# Gustavo Nazareno Afro-Latin Baroque

OPERA GALLERY

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6 – 29 March 2025



FOREWORD

We are delighted to introduce Gustavo Nazareno to Opera Gallery Miami with 'Afro-Latin Baroque,' an exhibition of new oil paintings by the artist. This exhibition coincides with 'Bará', a solo exhibition of the artist's drawings at Opera Gallery Bal Harbour and the artist's inclusion in 'One Becomes Many,' a group exhibition at the Pérez Art Museum. This exhibition is a celebration of all that makes Nazareno: both as an artist and as a human being. He paints with spirit and facility, referencing a wide gamut of influences — many sourced from his own history. Rich in symbolism, these paintings unfold as a reckoning with the often-chaotic spiritual and visual world that surrounds the artist. At his hand, seemingly disparate references find their place within a cohesive whole that reminds us how small, in many ways, the world really is.

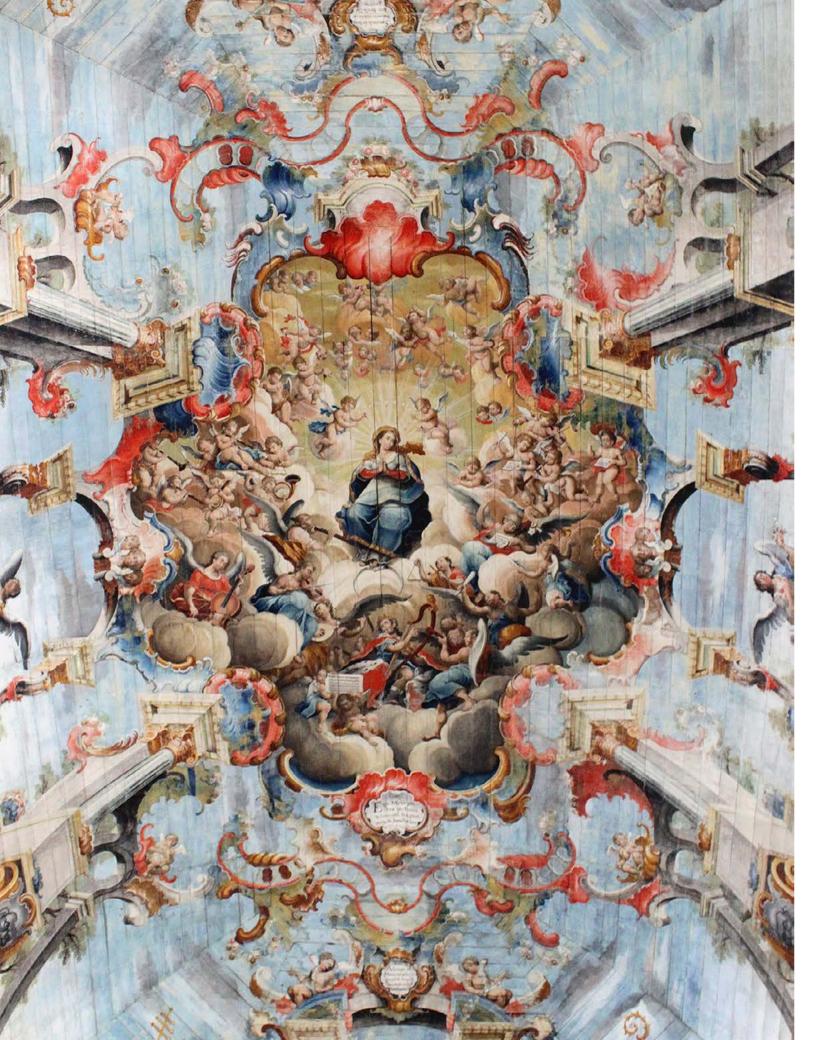
As its title suggests, this exhibition takes as its starting point the unique tripartite intersection of cultures where Nazareno lives and works. As Jennifer Inacio explores in her essay below, the colonial history of the artist's hometown of Minas Gerais gave rise to a style of architecture and art that blends a number of distinct sensibilities. Here, enslaved Africans built Catholic churches in Brazil, giving rise to a style that might be described as "Afro-Latin Baroque."

