perversity of an animal slaughtered as a trophy. Leonilson's jaguar skin is reminiscent of the way people hang skins on the walls of their homes, like absent bodies that recall the artist's own way of hanging his canvases, representing bodies that transcend and interact with time.



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Me alone, 1987

acrylic and metallic paint and colored pencil
on unstretched canvas

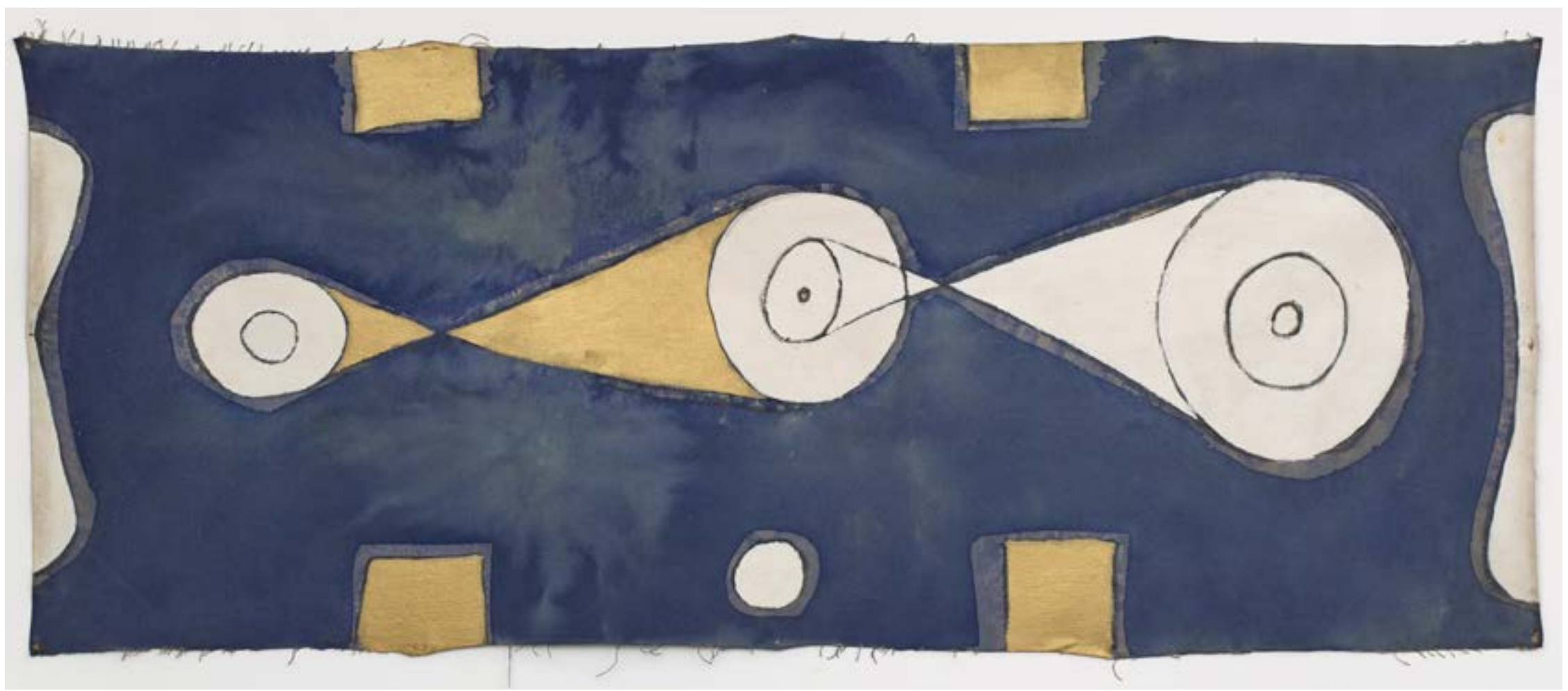
41 7/8 x 64 1/8 in (110,5 x 167,5 cm)

(14414)

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Me alone. Loneliness is a recurring theme in the artist's work, which he uses as an autobiographical field for making art. In this painting with its recurring symbols from Leonilson's visual lexicon, the hourglass or infinity symbol can speak of the passage of time, a glass of wine can speak of being alone, the mountain-island can speak of isolation and solitude, the buoy can say something about the castaway and in the center, the figure of a man swirling in the tunnel of time or in the eye of a hurricane or the endless hole at the center, like an abyss, the infinite. In this painting, Leonilson expresses a feeling and a moment of that feeling. A page from a diary.

