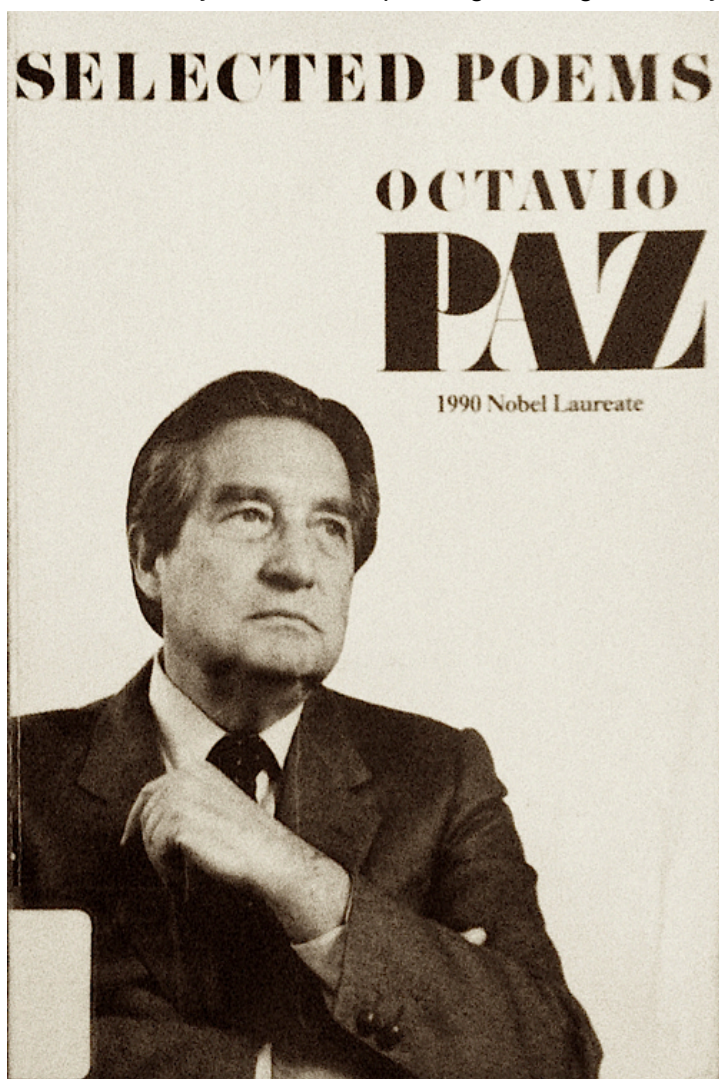


TITLE MAGAZINE

Ten mantras for Rubens Ghenov

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by Rubens Ghenov

When I come into the studio each day, I burn a stick of incense, put on a record, make tea and sit in front of my work before painting. Throughout the years these actions have become mantric in making art.



Mantras are not "... mere formulas of worship" but are "always a source of activity ... a potential means of achieving a special effect." (Jan Gonda, Selected Studies, Volume IV, History of Indian Religion). Although the word mantra has deeper implications in various cultural traditions beyond its etymology, its root man (to think) and the suffix -tra (names of or designation of instruments) in Sanskrit translate roughly as "instrument of thought." Though the word has dissolved into simpler meanings in a globalized and contemporary culture, it still retains the connotation of repetition.

Below are things that have become personal mantras that I surround myself with repetitively, hovering in my creative process meditatively.

1. Octavio Paz's excerpt from "Hacia el poema (Toward the poem)"

"Cuando la Historia duerme, habla en sueños: en la frente del pueblo dormido el poema es una constelación

de sangre. Cuando la Historia despierta, la imagen se hace acto, acontece el poema: la poesía entra en acción."

MORGAN LEHMAN

535 West 22nd Street, New York, New York 10011

“When history sleeps, it speaks in dreams: on the forehead of the sleeping people, the poem is a constellation of blood. When history wakes, image becomes act, the poem happens: poetry moves into action.”

-Octavio Paz “Hacia el poema (Toward the poem)”

2. Eliane Radigue, Transmorem – Transmortem

This year I have been listening to a lot of work from female electronic musicians in the sixties and seventies: Daphne Oram, Delia Derbyshire (BBC Radiophonic Workshop), the Danish composer Else Marie Pade, and the French Eliane Radigue, to name a few. The latter recorded Transmorem – Transmortem, which premiered in 1974 at The Kitchen, New York.