There's no doubt that this is a tragic and violent story. Nevertheless, it is the story of Nazareno's home and a large part of his cultural inheritance, so it is fitting that the exhibition begins here. From this point, we traverse a world of images that hint at sources from across the world's cultural history. In *The Dance of Xangô* (2025), for example, a figure wears a head tie that looks like a traditional West African gele with a billowing dress that could have been made by Japanese designer Issey Miyake in the 1990s. Decisions like this one are deliberate, in order to bring together distant aesthetic traditions and reflect the merging of cultures emblematic of Nazareno's life and work.

The titles of the paintings in this exhibition, switching between first and third person, reveal the complex network of symbolism at play here, as well as Nazareno himself as a character within his own lore. My Last Great Journey Was You (2025), a jewel-like painting, depicts two robed figures looking over an expanse of ocean. Though many of his subjects are named — in this exhibition we see Afro-Latin Orixás Iku, Exu and Eleguá, among others — these ones are not. One wonders if the artist himself might be one of these silhouetted figures, showing his companion the open expanse of the world in front of them and the depths to be plumbed below them. Like all great painters, Nazareno creates work that benefits from a close reading. The longer you look, the more references you will find to artists of all kinds who have gone before him. But even at a glance, there is a palpable sense that these paintings carry beneath their surfaces a deep and complex history.

GILLES DYAN Founder & Chairman Opera Gallery Group

DAN BENCHETRIT Director Opera Gallery Miami



## JENNIFER INACIO

↑ Igreja de Nossa Senhora do Rosário dos Homens Pretos, Ouro Preto, Brazil

← Ceiling of the church Saint Francis of Assisi Manuel da Costa Ataíde, Ouro Preto, Brazil

"Aleijadinho" was the nickname of Antônio Francisco Lisboa (1738-1814), one of

Brazil's most renowned Baroque sculptors

and architects. Born in Ouro Preto, Minas Gerais, to a Portuguese father and an

characterized by dramatic expression and intricate carvings-adorn many of the

region's churches, including the iconic Saint

Francis of Assisi church. Despite developing

a debilitating illness later in life, Aleijadinho continued to produce influential religious

sculptures, shaping the visual identity of

2 Born Manuel da Costa Ataíde (1762-1830). he was a prominent Brazilian painter of the

late Baroque and Rococo periods, known for his vibrant use of color and expressive

religious imagery. Based in Minas Gerais,

Preto, where he depicted the Virgin Mary

with distinctly Afro-Brazilian features-a

groundbreaking choice for the time.

his most celebrated work is also within the Saint Francis of Assisi church in Ouro

Brazilian Baroque art.

enslaved African mother, his works-

Gustavo Nazareno's first solo exhibition in the United States, Afro-Latin Baroque, offers a profound exploration of syncretism-a convergence of diverse traditions, symbols, and histories that reflect his Brazilian heritage and diasporic connections. Drawing from the dramatic and ornate visual language of the Baroque, Nazareno's works present a vivid amalgamation of Catholic references, Afro-Brazilian religious symbolism, couture, and art historical narratives rendered in monumental and intimate scales. The exhibition celebrates opulence and artistry, seamlessly fusing beauty with the stories of resilience and transformation inherent to Afro-Brazilian culture.

The Baroque in Brazil-particularly in Minas Gerais, where Nazareno's work has personal and cultural ties—is inseparable from the history of colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade. Catholic churches such as the Igreja de Nossa Senhora do Rosário, constructed by enslaved Africans and their descendants, encapsulate this era's complex legacy: magnificent religious structures adorned with intricate carvings and paintings by Afro-Brazilian artists like Aleijadinho<sup>1</sup> and Mestre Ataíde<sup>2</sup>. These artists merged European artistic conventions with African diasporic influences, creating works that celebrated spiritual devotion while subtly embedding their cultural identity. Aleijadinho's sculptures, with their dramatic drapery and emotional intensity, and Mestre Ataíde's vibrant, earthy ceiling paintings are key influences on Nazareno's exploration of grandeur and storytelling within the works exhibited in this exhibition. By incorporating these historical references, Nazareno bridges the past with the present, creating a space where cultural identity and historical legacy are celebrated and reimagined.