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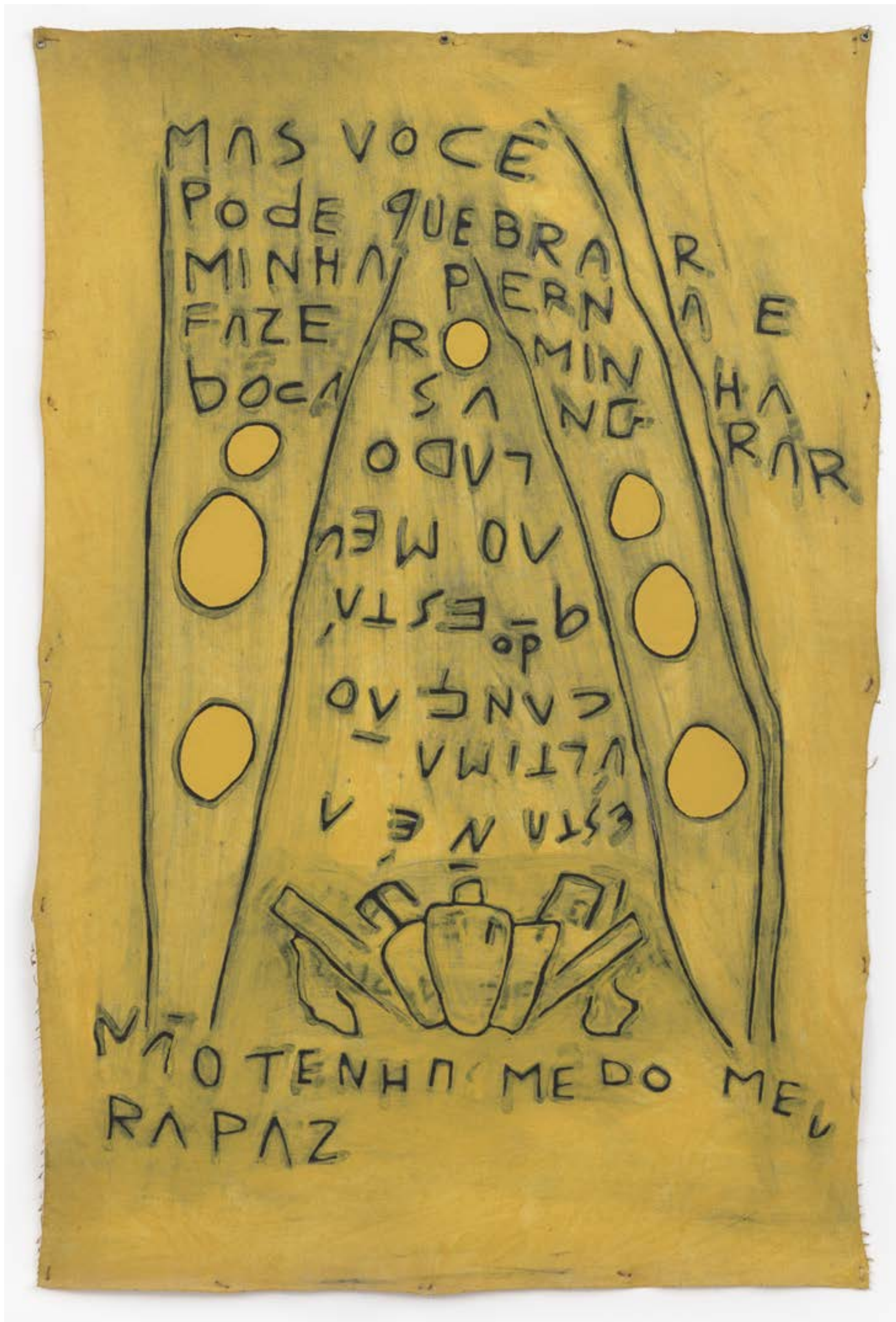


Elegance and continence, 1987
acrylic, metallic paint and cutout on canvas
25 5/8 x 61 3/4 in (65 x 157 cm)
(1649)

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An hourglass, a symbol of infinity, a purple background and gold markings are the elements that make up this canvas. Using this symbolism to talk about memory and time passing is part of Leonilson's narrative. But his use of color is not random, it is an existential choice, and should not necessarily be related to feelings and the moment of choosing which color to use. In the artist's own words, he often went by what he had at hand when choosing paint. Why green and not purple? He would make this decision while looking at the tubes of paint. Purple is a color linked to spirituality, but in this painting it wouldn't be fair to associate it with a simple representation of an existential state.

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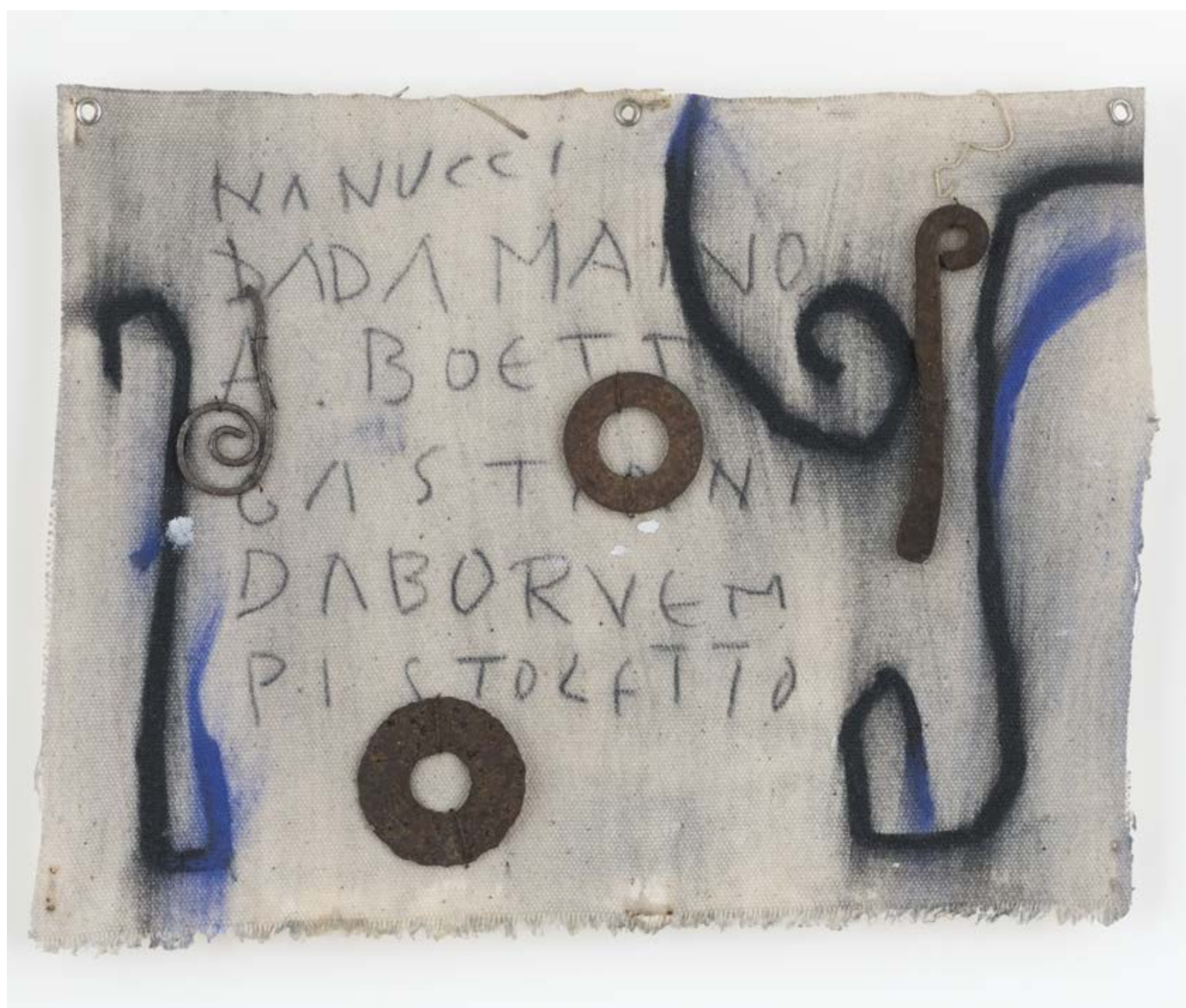
Don't be afraid my boy, c. 1988
acrylic on unstretched canvas
41 3/8 x 27 1/2 in (105 x 70 cm)
(14416)

