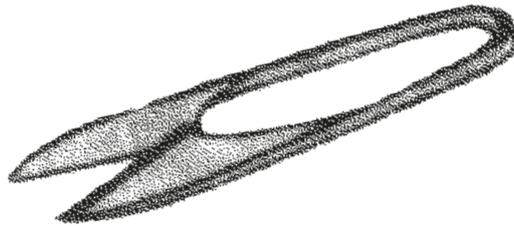


XAVIER ROBLES DE MEDINA

What if the tongue is cut out?

25–29 MAY 2022



CATINCA TABACARU GALLERY

DISCOVERIES 1C31

ART BASEL HONG KONG

INTRODUCTION

On the occasion of Catinca Tabacaru Gallery's first participation at Art Basel Hong Kong, we are elated to present a solo exhibition by Surinamese artist Xavier Robles de Medina. Known for his rigorous monochrome works, Robles de Medina combines a consistent, almost mechanical mark-making technique and surface quality, with pictures drawn from a personal archive. His paintings appear to exist on two extreme sides of a spectrum: the generic/emblematic and the highly personal. It is when these tendencies collide, that we seem to glimpse the unknown that Robles de Medina is attempting to "excavate" through his idiosyncratic mix of symbols. The poetry and non-linearity of his subjects belies the almost mathematical rhetoric of how he constructs his paintings, which are always mediated through the Cartesian coordinate system.

In true Robles de Medina fashion, *What if the tongue is cut out?* presents four scenes that differ in geographic location, period, size and colour. The acrylic on wood works show a group of rare gorillas photographed in the Nigerian jungle; a portrait of a girl from the Wayana tribe local to the artist's home of Suriname; an image found on social media taken at a Dutch rave inside a Gothic cathedral; and two combined views of an Upper Paleolithic double burial excavated from a cave in Italy.

Measuring at two meters in width, *Gorillas in the Mountains of Southern Nigeria: World's rarest great ape pictured with babies*, BBC News, 9 July 2020 is a life-size painting of nearly extinct gorillas glimpsed by hidden camera traps. The artist sourced the image from a 2020 BBC news article, which speculates that this threatened species has begun reproducing at the same time that humans around the world are retreating to suppress the spread of COVID-19.

Wayana facial painting. French Guyana. 1953. (source: Dominique Darbois) depicts a young girl engaging with the ethnographer behind the lens of Robles de Medina's photographic source. The painting, cropped from its original format, shows her evading the viewer's gaze. As the magic of replication acquires the emotions of the characters portrayed, these paintings look back at the voyeur as they are contemplated. They take on a dominant role by confronting their observers, enacting a presence that attains agency. Along with *Untitled (dress to protest)*, which speaks to appropriations of protest culture in commercial advertising, these paintings dispel notions of objectification.

The theme of "photographic intrusion" extends throughout *What if the tongue is cut out?*. *The original position of the skeletons from the double burial from Grotte des Enfants. Upper Paleolithic, Italy. c. 24000–20000 BC* shows a double burial uncovered and recorded by the camera lens. Double burials were surprisingly frequent within this excavation site, at about one in five. A 2015 article hints at

the widely accepted notion that Upper Paleolithic societies engaged in practices of human sacrifice: "Frequency, composition by age and sex, and simultaneity of interment suggest that death by natural cause may not be the most likely explanation for these findings."¹ As the artist recontextualizes these findings in his painting, he removes the scene from the archeological sphere. The final work offers space for nonlinear and metaphorical readings, rather than relying on a set of scientific tools.