The region of Minas Gerais was at the heart of Brazil's gold rush in the 18th century, a period marked by economic prosperity and immense human suffering. The wealth generated by gold mining fueled the creation of exuberant Baroque churches, yet this lavishness was built on the exploitation of enslaved labor. The juxtaposition of splendor and hardship profoundly influenced the art of the time, and it is this tension that Nazareno revisits in his work. He draws attention to the dual narratives of creativity and oppression that define Brazil's Baroque legacy. This contextual grounding imbues his work with historical depth, inviting viewers to consider the intertwined legacies of art, labor, and faith.

Central to this exhibition and Nazareno's practice is the reinterpretation of religious and mythological figures through the lens of couture sculptural forms. The artist begins his composition process by creating voluminous miniature garments for dolls, using these as models for his painted compositions. The exaggerated forms and dramatic drapery that form the garments within his paintings draw inspiration from Baroque vestments and the

## ASSOCIATE CURATOR AT PÉREZ ART MUSEUM MIAMI

# Afro-Latin Baroque

contemporary designs of Japanese fashion designer Rei Kawakubo. She, who is celebrated for her bold and unconventional approach to fashion, drives Nazareno's emphasis on garments as more than functional clothing—they become vehicles of identity, status, and narrative. In his works, garments are not merely decorative but act as sculptural extensions of the figures they adorn, underscoring their spiritual and cultural resonance.

As an art form, fashion has long engaged with themes of identity and transformation. In contemporary practice, designers like Kawakubo and Alexander McQueen have challenged traditional notions of clothing, using fabric and form to explore concepts of power, vulnerability, and rebellion. Nazareno's incorporation of these ideas situates his work within a broader dialogue between fashion, religion, and visual art. By adding sculptural importance to the garments within his paintings, he elevates their symbolic weight, allowing them to serve as bridges between the spiritual and the material. In addition, the portraits are set against neutral gray backgrounds reminiscent of Richard Avedon's studio photography. While isolating his subjects in Avedon's stark and timeless style, Nazareno elevates his figures to a space where their gaze and posture convey spiritual reverence and defiance. This interplay enhances the mystery and theatricality of his paintings, aligning them with the grandiose ethos of the Baroque while addressing contemporary discourses on cultural expression.

Another key element to Nazareno's practice is the exploration of Afro-Brazilian religions, such as Candomblé and Umbanda, which draw on West African traditions of the Yoruba, Fon, and Bantu ethnic groups and have syncretisms with Roman Catholicism. These religions honor a multitude of deities known as orixás. The garments and accessories worn by them carry significant symbolic meaning, reflecting their attributes, powers, and connections to nature. Colors, accessories, beads, and adornments—elements often linked to fashion and décor—are vital in representing and honoring the orixás. For example, the colors associated with Exu, Ossain, and Xangô—red and black, green, and fiery tones, respectively—are not merely decorative; they serve as sacred identifiers within rituals, embodying the unique essence of these orixás.

Nazareno draws directly from this tradition, translating these sacred codes into contemporary art. Each painting in the exhibition is titled *Attire for* [...] followed by the deity's name, emphasizing the garments as a narrative and symbolic device. For example, in *Attire for Ossain*, Nazareno incorporates green, as this orixá is the god of the herbs and leaves, capable of healing through the power of vegetation, while also bringing strength and vitality<sup>3</sup>. Meanwhile, Exu's red and black palette symbolizes blood (life), mystery, or the unknown of the ethereal. This layering of spiritual and cultural symbolism enhances the grandeur of Nazareno's work, creating a dialogue between Afro-Brazilian spirituality and European artistic traditions.

Religious syncretism, as seen in Brazil, represents a unique merging of Catholicism and Afro-Brazilian traditions, born out of necessity and resilience. Enslaved Africans brought to Brazil were forced to adopt Catholic practices, but they found ways to preserve their spiritual beliefs by aligning orixás with Catholic saints. For example, Xangô is often associated with



↑ Dress designed by Rei Kawakubo for Comme des Garçons © Rhododendrites

3 "Ossain," O Candomblé, accessed January 18, 2025, https://ocandomble.com/os-orixas/ossaim/. Saint Jerome, and Iemanjá is likened to the Virgin Mary. This blending of faiths is vividly evident in the rituals of Candomblé and Umbanda, where sacred spaces and objects often reflect a coexistence of African and European influences.