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In this painting, Leonilson appears to be giving advice to himself. He asks the "lad" to be courageous. Be firm. Be strong. It's as if he's conversing with himself – the painting as a narrative of a conversation with oneself. The painting is vertiginous: text on both sides, inverted, covering the whole canvas and holes drawn in what could be two legs. At the bottom center, there appears to be a heart with graphically incomprehensible elements, speaking of passion and the violence of passions that can cause harm. It seems to be advising Leonilson to take courage and let himself be carried away by passion. All this is the theme of his work, which speaks of his own feelings. Being sensitive. It's a canvas of sensitivities.

MAS VOCE
PODE QUEBRAR
MINHA PERNA
FAZE ROSSO MINHA
BOCA OS ANGINHA
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NO MEU
9° ESTÁ
OP
CANCER
ULTIMA
ESTÁ NEM
NEM
TO TENHA MEDO
PARAZ

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Untitled, 1988

acrylic and metal on canvas

9 x 11 3/4 x 1/4 in (23 x 30 x 0,5 cm)

(13624)

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Lists of the names of influential artists and people in art and fashion will appear on canvases from the late 1980s. A mode of painting with text, inscribing in his paintings lists of names, things and art movements of interest to Leonilson, made on pieces of canvas without a chassis. One of the characteristics of his paintings and embroideries (on these scraps) will be their ambiguous aspect of visual poverty, which is intentional. Canvases such as this untitled one from 1988, with frayed fabric, "badly" painted and cut unevenly, are hung on the wall by the artist without a frame. The accidents and what is "poorly done" are incorporated into his canvases, which are understood as objects, allowing for interaction with time (atmospheric and from exposure). Rolling, rippling, fraying, unraveling and collecting dust are elements that will be incorporated into the canvases and embroideries.

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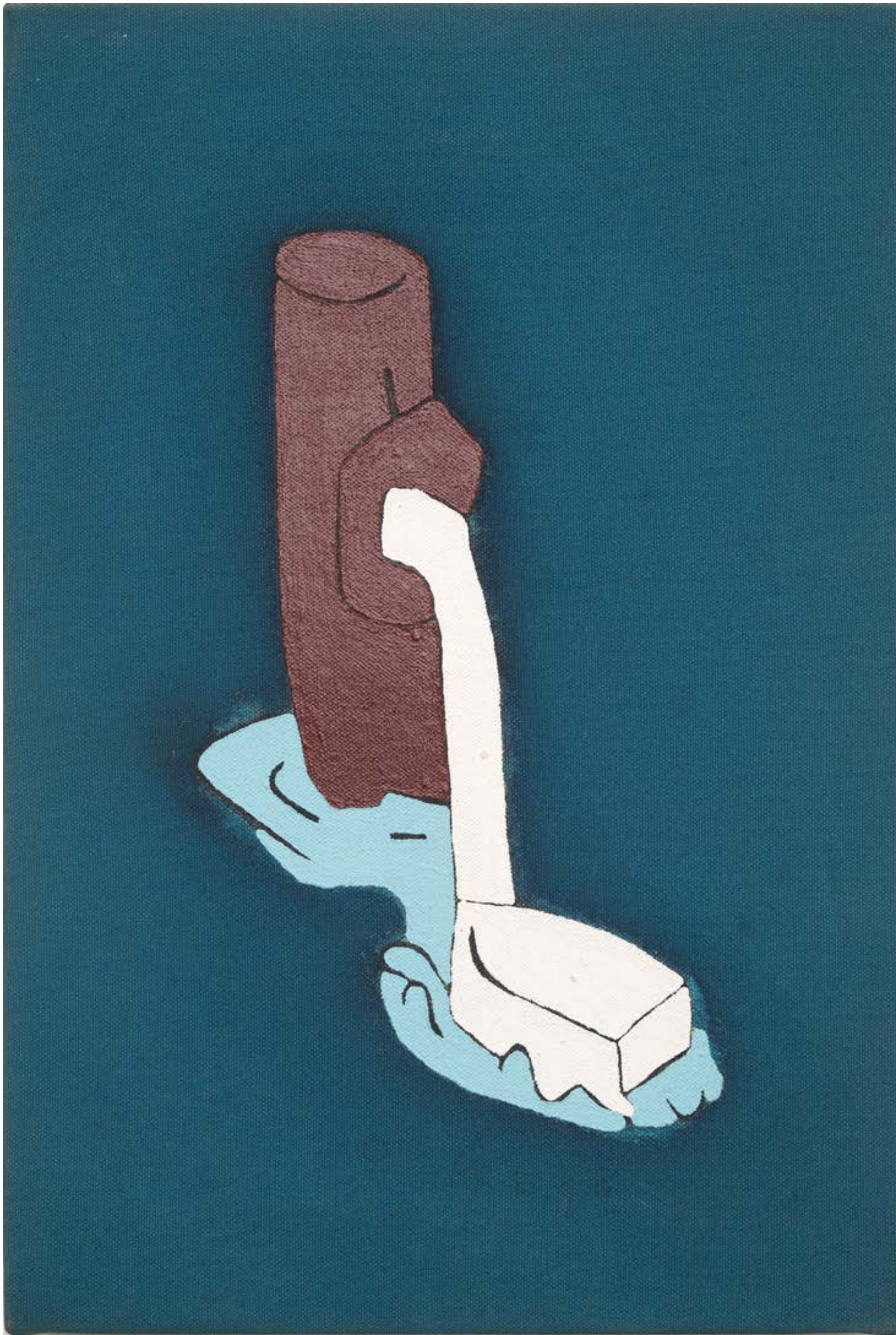


Green flag with n°s, c. 1991
acrylic and thread on canvas
20 1/8 x 76 1/8 in (51 x 193,5 cm)
(1647)

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A pennant-shaped canvas that can be viewed both horizontally and vertically, it presents numbers in a disconnected arrangement, leaving the question of the artist's intention with this numbering hanging in the air. We don't know for sure here, but the artist may use numbers as signs or as purely graphic elements. But they often appear as symbols related to time, with dates, hours, weight, height and age, as if they were marking and dating an intimate diary of years, days and hours.