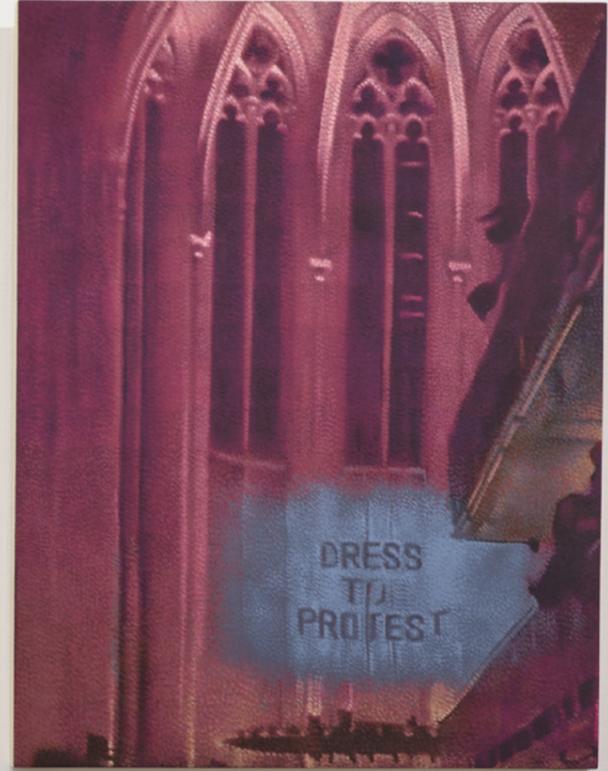
"But what if the mother tongue is stunted? What if that tongue is not only the symbol of a void, but is itself a void, What if the tongue is cut out?"²

The exhibition's title is extracted from Ocean Vuong's 2019 novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. In this quote, Vuong alludes to a trauma encrypted within the Vietnamese that the protagonist was taught by his mother. The void is not simply a metaphor for silence, but something deeper, like a wound. Within the context of Suriname, the only Dutch speaking country in South America, around ten other languages are spoken. Furthermore, the artist who is educated in the UK and the USA, now lives in Germany. In choosing this title, we undoubtedly glimpse Robles de Medina's own complex relationship to language.

Perhaps he connects Vuong's words to the language of images as well. There is always a bifurcation in the artist's work between the literal and the metaphor, the discursive and the figural, between what is said and how it is interpreted, or translated, or appropriated, between the speaker and the listener. Stepping back slightly, Robles de Medina's emphasis on tangibility suggests a deep yearning to connect with the viewer. After all, if the tongue is not only the symbol of a void, but is itself a void, then perhaps it's also an invitation to enter.

¹ Formicola, Vincenzo; Holt, Brigitte. *Grimaldi's Upper Paleolithic burials*. Journal of Anthropological Sciences Vol. 93. 2015. pp. 83.

² Vuong, Ocean. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. 2019. pp. 31.