Nazareno's work captures this spiritual hybridity, using visual language to honor the resilience and adaptability of Afro-Brazilian culture. His works do not merely portray the orixás but bring them into a contemporary pantheon, where their presence resonates beyond their traditional domains. The garments, meticulously detailed and dramatically rendered, draw from the opulent visual language of the Baroque while simultaneously highlighting the sacred references from Afro-Brazilian religions. The result is a fusion of worlds-Catholicism, Candomblé, fashion, and fine art-into a singular expression of identity and creativity. In addition to building bridges between these different worlds, Nazareno highlights orixás central to Candomblé and Santería for this exhibition, fostering a transnational dialogue that connects Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Cuban traditions. The diasporic communities in Miami provide a vibrant backdrop for this cultural exchange, and the portraits and symbols he creates resonate deeply, honoring the resilience, strength, and healing within diasporic identities. Through carefully weaving these references, each work tells an intimate yet universal story that goes beyond boundaries.

A very striking work in the exhibition is titled *May This Painting Reach Your Heart – A Tribute to Chico Rei*. It features a monumental painting of a black horse draped in red cloth, symbolizing both the orixá Exu and the legendary figure of Chico Rei. In Brazil, Chico Rei is believed to have been an African king enslaved in Minas Gerais, who managed to secure his freedom and that of many others. The red cloth, tied to Exu's role as a guardian of crossroads, resonates with themes of liberation and spiritual power. This homage situates Chico Rei within a narrative of resilience. The imposing black horse, adorned with striking red drapery, becomes a vivid symbol of transformation, resilience, and cultural pride.

It is unclear whether Chico Rei's story is factual, but it is widely accepted that he embodies the spirit of resistance and cultural survival. As a leader who used his position to liberate others, he symbolizes the power of community and the enduring quest for justice. Nazareno's depiction of the horse, an enduring symbol of freedom and strength, connects this narrative to broader themes in art history. Horses have long been associated with power and nobility, from equestrian statues of European monarchs to the dynamic representations in George Stubbs' work in Whistlejacket (1762). By placing the horse at the center of his composition, Nazareno pays homage to this symbolic tradition in art history and reclaims it, infusing it with Afro-Brazilian cultural meaning. His fascination with horses, exemplified in this painting, reflects a deeper autobiographical dimension. In a fable written by Nazareno many years ago, he describes individuals transforming into the spirit of a horse when embarking on new journeys. This metaphor resonates with the diasporic experience, where movement, self-empowerment, and transformation are integral to identity. By positioning the horse as a central figure in May This Painting Reach Your Heart - A Tribute to Chico Rei, Nazareno ties its symbolism to themes of strength, freedom, and

↓ Whistlejacket, George Stubbs, circa 1762, oil on canvas, National Gallery, London



spiritual connectivity. Through this lens, the horse also becomes a stand-in for the artist himself, embodying resilience, adaptation, and the search for meaning in a fragmented world.

In conversation with the larger paintings referencing orixás, Nazareno paints smaller landscape scenes that provide moments of intimacy and reflection. These landscapes-inspired by the Romantic works of Caspar David Friedrich-with their mist-covered hills and faintly silhouetted churches, evoke Minas Gerais's terrain, serving as poetic narratives where nature becomes a vessel for memory and spirituality. Friedrich's sublime landscapes, often filled with contrasts between light and shadow, resonate in Nazareno's dramatic compositions. Yet, his reinterpretation through an Afro-Latin lens highlights collective memory, drawing from Minas Gerais's sacred and historical landscapes. These intimate, fictionalized scenes balance the magnificence of his portraits, offering a nuanced perspective on resilience and spirituality that overcomes the contested past. Mist and dramatic lighting create a dreamlike quality, inviting viewers to contemplate the layers of history embedded in these imagined terrains. The delicate interplay between landscape and cultural memory further underscores how geography shapes identity and narrative.