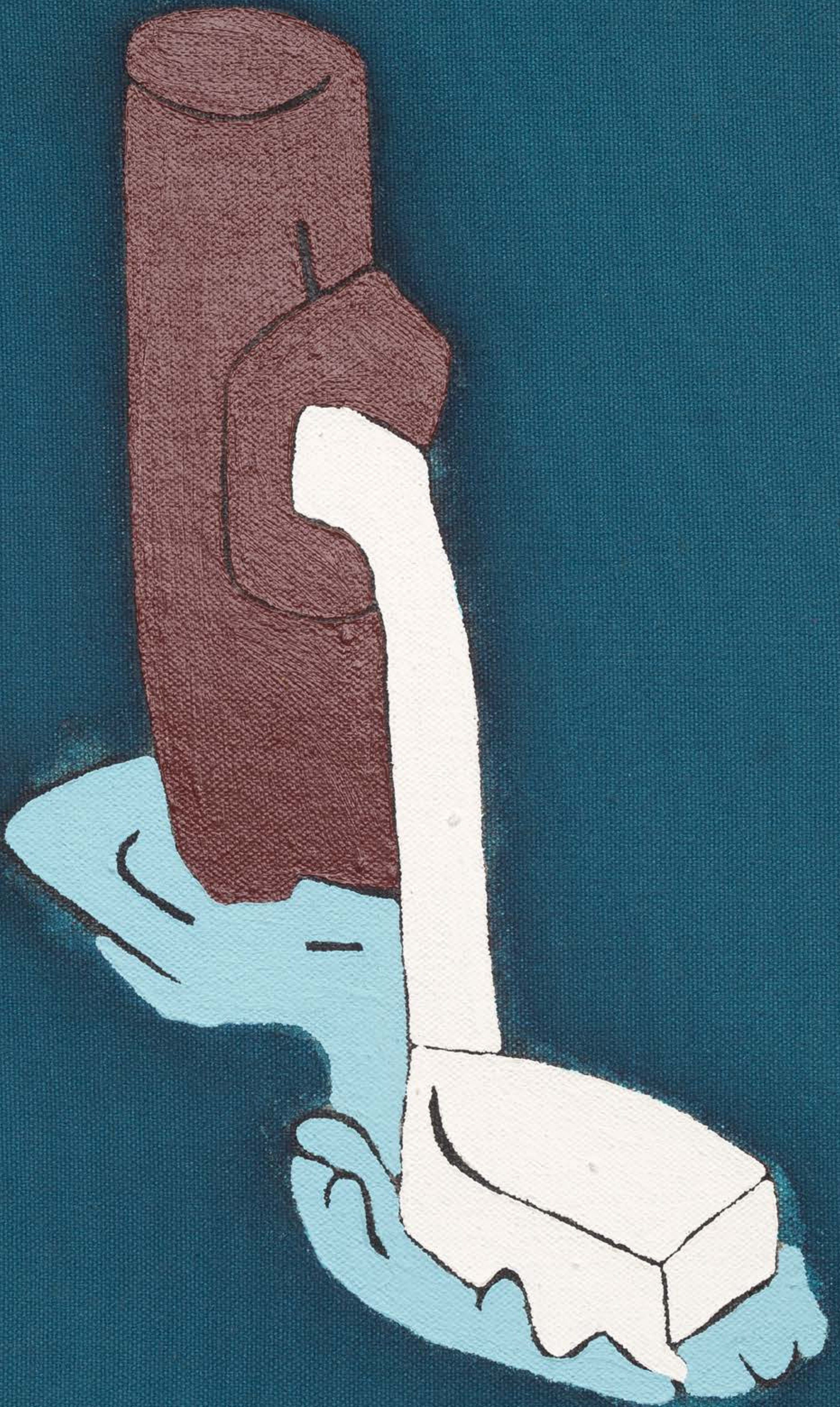
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The price, 1992
acrylic on canvas
17 3/4 x 11 3/4 in (45 x 30 cm)
(2065)

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This painting from the end of Leonilson's career is figurative, yet it's difficult to understand what he painted. There is a disconnect between the painted image with its deep blue background and the title, *The price*. It's not common to be in doubt about an image painted by the artist, but in this painting, there are forms that don't make it very clear what the scene is about. In an effort to decipher this simple painting, it seems to resemble the long neck of a swan with its head lodged in a wooden trunk surrounded by water. The title, *The price*, in keeping with the poetics of texts (titles) and symbols used by the artist to set up his narratives, makes us think of the cost of passions, the cost of loves and the cost of living with all the risks. Perhaps this little painting speaks of fear. The fear of "loving well enough" (title of a drawing).



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Untitled, 1992
acrylic and thread on canvas
36 3/4 x 21 5/8 in (93,5 x 55 cm)
(8919)

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This painting features recurring elements in Leonilson's artwork such as the exploding bottle in reference to volcanoes, which in turn reference the artist's body. Clouds of smoke and lava emanate from the bottle as if they were overflowing rivers. Red and yellow in the background, warm colors that also signal emotional heat. Bottles appear in his work as bodies that confine passions, volcanoes in eruption, ready to explode. Leonilson does not simulate the canvas but makes it evident when he paints four cuts from which golden (yellow) or incandescent (light emanating) lava flows. The sign of the volcano is one of the natural elements he most often represents in his work. A sensitive equivalence that represents a state of the body (in love), ready to explode.



