

Antonio Dias  
*The Illustration of Art, 1969 - 1971*

15 October – 28 November 2025

Preview: 14 October 6–8 p.m.



Antonio Dias  
*The Wandering Monument / Desert, 1970*

Sprovieri is delighted to present *The Illustration of Art, 1969 – 1971*, Antonio Dias' first exhibition at the gallery, in collaboration with Gomide&Co, São Paulo, Brazil. The exhibition will comprise six historical works realised when he was living in Milan, underscoring Dias's enduring relationship with Studio Marconi, where he first presented a solo exhibition in 1969.

Born in Campina Grande, Paraíba, Brazil, in 1944, Antonio Dias moved with his family to Rio de Janeiro in 1957, where he enrolled at the Academy of Fine Arts and attended the studio of Oswaldo Goeldi. In the mid-1960s, in open defiance of Brazil's military dictatorship, Dias moved to Paris after receiving a French government scholarship for his participation in the 4th Biennale de Paris. In 1968 he relocated to Milan, where he established close ties with artists including Mario Schifano, Luciano Fabro, Alighiero Boetti, and Giulio Paolini. Works from this period, presented in the exhibition, reflect the consolidation of Dias's conceptual language during his early years in Milan.

**Marcio Junji Sono, "The infinite within and the abyss without: about Antonio Dias."**

French philosopher Paul Ricoeur defined imagination as a form of fiction — a mind-generated alternative reality<sup>1</sup>. As such, it holds an inherently paradoxical structure: although it enables an escape from one's socio-cultural and political reality, it is also constitutive of that very world. While this paradox remains largely unexplored in philosophy<sup>2</sup>, artistic mastery sometimes lays it bare — and even multiplies its interpretations — as exemplified with particular brilliance in the work of Antonio Dias.

For art historian Hans-Michel Herzog, Dias's art is anything but one-dimensional: [On the one hand,] "it is always sensual — indeed erotic — political, socially engaged, open and playful, brimming with subversive energy and with an ironic gaze. At the same time, born of the unconscious and guided by a powerful poetics, Dias's multi-referential work is fuelled by an existential scepticism, alongside a joy in living, and offers rich rewards to those who engage with it."<sup>3</sup>

Antonio Dias is one of those rare artists whose work appears deceptively simple — its clarity of form and seemingly direct language offer immediate visual pleasure and a sense of legibility. Yet beneath this surface lies a dense, layered fabric of meaning: political, existential, poetic. His images do not merely communicate; they provoke, conceal, and resonate — inviting the viewer into a space where the self-evident meets the ineffable.

Although frequently associated with Pop Art by critics and historians, Dias himself resisted such categorisation. Yes, his early works from the 1960s may echo the visual language of mass media — sharp contours, flat chromatic fields, comic-strip aesthetics — but they do not celebrate mass culture. Rather, they confront it as

<sup>1</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. *Lectures on Imagination*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> For an exception, see Geniusas, Saulius. "Between Phenomenology and Hermeneutics: Paul Ricoeur's Philosophy of Imagination." *Human Studies*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2015, pp. 223-241.

<sup>3</sup> From Antonio Dias – *Anywhere Is My Land* exhibition catalogue. Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, São Paulo, 2010.

site of tension and subversion. These are not gestures of affirmation but of resistance: subtle, ambivalent, and often laced with irony.

More illuminating lenses through which to approach Dias's work may be those of the Neo-Concrete school and, moreover, Tropicália, the audacious cultural movement in which poetry, music, visual art, and sensuality collided to challenge authority and convention. Much like a lyric by Caetano Veloso or a poem by Torquato Neto, Dias's visual language unfolds a profusion of meanings and sensations from compressed, often colloquial forms — a kaleidoscope of images and ideas conjured from what at first appears mundane.

Dias emerged on the Brazilian art scene in the mid-1960s, quickly gaining recognition for works that expanded the language of painting by incorporating texture, volume, and organic fluidity — always undergirded by a keen political awareness. As Brazil's military dictatorship intensified, he chose exile in Europe, where his practice shifted toward a more austere and introspective refinement.

The works gathered in this exhibition — produced during one of the most defining periods of his career, after relocating to Milan in the late 1960s — mark a fundamental turn in his practice: they exemplify a move toward pared-down elegance and conceptual precision, in which the tension between abstraction and political resonance is both distilled and expanded. Though traces of exile, silence, and dissent remain, the measured compositions and thoughtful use of space invite broader, even metaphysical reflection.

In the early 1970s, as Dias's palette retreated into near-monochrome, his paintings became sites of quiet inquiry into the very nature of art — what Jacopo Crivelli Visconti described as a “criticism of art as language, as ideological system, and as field of research.”<sup>4</sup> From another angle, they may be read as spiritual cartographies: intimate yet unbound, personal yet cosmically scaled. Themes such as secrecy, memory, space, and drift are not resolved or illustrated but preserved — enigmatic, opaque, and resonant in their restraint.

There is a paradoxical purity to these works: they resist spectacle even as they mesmerise. While rooted in their historical and biographical contexts, they seem to transcend them — bridging Cartesian rationality with the meanderings of spirit across the vast terrain of solitude, finitude, and their inverses. In this sense, Dias's early 1970s works inhabit a unique position between two of Brazil's most distinct artistic legacies: the festive, vernacular, colourful lyricism of Tropicália and the contemplative, visually concise humanist geometry of Neo-Concretism.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote that “the words most charged with philosophy are not necessarily those that contain what they say, but those that most energetically open upon Being, because they more closely convey the life of the whole and make our habitual evidences vibrate until they disjoin.”<sup>5</sup> By contrast, Torquato Neto once described words as “polyhedrons with infinite faces,”<sup>6</sup> where each facet refracts and distorts the real — which, in itself, is straightforward and transparent. Often hardly even employing colours, Dias's works seem to both exemplify and refute the claims of the French philosopher and the Tropicalista poet. They achieve the rare feat of enunciating both the prosaic and the unfathomable; they open windows into the infinite within and the abyss without.

London, September 2025

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<sup>4</sup> Visconti, J. C., 34th Bienal de São Paulo catalogue (2021).

<sup>5</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Visible and the Invisible*, Northwestern University Press, 1968, pp.102-103.

<sup>6</sup> Torquato Neto, *Os Últimos Dias de Paupéria* (1973).