In every detail, from the striking depictions of orixás to the contemplative landscapes, Afro-Latin Baroque underscores Nazareno's ability to integrate history, mythology, and personal experience into a visually and emotionally powerful narrative. His work invites audiences to explore not only the cultural richness of Afro-Brazilian traditions but also their enduring influence on contemporary art and identity. The contrasts-light and shadow, exuberance and intimacy-highlight diasporic resilience while engaging viewers in a celebration of cultural pride. As Stuart Hall notes, diasporic identities are "constantly producing and reproducing themselves through transformation and difference."4 Nazareno's art exemplifies this dynamic, offering a transformative experience that bridges personal memory, historical narrative, and spiritual inquiry. By connecting the past to the present and fusing identities, traditions, and artistic innovation, Afro-Latin Baroque invites viewers to celebrate Afro-Brazilian culture while reflecting on the profound ways in which art can honor heritage and facilitate new cultural dialogues. The result is an exhibition that is both deeply rooted in tradition and boldly innovative, marking a significant moment in Nazareno's artistic journey and expanding the boundaries of Afro-Latin expression on a global stage.

4 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 235.



↑ Mountain Landscape, Caspar David Friedrich, 1810's, oil on canvas, Pushkin Museum, Moscow

Artworks





May This Painting Reach Your Heart – A Tribute to Chico Rei 2025

Oil on linen Signed and dated 'GUSN 2025' on the reverse 98.4 × 78.7 in | 250 × 200 cm

PROVENANCE Artist's studio



# *The Dance of Xangô* 2025

Oil on linen Signed and dated 'GUSN 2025' on the reverse 59.1 × 47.2 in | 150 × 120 cm





*Attire for Ogum* 2025

Oil on linen Signed and dated 'GUSN 2025' on the reverse 78.7 × 66.9 in | 200 × 170 cm



## Preta Velha 2025

Oil on linen 15.7 × 11.8 in | 40 × 30 cm







Ossain Was Born at the Stroke of Midnight 2025

Oil on linen Signed and dated 'GUSN 2025' on the reverse 70.9 × 59.1 in | 180 × 150 cm





I Gave You a Thornless Rose 2025

Oil on linen 78.7 × 118.1 in | 200 × 300 cm





An Ode to My Old Spirit 2025

Oil on linen 19.7 × 19.7 in | 50 × 50 cm







*Attire for Exu* 2024

Oil on linen Signed and dated 'GUSN 2024' on the reverse 70.9 × 59.1 in | 180 × 150 cm



Buffalo 2024

Oil on linen Signed and dated 'GUSN 2024' on the reverse 59.1 × 47 in | 150 × 120 cm







Iku reading a poem for Ewa 2024

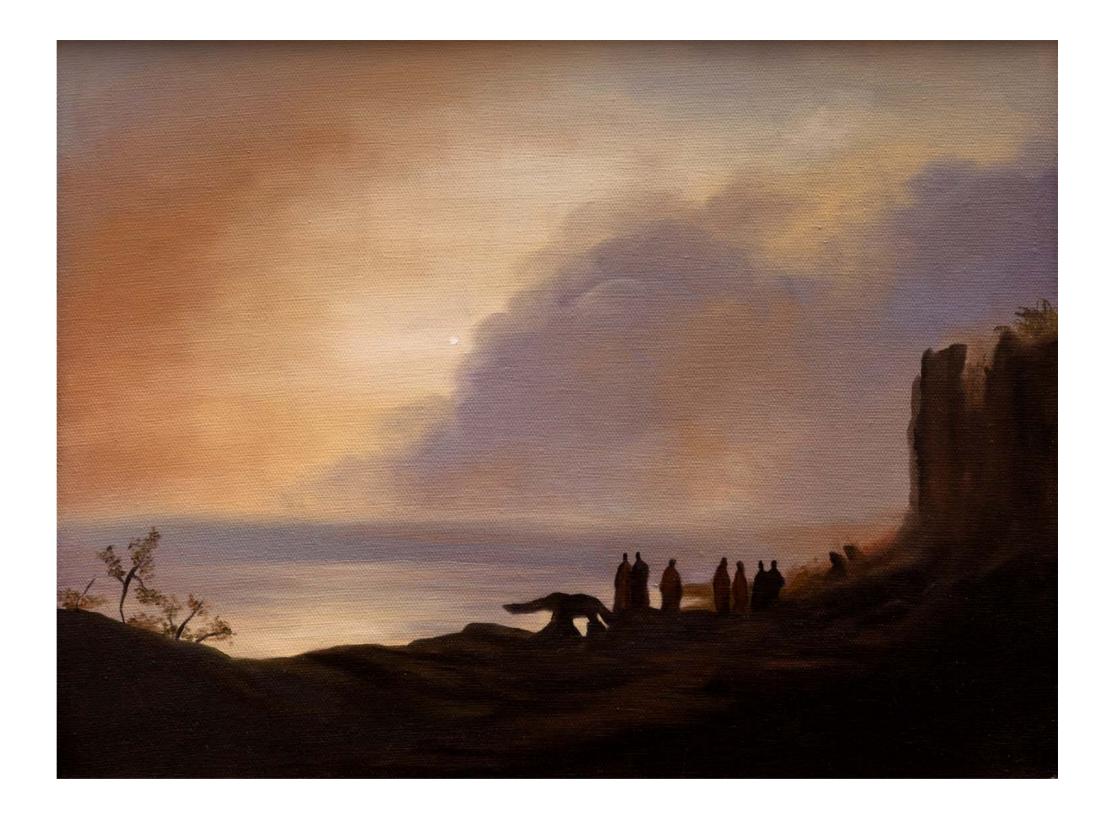
Oil on linen Signed and dated 'GUSN 2024' on the reverse 51.2 × 51.2 in | 130 x 130 cm