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Truth; fiction, 1990

thread and silk on linen canvas

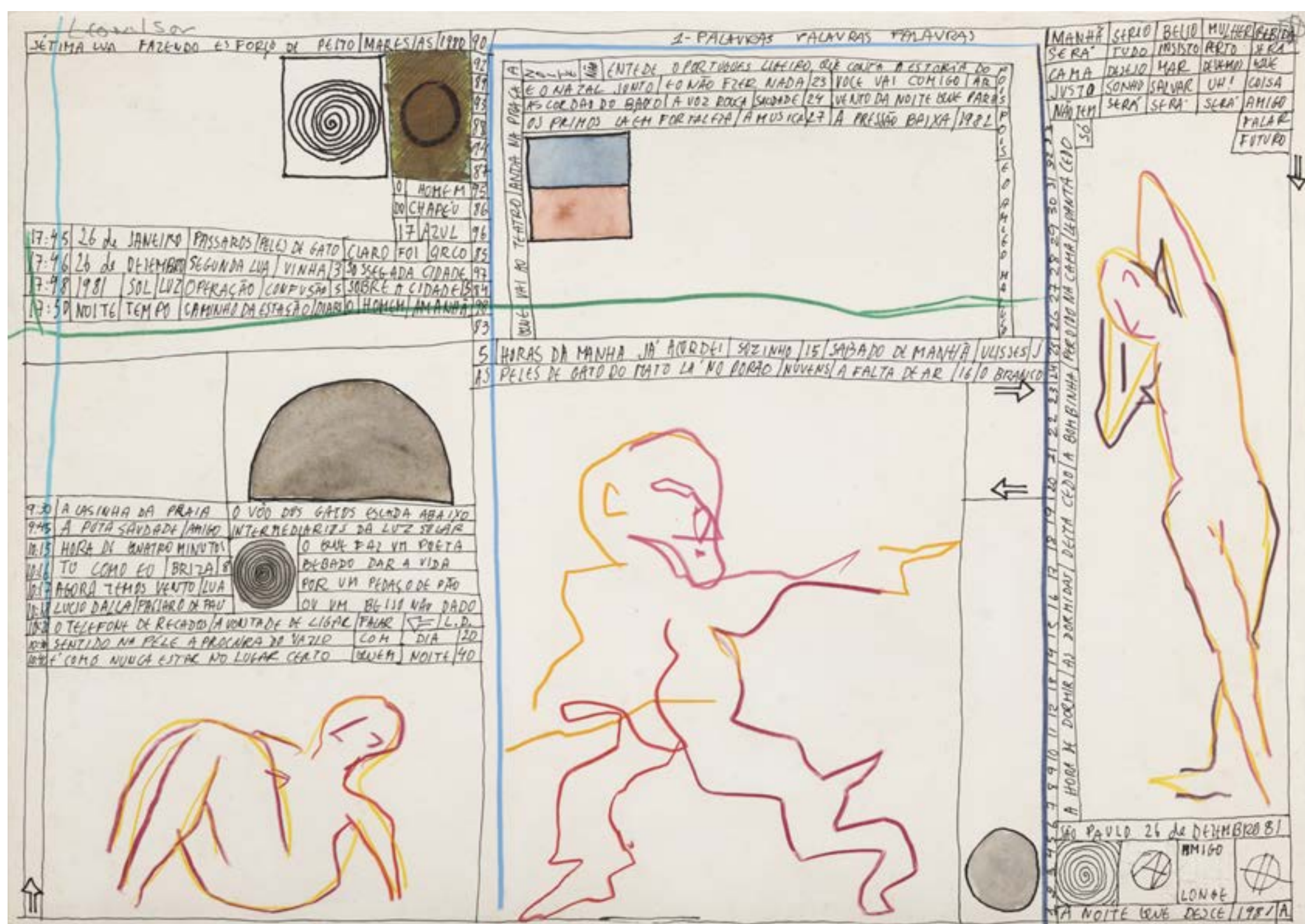
12 1/4 x 10 1/4 in (31,5 x 26,3 cm)

(8918)

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Leonilson is a romantic artist, always talking about himself. This embroidery is no different: the conductive thread is the state of passion. On the machine-embroidered canvas (few of his embroideries use this technique), the heart pierced by an arrow evokes Cupid's arrow wound. It is there to expose a state of passion complemented by the words truth-fiction, which could be translated as truth-lie (fiction as invention, as a lie, in other words). It's about the duality of the feelings of the person in love, part of a game of love where you don't know when you're telling the truth or when you're lying.

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The descending night, 1981
 watercolor, permanent pen, colored pencil and
 hydrographic on paper
 13 3/8 x 18 7/8 in (34 x 48 cm)
 (12646)

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The descending night refers to a moment in the artist's day. The nightfall, the twilight or dusk of the title, situates us in this work which, in turn, serves as a page from a diary in which he makes various notes on recollections, encounters, places, times, dates and thoughts that occurred on December 26, 1981, in São Paulo. Leonilson seems to pinpoint the time when thoughts occurred to him by writing down what he felt, moments such as "wanting to call", or "feeling it on my skin", "looking for emptiness", "like never being in the right place" and so on. There is a repetition of the symbol of the time tunnel or infinite time represented by the spiral at three different points in the drawing, which also has arrows indicating direction from one place to another on the sheet of paper, which also suggest the artist wandering, or the three figures of little men sitting, walking and lying down, also suggesting moments of that day. A drawing from the beginning of his career that already foreshadowed his autobiographical work and the use of text and words that would later become hallmarks of his work.

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Untitled, 1983
colored pencils on paper
13 3/8 x 18 7/8 in (34 x 48 cm)
(1017)

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A sofa in perspective, hovering on a white sheet of paper, dated 1983, with graphics characteristic of the artist's work in the first half of the 1980s. The drawing bears similarities to the work of the "80s Generation", as the artists from the first half of the decade were known. With its intense colors, the retro sofa with midcentury modern feet was fashionable in homes and the drawing could be read, within the imagery of the artist's narratives, as a place for gatherings, conversations and contemplation. This is how furniture, cars and animals appear in this phase of his work – with lots of color and humor.