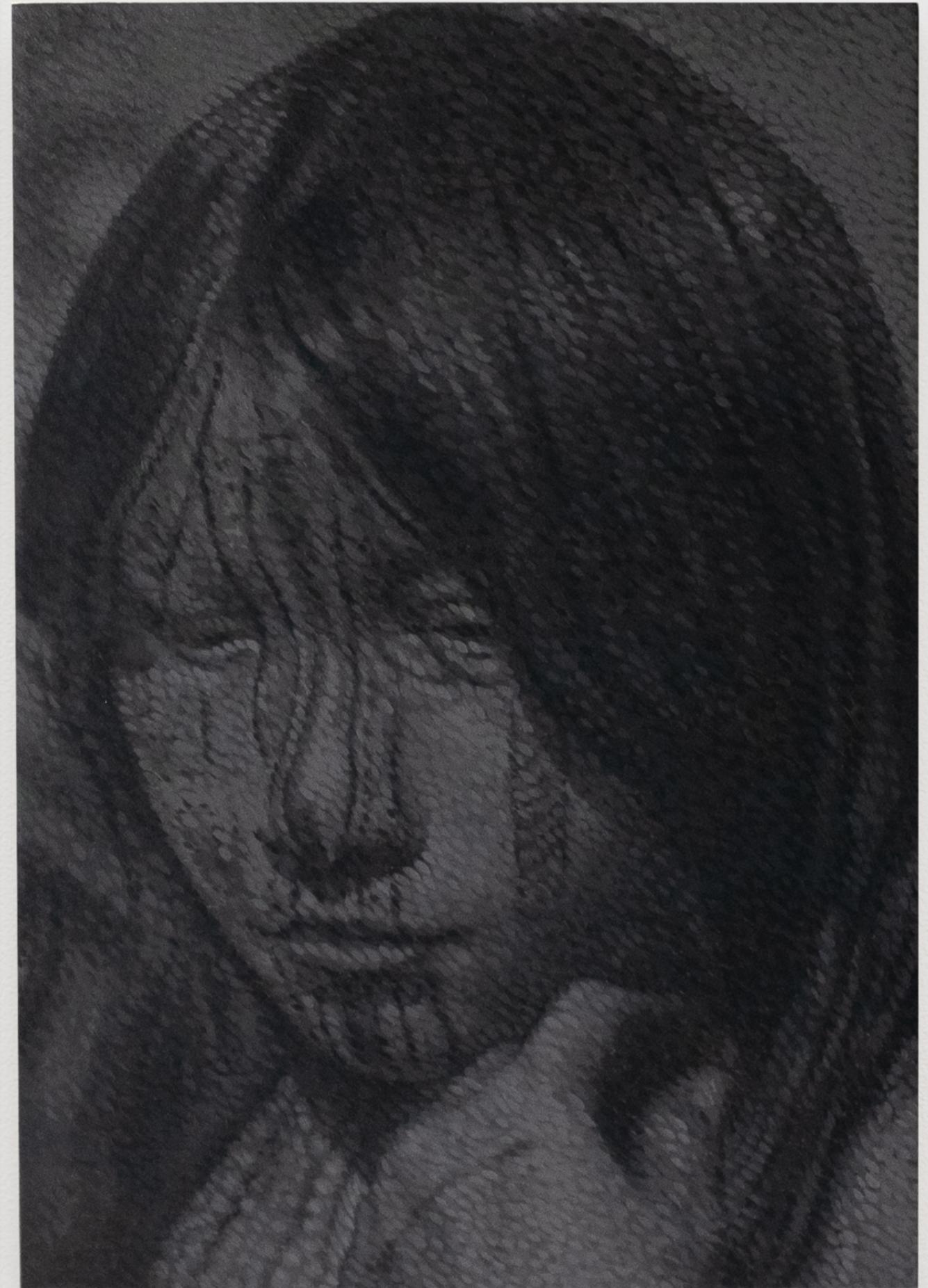


WAYANA FACIAL PAINTING. FRENCH GUYANA. 1953. (SOURCE: DOMINIQUE DARBOIS)
2021, acrylic on wood, 30 × 21 cm

The threshold between looking and intruding is where we begin with *Wayana facial painting. French Guyana. 1953. (source: Dominique Darbois)*. The artist's examination of this image is personally driven, as the Wayana inhabited parts of Brazil, French Guyana, and Robles de Medina's home of Suriname long before the European colonial project reached the northern shores of South America.

The photographic source depicts a young girl engaging with the European ethnographer behind the lens. Robles de Medina has cropped the original format, which shows her bare chested. By extracting the image from its original frame, the emphasis shifts to the line painting on the girl's face, which shares a certain vernacular with maps—those same maps that led French ethnographers to French Guyana to “capture” Robles de Medina's source photo.

This painting separates itself from the girl's facial painting in its literal detachment from the subject. It also doesn't quite read as a map, even if Robles de Medina paints on a grid and uses the same measuring techniques that would be used to make one. This lends an intriguing ambiguity to the painting, especially considering the artist's intricate process and the work's inherent tenderness.