A Red Candle for a Red Rose 2025

Oil on linen 15.7 × 11.8 in | 40 × 30 cm





*The Golden Quest* 2025

Oil on linen Signed and dated 'GUSN 2025' on the reverse 11.8 × 15.7 in | 30 × 40 cm



*A Lone Prayer* 2025

Oil on linen Signed and dated 'GUSN 2025' on the reverse 11.8 × 15.7 in | 30 × 40 cm



My Last Great Journey Was You 2025

Oil on linen Signed and dated 'GUSN 2025' on the reverse 11.8 × 15.7 in | 30 × 40 cm

PROVENANCE Artist's studio



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*Eleguá* 2025

Oil on linen 19.7 × 15.7 in | 50 × 40 cm



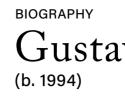
*Ibeji* 2025

Oil on linen Signed and dated 'GUSN 2025' on the reverse 59.1 × 47.2 in | 150 × 120 cm









Gustavo Nazareno is known for the range of sources that his work draws on, from personal and cultural histories, fables and religious tales to Renaissance painting and fashion photography. His output mostly comprises oil paintings and charcoal drawings, both notable for the artist's deft manipulation of light and dark that recalls chiaroscuro, a technique of rendering illumination and shadow dating back to the fourth century. At Nazareno's hand, the dizzying breadth of his reference points, encompassing the cultural and spiritual histories of Africa, Europe and his home of South America, is distilled into enigmatic images that cannot be consigned to a single artistic category or movement.

Born in Três Pontas, Brazil, in 1994, Nazareno moved to São Paulo in 2018 on the advice of his Aunt, a practitioner of the Afro-Brazilian religion Umbanda, who had experienced a vision from a minor deity known as an Orixá. Self-taught as an artist, he has spent the remainder of his career painting and drawing scenes that originate in fables that he writes about Orixás from the Candomblé and Umbanda religions. Within Nazareno's practice, the boundary between faith, fiction and research is intentionally blurred, allowing him to call on all three to inspire his work. Each of his paintings begins with a sketch, which he then recreates in the form of *tableaux vivants*. For these, he dresses miniature wooden mannequins in garments that he creates, influenced equally by Haute Couture and traditional religious dress. When a sense of balance has been achieved, the image is painted, completing Nazareno's elaborate process.

Ambiguity and duality are two cornerstones of Nazareno's work, which seeks to interrogate tensions and similarities within various perceived binaries — fact and fiction, good and evil, God and man. The fables that his artworks reflect are set in a world where Orixás walk among us. "I do write about Orixás that exist, but I usually invent characters as well — not deities, but characters to create this syncretism between the human and divine", he says. His allusions to fashion photography deepen this relationship between spirituality and everyday life, imbuing his subjects' clothing with transcendental resonances.

Nazareno has been the subject of numerous institutional solo exhibitions in Brazil, most recently at the Museum of Modern Art Aloisio Magalhães in Recife (2024) and the Museu Afro Brasil Emanoel Araújo in São Paulo (2023). His work has also been included in group exhibitions at the Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil (CCBB) in São Paulo, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art in New York and the Inhotim Institute in Brumadinho, among others. He will be the subject of a forthcoming solo exhibition curated by Danny Dunson at the DuSable Black History Museum and Education Center in Chicago.