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Sheltering sleep, c. 1986
colored pencil on paper
18 7/8 x 13 in (48 x 33 cm)
(2006)

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Leonilson used his work to talk about himself through an autobiographical manner of drawing and painting. In this drawing, he brings the subject into the work with the melancholic image of a small man sleeping in what could be a representation of the tunnel of time. Subjectively it could represent receptivity to life with its spirals and whirlpools, indicating the passage of time. The simplified figure of the man with a watch on his left arm is the purest representation of the human being projected intimately onto the body-canvas-artist.

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Untitled, c. 1986

metallic pencil and colored pencils on paper

18 7/8 x 13 in (48 x 33 cm)

(9781)

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A small image of a huge sports stadium (the Maracanã?) drawn in metallic pencil. The stadium floats above the dashed lines that represent water and rivers in the work, and inside it is blue. It's a building in the middle of a flood and the inside is immersed in water. It's possible to think of stadiums as being like bottles, elements that contain or store, that shelter, and even protect. Lines around the stadium give the idea of vibration or movement, as if it were vibrating and moving (vibration caused by the crowds?). The atmospheric effect of El Niño caused heavy rains in the south and southeast of Brazil that year, 1986, which leads us to believe that Leonilson, as if he were keeping a diary, was telling us about the catastrophes of those days.

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Untitled, 1986
acrylic, gouache and ink on paper
7 1/8 x 9 1/2 in (18,5 x 24 cm)
(10177)

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A small man with his hair blowing in the wind is the simplest drawing Leonilson could create to represent a human being, almost without definition. Minimal lines provide the simplified shape and, starting from the human figure, develop the drawing that is being constructed within the quadrilateral that occupies a small area of the sheet of paper. The element water covers everything in the drawing and takes up almost the entire sheet of spiral notebook paper. In the case of this narrative drawing, the little man clings to the dolphin, which is swimming speedily over the sea's undulations. The drawing also shows the symbol for infinity in the form of the number 8, which, along with the little fish, are among the most recurrent signs in his work. The number 8 and the hourglass are associated with the infinity symbol and when they appear in his artwork are referring to the passage of time and the time of memory.

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The thoughts of the heart - miniature, c. 1988
hydrographic on paper
3 1/4 x 4 in (8,4 x 10 cm)
(12643)

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This drawing is a preparatory study for a painting with the same title. In this drawing, a small cut-out of paper covered in red felt-tip pen bears several of the symbols that the artist will have at hand to tell of his passions, of a love-struck heart with all its dilemmas of conflicting amorous thoughts. The crossed swords in the center describe love as a duel or a struggle between two people.

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Like the waterfalls - miniature, c. 1988
hydrographic on paper
3 1/4 x 2 1/2 in (8,2 x 6,2 cm)
(12644)

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Leonilson's drawings were like pages from a diary where he expressed feelings and longings, almost confessional. In this case, natural elements are used to represent states of the soul and forms of feeling. Like the cataracts, it is a drawing in preparation for a large painting. A river runs through the blue head of the human figure. Like thoughts, the river follows its natural course, carrying and washing everything from its banks, flowing into cataracts, currents and waterfalls until it reaches the ocean. Why not here, have life as a catharsis that leans over into the abyss?

