

Chico da Silva and the Pirambu School: The emergence of a very collective and public artform

Chico da Silva's artistic practice reached its most fully realised public dimension with the creation of his school-studio, the Pirambu School. Formed primarily by members of his family and his network of relationships within the Pirambu community where he lived, the school began in the early 1960s in the backyard of his home. With the growing demand for his work in both local and international markets, the artist established what was almost an open and collaborative production line. His artistic output gradually merged with that of his students and collaborators. It is worth noting that at the time, the influence of Chico on the local community grew even greater, and it was reported that there were over 500 people producing and living of the sale of 'Chicos'. Pirambu went from a town associated with poverty to one connected directly to the world's art market.

Figures such as Sebastião Lima da Silva (Babá), José dos Santos Gomes (Garcia), Ivan José de Assis (Ivan), Francisca da Silva (Chica da Silva), and José Claudio Nogueira (Claudionor) expanded the figurative and technical repertoire of the works. At the same time, this mode of working disrupted conventional notions of originality, setting aside values such as purity, authorship, and authenticity. Despite sharp criticism from the media and market agents – including Chabloz, the collector and critic who helped shape much of Chico's early emergence into the art world – the school endured in its originality and collective strength. From this project of community representation emerged the conceptual work *Homens trabalhando [Men at Work]* (1977), consisting of the creation of a large collective mural and the filming of the action in Super 8: a powerful response to the privatisation of the market and the elitism of art criticism.

A point of departure: Art and the maritime

It is widely established that the artist maintained an almost symbiotic relationship with the urban environment along the seafront. In 1934, upon arriving in Ceará, after spending some time in a rural community, his family settled in Pirambu, a coastal neighbourhood, located in the city of Fortaleza's oldest area; where centuries earlier Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch colonisers had landed.

Nearby, along a strip of coastline known as Praia Formosa, home to a modest fishing community of simple houses and loosely structured alleyways, Chico da Silva drew on whitewashed walls with charcoal or chalk. There, he presented his first figurations to the city, closely attuned to the fantasies, myths, and stories of both Amazonian and coastal life. It was while wandering through this area that the collector and critic Chabloz encountered the artist and was struck by his work.

In a city that at the time still turned its back on the sea, Praia Formosa was one of the few places where a beach culture took shape: bathing and fishing, nightlife and prostitution, leisure and access to healthcare. Nearby was the Pirambu community itself - today one of the largest urbanised favelas in Brazil. It was within this sociocultural environment that the artist's first marks emerged, from mural paintings to his early explorations of the planar surfaces of paper and wood.