GORILLAS IN THE MOUNTAINS OF SOUTHERN NIGERIA: WORLD'S RAREST GREAT APE PICTURED WITH BABIES, BBC NEWS, 9 JULY 2020
2022, acrylic on wood, 114 × 200 cm

Those who have studied painting and drawing might recall being introduced to perspective drawing—an optical illusion where directional lines serve as tools to help translate the idea of a complex environment, onto a simple plain. With Robles de Medina's *Gorillas*, we sense a depth of space and feel the workings of its one-point perspective, but get lost in the confusion of the jungle's foliage. Just as the jungle has its own distinct rules, completely at odds with the logic of perspective drawing, our main clue for its depth in the painting is the receding scale of the gorillas. The vanishing point is described entirely by the scaling of their forms, a kind of simile for the threat of this Great Ape's extinction.

The source picture, taken by a camera trap in the Mbe mountains, is an extremely rare glimpse of this endangered sub-species. Local to a mountainous region in Nigeria that neighbours Cameroon, they are naturally wary of humans and rarely ever seen. However, the BBC article cited in the painting's title provides positive news: "...the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) says this sighting raises hopes that the animals at risk of extinction are actually reproducing. A number of infant gorillas are visible in the shots..." There's a twisted humour at play here—as Robles de Medina notes, the image was taken in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, as human beings were (and still are) collectively retreating from public space.

That reference to human activity, and that of time slowed, also point to Robles de Medina's process—the pace with which he meditates on an image. Spending months at a time slowly forming the image, this process is an integral part of the painting's vernacular. In this way, the artist's paint marks act as a kind of personal base unit for his own measurement of time, or rather, his performance of it. Perhaps it is that aspect of the picture being interpreted by the human hand, at a human pace, that transforms the digital, low resolution jpg into something more complex. Compared to the many contemporary technologies and approaches that can speed up art making, these works are particularly jarring. He has mentioned the uncompromising nature of the method used to make them to us many times and how there is no possibility for cutting corners. It is worth noting that Robles de Medina's oeuvre is immensely wide-ranging, involving digital film montage, writing, and sculpture. The nature of his approach in these paintings suggests a deep desire to find meaning outside the digital realm.