# Gustavo Nazareno

#### SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2025

2024

2023

2022

2021

#### COLLECTIVE EXHIBITIONS

<ul> <li>'Bará', Opera Gallery, Bal Harbour, USA</li> <li>'Afro-Latin Baroque', Opera Gallery, Miami, USA</li> <li>'Orixás: Personal Tales on Portraiture', Opera Gallery, London, UK</li> <li>'Star of a Hero', Cassina Projects, Milan, Italy</li> <li>'Bará', Museu de Arte Moderna Aloisio Magalhães, Recife, Brazil</li> <li>'Bará', Museu Afro Brasil Emanoel Araújo, São Paulo, Brazil</li> <li>'Pombagira', Selma Feriani Gallery, Tunes, Tunisia</li> <li>'Personal Notes on Faith', Cassina Projects, Milan, Italy</li> <li>'Fables on Exu', Gallery 1957, London, UK</li> </ul>	2024	'One Becomes Many', Peréz Art Museum Miami, Miami, USA 'Mirror of the Mind: Figuration in the Jorge M. Pérez Collection', El Espacio 23, Miami, USA 'Dos Brasis', SESC Quitandinha, Petrópolis, Brazil
		'Encruzilhadas da Arte Afro-Brasileira', Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Belo Horizonte, Brazil 'Brazil Now Vol. I', U-Art-P, Bergamo, Italy
	2023	'Encruzilhadas da Arte Afro-Brasileira', Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, São Paulo, Brazil
		'Etérea', Instituto Colaço Paulo, Florianópolis, Brazil
		'Dos Brasis', SESC Belenzinho, São Paulo, SP, Brazil
		'NOW', Museu Inimá de Paula, Belo Horizonte, Brazil
	2022	'Quilombo: vida, problemas e aspirações do negro', Inhotim, Brumadinho, Brazil
		'Between Nothingness and Infinity', Cornell Biennial, Johnson Museum of Art, New York, USA
		'The Storytellers', Gallery 1957, London, UK
	2021	'Outros Ensaios para o Tempo', Galeria Nara Roesler, São Paulo, Brazil
	2020	'Collective Reflections: Contemporary African & Diasporic Expressions of A New Vanguard', Gallery 1957, Accra, Ghana

#### PUBLICATIONS

2024	Brazilian Homo, Issue 1, Brazil, 15 June 2024, ill.
2023	International Journal of Fashion Studies, Volume 10, No. 2 2023, <i>Intellect Journals</i> , Bristol, ill. in colour on the cover
	Gustavo Nazareno, <i>BARÁ</i> , Editora Act., São Paulo
2022	<i>Serrote</i> , Volume 42, IMS, ill. in colour on the cover
2022	Ekow Eshun, <i>In the Black Fantastic</i> , Thames and Hudson, London, ill. in colour p. 258
2021	<i>Elle Brasil</i> , Volume 6, 16 December 2021, São Paulo, ill. in colour on the cover

#### **RESIDENCIES AND SPECIAL PROJECTS**

2023	1-54, Galeria Portas Vilaseca, London, UK
2021	SP-Arte, Galeria Portas Vilaseca,
	São Paulo, Brazil
2020	Legacy Brothers Lab, Chicago, USA

#### AWARDS

2024	Winner of the Jabuti Award for the
	book Bará for graphic design, Brazil

2025





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2024



Preta Velha 2025

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*Buffalo* 2024



Iku reading a poem for Ewa 2024



Ossain Was Born at the Stroke of Midnight 2025

I Gave You 28

a Thornless Rose 2025



An Ode to My Old Spirit 2025



Attire for Exu

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A Lone Prayer 2025



My Last Great Journey Was You 2025

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A Red Candle for a Red Rose 2025

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The Golden Quest 2025



*Eleguá* 2025



*Ibeji* 2025

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This exhibition catalogue is created upon the occasion of the exhibition Gustavo Nazareno, 'Afro-Latin Baroque' Presented by Opera Gallery Miami from 6 – 29 March 2025.

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COVER Gustavo Nazareno, *Attire for Exu*, 2024

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