COMO

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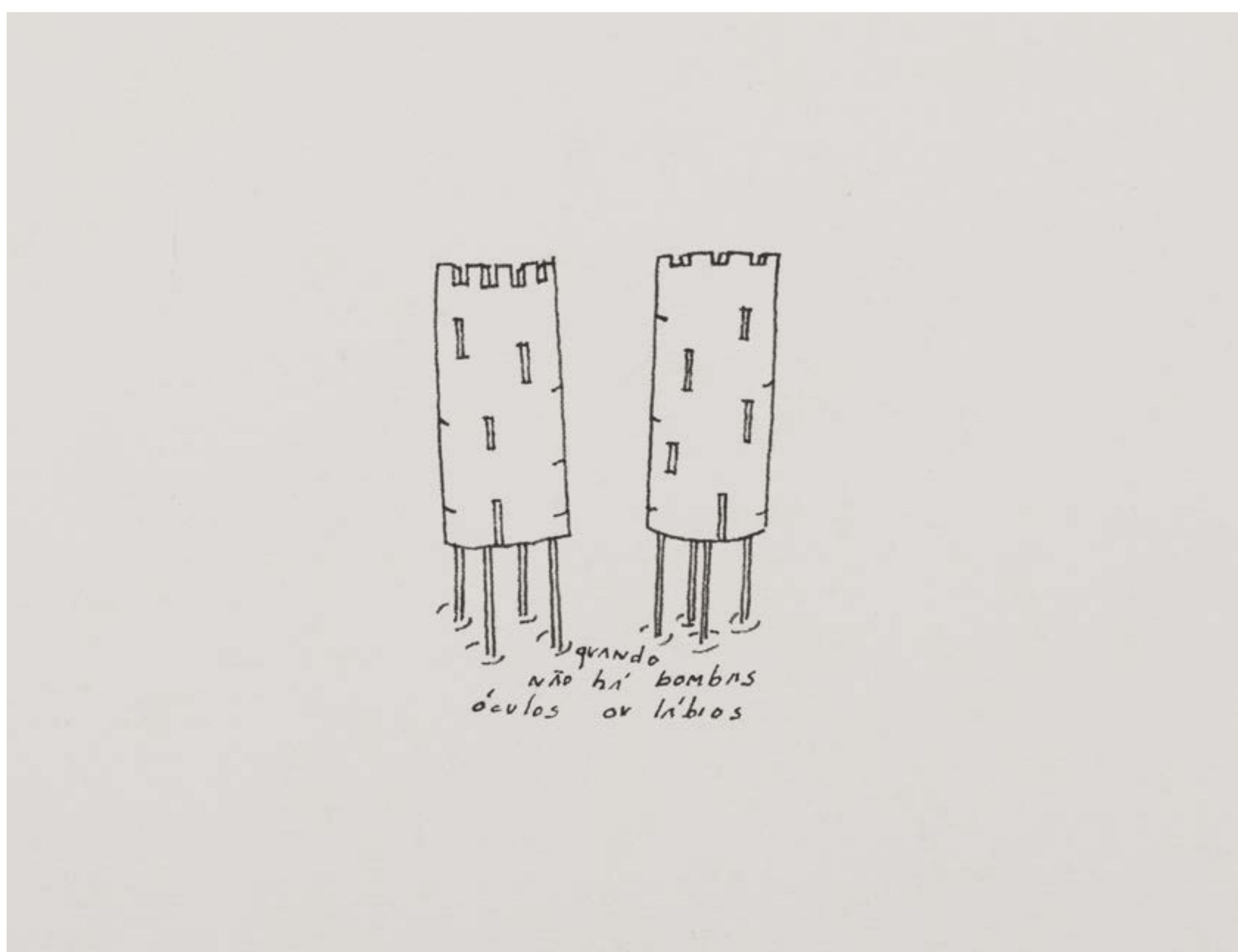
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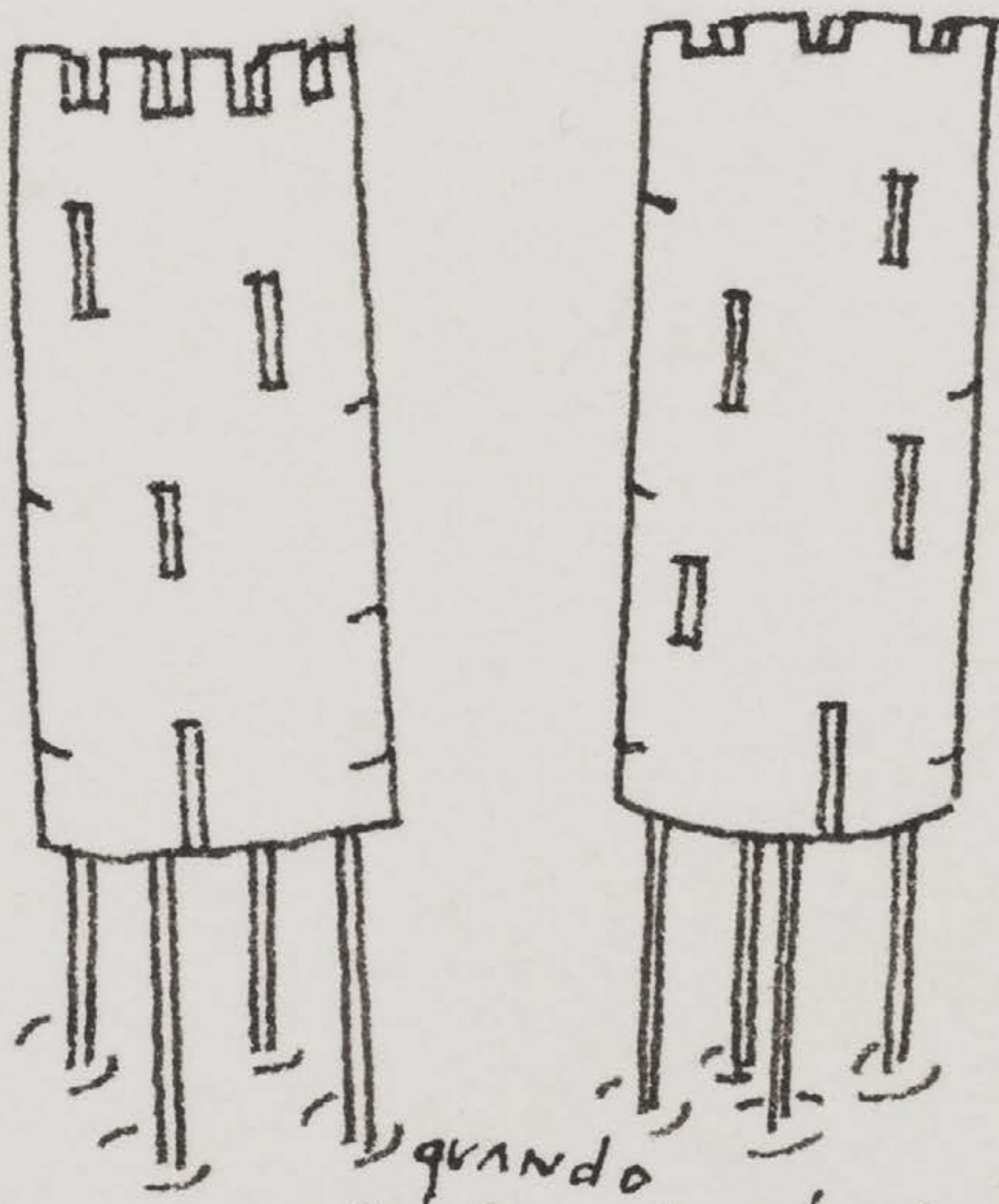
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When there are no bombs, glasses or lips, c. 1989
permanent pen ink on paper
10 3/8 x 13 1/4 in (26,3 x 33,6 cm)
(0432)