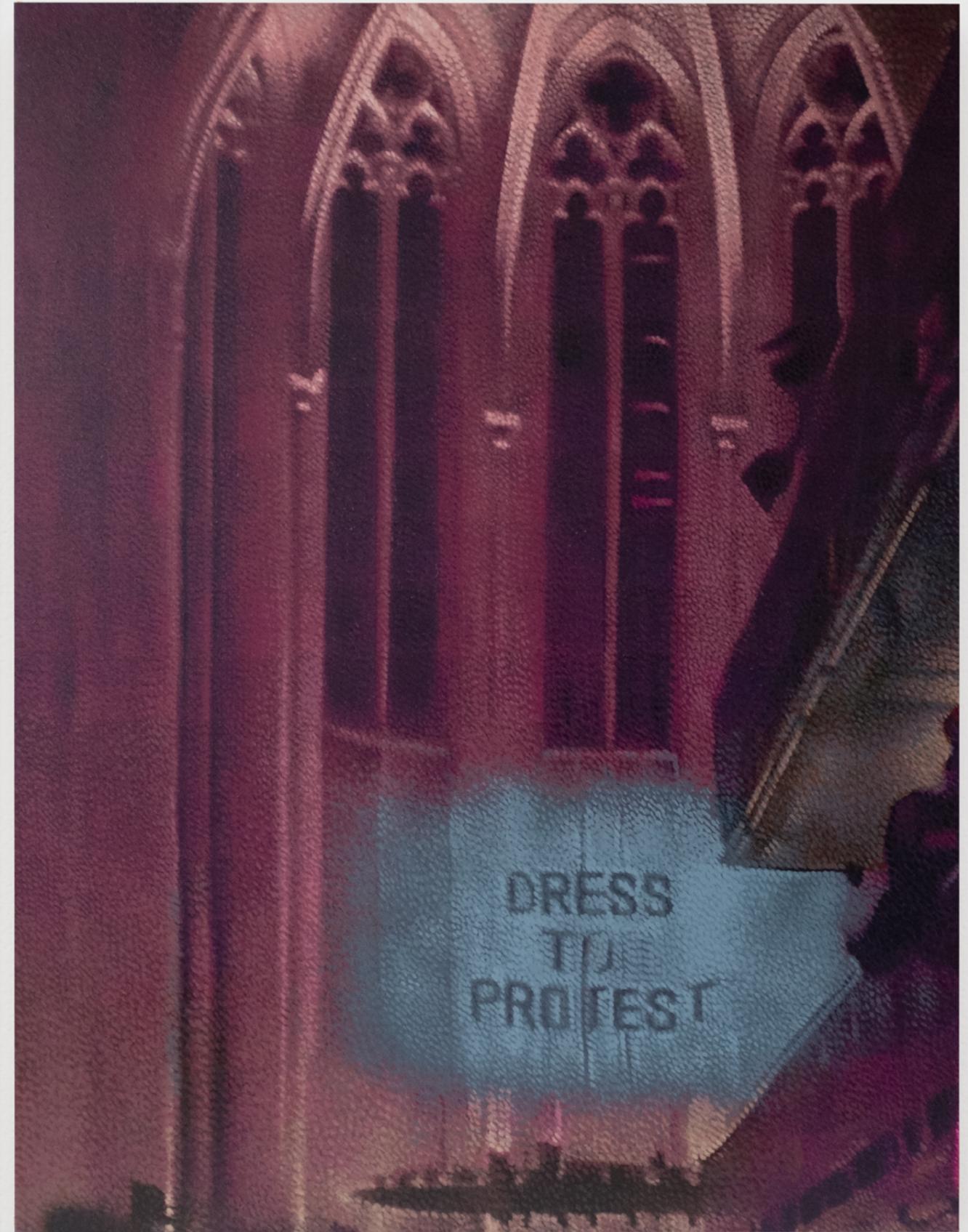


UNTITLED (DRESS TO PROTEST)
2022, acrylic on wood, 56 × 43 cm

Here we have the only untitled work in the exhibition, which also happens to be the only one sourced on social media and in full colour. Shared to Instagram stories by a friend of the artist, the source image captures a party inside a cathedral in the Netherlands, at which a projection encourages party-goers to “dress to protest.” As Robles de Medina puts it, the image is a kind of real-space collage. The pointed arches and Quatrefoil clover-shaped windows typical of Gothic architecture, float above the projection.

A play on the phrase “dress to impress,” it is as indicative of our time as any other, conjuring up associations of influencer culture—like the controversial Kendall Jenner Pepsi commercial and any number of advertisements capitalizing on contemporary protest culture we’ve grown accustomed to seeing on social media. This suggests another layer to Robles de Medina’s show title *What if the tongue is cut out?* and questions what might be at stake for artists operating within a Neoliberal system.

What is the cost of neglecting the mother tongue and perpetuating the supremacy of English? Neoliberalism has an uncanny ability to absorb counter cultures in order to invert them for its own Capitalist motives. Within this model, what is the cost for the artist of the quantified self? Notice how “dress to protest” is not a call to any specific political action or belief, like Black Lives Matter, women’s reproductive rights, or land reform. It’s merely asking the partygoers inside this Gothic cathedral to look as if they have political leanings.



THE ORIGINAL POSITION OF THE SKELETONS FROM THE DOUBLE BURIAL FROM GROTTA DES ENFANTS. UPPER PALEOLITHIC, ITALY. C. 24000 – 20000 BC
2021, acrylic on wood, 96 × 67 cm

“The work in question is archival since it not only draws on informal archives but produces them as well, and does so in a way that underscores the nature of all archival materials as found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private.”³

Foster’s statement emphasizes the constructed nature of archives, which relates very directly to Robles de Medina’s acrylic on wood work showing an Upper Paleolithic cave excavation. A kind of photographic intrusion into an Italian double burial from around 25,000 years ago, the work is deceptively simple, as it was constructed from two separate source photos. The pictures depict the same scene, but with opposing light sources. Robles de Medina’s method connects to Foster’s *Archival Impulse* by way of the artist’s intent in combining two images, which he says is simply to “uncover” the optimum amount of visual information in the no longer extant site.