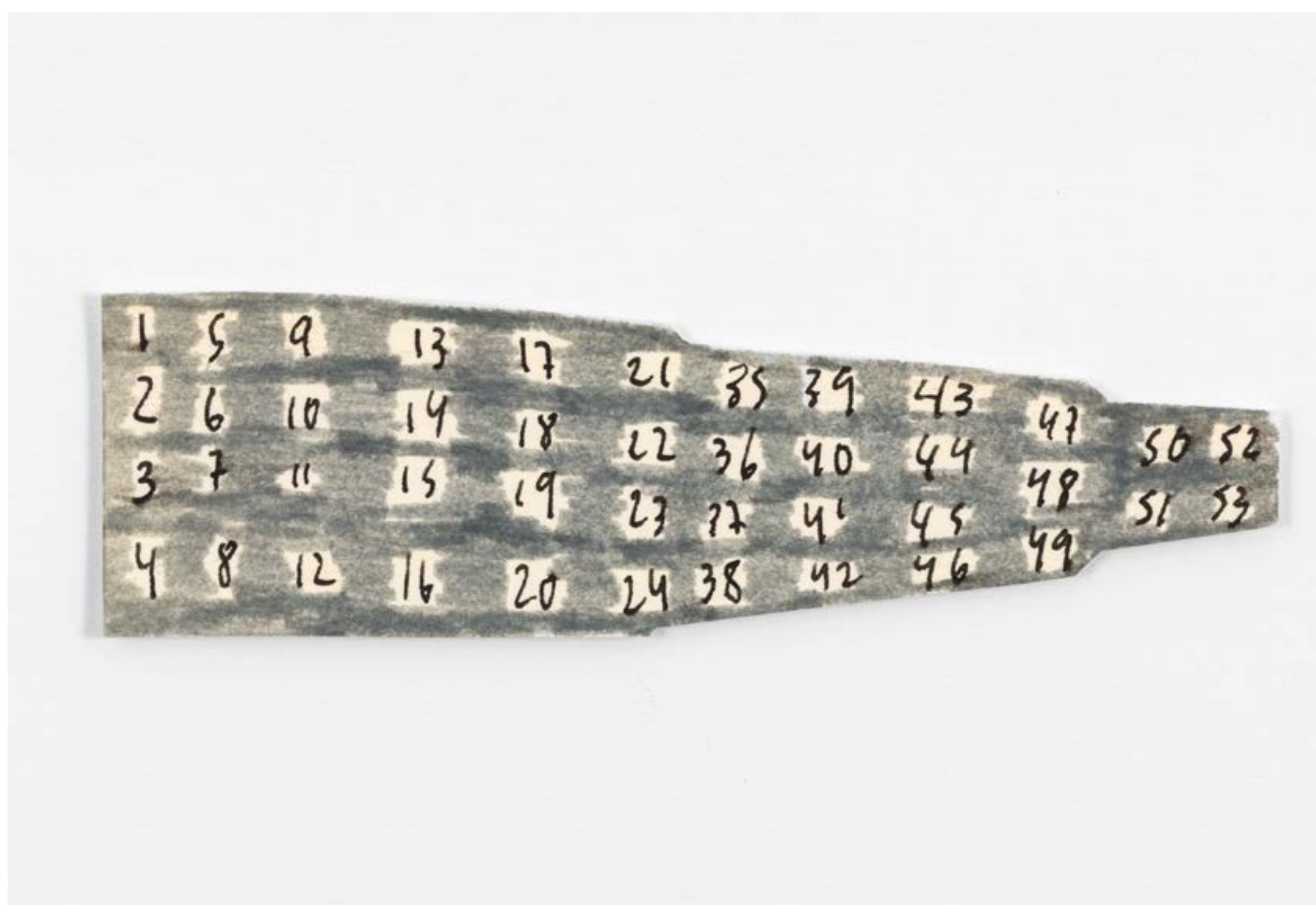
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Two castle towers on pillars submerged in water are held up by the words “there are no bombs, eyeglasses or lips”, a phrase that is disconnected from the drawing, words evidently with political meaning as was characteristic of the 101 drawings that illustrated journalist Barbara Gancia’s column in the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* between 1991 and 1993. Writing “feeds” his work, as Leonilson himself said in an interview. Although drawing and text don’t make immediate sense together, in this column Leonilson is “talking” about the relationship between two people and a political moment or event



quando
não há bombas
óculos ou lábios

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Green flag - miniature, c. 1991
hydrographic on paper
4 3/8 x 1 1/4 in (11,2 x 3,2 cm)
(12645)

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Preparatory drawings for large paintings are like jewels in the artist's oeuvre, so precious as to be kept in reliquaries. In this pennant, the numbers are signs and also, when exposed to the wind, the flickering resembles small flames of fire. If used to decorate boats, which is very commonly seen, the "little flames" also indicate the direction and speed of the wind. Like windsocks, Leonilson makes use of banners and flags, representing, in a free interpretation of these symbols, contrary to what one might imagine, disorientation or a search for orientation. Pennants also give direction by pointing somewhere, forward or backward.

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20

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Leonilson

The artist of our times

1957-1993

Born in Fortaleza on March 1, 1957, Leonilson moved to São Paulo when he was five years old. In May 2023, there will be no commemoration or celebration of 30 years without the artist. Nevertheless, institutions throughout the country have organized exhibitions to remember the enormity of his legacy, which places him among the most relevant Brazilian artists.

Three decades after his untimely death on May 28, 1993, the artist exerts great influence on a whole generation of new Brazilian artists and touches the public at his exhibitions, which reference his way of being and his oeuvre of drawings, paintings, embroideries, prints, sculptural objects and writings.

Leonilson produced delicate drawings and frequently used inscriptions of texts and words, transforming them into veritable poetry – the conversation of someone who had transcended the world.

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In the 1970s, he became an artist without finishing college after taking the advice of his professor, the artist Nelson Leirner, who, in different words, recommended that Leonilson get out into the world since he was already an accomplished artist. Better said, he was born an artist and emerged in the 1980s as part of the generation that revolutionized the Brazilian art milieu of that decade. In the small figures in drawings from the late 1970s, we can see the qualities of the artist's lines that we will see again in drawings from the late 1980s and early 1990s, at the end of his career, showing us graphic coherence and eloquent narratives. Small figures of men reduced to minimal strokes, but still charged with powerful expression, represent human beings in their essence.

Figures of organic forms and natural phenomena, executed in small proportions on sheets of paper and canvases with large areas of white or solid colors, are characteristic of his drawings and paintings from the 1990s.

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In other watercolored drawings from the early 1980s, we can observe how he saw the inner world of others – scenes from everyday life in which he portrays friends in a state of contemplation. In the more autobiographical 1990s, Leonilson produced a series of drawings that explored themes such as loneliness, anguish and death, with the exception of the “Dedicated” series of drawings, all of which made reference to himself.

These drawings are characterized by minimal but forceful and expressive lines, highlighting the emotional charge present throughout his oeuvre. Expressing his feelings through his work was paramount for the artist.

Undoubtedly, Leonilson accomplished much in a career of just over 10 years. His work is about living an intense life.

Ricardo Resende

Curator and Art Critic (Curator of the Leonilson Project for many years)

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