Robles de Medina’s interest in excavations, and especially of double burials, is notable; this is his second work that references the phenomenon. Scientists have speculated in the *Journal of Anthropological Sciences* that we’re likely looking at a scene of human sacrifice in this site initially known as the “Grimaldi Man.” When this work was exhibited with the Association for the Palliative Turn at Brandenburgischer Kunstverein Potsdam in 2021, Robles de Medina said that “this hypothesis of a sacrifice of one member of the community, in order to “comfort” and “accompany” the diseased, is kind of like the ultimate palliative act.” Here, we get a sense of the artist’s twisted humour through the metaphorical dimension to excavations.

Given the work’s medium and subject, it is unavoidably linked to the canon of painting history. The work is a play on the colonial-era construct of “history painting” and “memento mori” in the same way that archeologists are reverse-artists in a way, altering or halting the course of expiration of the artwork/artefact/human body. We can see Robles de Medina’s work here as that of a conservator, in the way that he engages in a preservation process by creating a completely unique portrayal that ultimately holds the highest amount of visual information of any existing photographic image of this site.



³ Foster, Hal. *An Archival Impulse*. October Vol. 110. 2004. pp. 5.

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Xavier Robles de Medina
Wayana facial painting.
French Guyana. 1953.
(source: Dominique Darbois)
2021, acrylic on wood
30 × 21 cm



Xavier Robles de Medina
Gorillas in the Mountains of Southern Nigeria: World's rarest great ape pictured with babies, BBC News, 9 July 2020
2022, acrylic on wood
114 × 200 cm



Xavier Robles de Medina
The original position of the skeletons from the double burial from Grotte des Enfants. Upper Paleolithic, Italy. c. 24000 – 20000 BC
2021, acrylic on wood
96 × 67 cm



Xavier Robles de Medina
Untitled (dress to protest)
2022, acrylic on wood
56 × 43 cm

XAVIER ROBLES DE MEDINA (b. Suriname, 1990) is a visual artist based in Berlin. He graduated from the Master's program in Fine Art at Goldsmiths, University of London in 2019. In 2015 he was nominated for the Prix de Rome Visual Arts in the Netherlands, and was shortlisted for the Royal Award for Modern Painting, also in the Netherlands. Recent solo presentations of his work include *If you dream of your tongue, beware* at Catinca Tabacaru Gallery in New York (2017); *Ți-a ieșit iepurele în cale* at Another Mobile Gallery in Bucharest (2020); *Faya Lobi* at galerie Praz-Delavallade in Paris (2020); and *Wan Destination Wanhoop* at SCAD Museum of Art in Savannah (2020). 2022 exhibitions include Senegal's fourteenth Dakar Biennale and *The Palliative Turn* at Künstlerhaus Bremen.

What if the tongue is cut out? Xavier Robles de Medina's presentation with Catinca Tabacaru Gallery at Art Basel's show in Hong Kong marks the artist's first solo exhibition in East Asia.



EDUCATION

- 2019 MFA in Fine Art, Goldsmiths, University of London, UK
- 2012 BFA in Painting and Animation, Magna Cum Laude, Savannah College of Art and Design, Savannah, USA
- 2008 Bilingual International Baccalaureate Diploma, St. Clare's, Oxford, UK

INSTITUTIONAL EXHIBITIONS

- 2022 *ĪNDAFFA FORGER / OUT OF THE FIRE*, 14th Dakar Biennale, Republic of Senegal
- The Palliative Turn*, Künstlerhaus Bremen, Germany; curator: Nadja Quante
- 2021 *The Palliative Turn*, Brandenburgischer Kunstverein Potsdam, Germany; curator: Olav Westphalen
- 2020 *Wan Destination Wanhoop*, SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, USA; curator: Ben Tollefson (solo)
- 2019 *CTG(R): Finland*, Serlachius Museum, Mänttä, Finland; curators: Catinca Tabacaru, Raphael Guilbert
- 2018 *From Shape to Form*, Institute of Sacred Music, Yale University, USA; curator: Jon Seals
- 2016 *Exhibition of the LAOCA*, Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art, Japan
- Zig Zag Zim*, National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Harare; curators: Raphael Chikukwa, Catinca Tabacaru

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2022 *What if the tongue is cut out?*, Catinca Tabacaru Gallery, Art Basel Hong Kong, China
- 2020 *Ți-a ieșit iepurele în cale*, Another Mobile Gallery, Bucharest, Romania
- Faya Lobi*, Praz-Delavallade, Paris, France
- 2019 *MFA Degree Show*, Goldsmiths, University of London, UK
- Opportunity Cost*, Praz-Delavallade, UNIT 5, Los Angeles, USA
- 2018 *Als het hele lichaam oor zou zijn*, Readytex Art Gallery, Paramaribo, Suriname
- The Future Looms Dark and That We Can Scarcely*, Barbé Urbain Gallery, Ghent, Belgium
- 2017 *Thursday Night Feature*, Readytex Art Gallery, Paramaribo, Suriname
- X-C: Transference Between Neighbours* (with Clément Carat), WOW Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- If you dream of your tongue, beware*, Catinca Tabacaru Gallery, New York, USA
- 2012 *Atelo*, Little Beasts Gallery, Savannah, USA

AWARDS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- 2021 Trinity Buoy Wharf Drawing Prize 2021 (finalist), London, UK
- 2016 Royal Award for Modern Painting (shortlist), Royal Palace, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- 2015 Prix de Rome Visual Arts nominee, The Mondriaan Fund, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- 2012 Artistic Honors Scholarship, Savannah College of Art and Design, Savannah, USA

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2021 *DIONYSIA*, No Man's Art Gallery, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- Dreams Made Flesh*, Galleria Catinca Tabacaru, Bucharest, Romania; curator: Luís Manuel Araújo
- 2019 *The Sound of Silence*, Praz-Delavallade, Los Angeles, USA
- General Meeting*, Freehouse, London, UK; curators: Nancy Hatcher, Darren Flook
- ZWRT*, Barbé Urbain Gallery, Ghent, Belgium
- 2018 *CTG(R): Zimbabwe*, Catinca Tabacaru Gallery, Harare, Zimbabwe; curators: Catinca Tabacaru, Raphael Guilbert
- Material*, Cob Gallery, London, UK
- Drawing in Gallery*, Galerie ALB, Paris, France
- Power & Ancestors*, WM Gallery, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- Jubileum Expo*, Readytex Art Gallery, Paramaribo, Suriname
- 2017 *While Meditating on War*, CBK Zuidoost, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; curator: Renske de Jong
- 2016 *Zig Zag Zim*, Catinca Tabacaru Gallery, New York, USA
- 25 Years Contemporary Art in Suriname*, Readytex Art Gallery, Paramaribo, Suriname; curator: Sasha Dees
- 2015 *Fictions and Constructions*, Catinca Tabacaru Gallery, New York, USA
- 2014 *OPEN*, WOW International, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- It Begins on Paper*, Catinca Tabacaru Gallery, New York, USA
- 2013 *Ever Ours, Beethoven Festival: LOVE 2013*, Chicago; curator: Catinca Tabacaru

RESIDENCIES

- 2020 CTG(R): Bucharest, Romania
- 2019 Serlachius Museums, Finland
- 2018 CTG(R): Zimbabwe, Harare
- 2017 CTG(R): Zimbabwe, Harare
- WOW Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- 2015 CTG(R): Zimbabwe, Harare

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