3. Hiroshi Teshigahara, Woman in the Dunes

This second film in a collaborative trilogy between Kobo Abe (writer), Toru Takemitsu (composer) and Hiroshi Teshigahara (filmmaker) is my favorite film. It began to take the shape of a mantra when I started to watch it everyday at the studio while eating or taking breaks and at home before going to bed.

4. Clarice Lispector’s The Passion According to G.H.

Clarice Lispector is poetry, prose, confession, philosophy, psychology, and story within a story, all without the sense that she is attempting to combine genres. In an interview, Lispector said that when she wasn’t writing she was dead. Her confessions blend into stories and characters laced with poetics all her own. She bleeds into the world and then collects the plasma back into herself with the grime and glory of the landscape to later dispense it back. A Ukranian who immigrated to Brazil, she has an element of Dostoevsky in her, born and forged in the Northeast of Brazil. The Passion According to G.H. digs tunnels too brittle to excavate as the protagonist contemplates her humanity while watching a cockroach in its last minutes of life.



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5. Oãoj Loop, “Esse amao da naraval ... nada vi.”

There’s always music playing in the studio, and sometimes, perhaps to my studio mates’ dismay, I play the same song over and over for six, seven, or even eight hours. Though I wouldn’t consider myself a musician, I make music, or more aptly, I make sounds. While creating a track I often find a sampled loop that I would rather leave alone, then play it over and

MORGAN LEHMAN

535 West 22nd Street, New York, New York 10011

over in the studio. I found this loop as I was playing a João Gilberto LP backwards and slowed down. The song is called “Avarandado,” a very early Caetano Veloso track that Gilberto interprets. After recording the loop as I heard it, I have been incessantly listening to it in the studio. The phonetic reversal loop “Esse amao da naraval ...nada vi,” sounds as if he’s saying “Esse amor do carnaval... nada vi” (This love of carnaval ... I see none).

6. Film still from Black Orpheus “A guitarra”

I came across this scene while watching Marcel Camus’s 1959 film Black Orpheus and snapped a screen shot. It’s hung in my studio ever since. Later I used the image in a collage titled The Office of Black Orpheus. I have always marveled at the composition’s symbolic nature. The guitar (emblematic of samba canção and bossa nova) being passed around and held high above the heads of Brazilians viewed from the back and concealed by shadows (suggesting the invisibility of the poor and struggling class) in a pawn shop (economic problems, the historic chasm between Brazil’s rich and poor) in typical Brazilian processional fashion (funerals, catholic processions and carnaval) succinctly points to predicaments and expressions of the nation in a folkloric tradition.

7. Josef Albers woodcuts/Favela structure/Borel



1) Growing up in São Paulo during the eighties under massive economic inflation, the scent of cement and bricks was ubiquitous. High residential edifices would suddenly rise up, then construction would peter out due to lack of funding. In subsequent years these enormous skeletons (esqueletos) would pierce the skyline like ghosts without past lives. Their bare structure nakedly depicted a history that never quite existed. These open architectural lines became one of the ways for me to think of how to stack and support things visually.

2) Albers’ woodcuts poetically visualize the São Paulo milieu I grew up in: favelas (wood grain), Oscar Niemeyer’s architecture (geometric shapes) and the esqueletos (lines). With the wood grain fluidly occupying sky and terrain, these modules and geometric shapes seem to be supported precariously but never fall.

3) The image of the Borel Favela looms above any creation I conceive of. You can see the Borel Favela (a ramshackle shanty town) on the mount between the two buildings. We lived in an apartment building three doors from the building on the left, on the third floor, between a tobacco factory and the morro, or the mount where the favela sits. After school I would come home, open the living room window and watch the morro life for hours on end. Kites being flown

MORGAN LEHMAN

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on rooftops, laundry hung from poles that came out of unseen ground, pink, green and light blue painted houses adjacent to tin and wood constructions. The stacking of the houses all seemed to unstably and imperfectly fit, strangely flat as in a Persian miniature painting, until people would venture out from within.

4) Though Albers' Homage to the Square deals with perception of color, I've always enjoyed the idea that these works also provide a window not to an outside or an inside, but to guide the external logic of a painting internally. In this way the square window and the colorful favela abstractly collapse into one single image.

8. Giorgio Morandi's quote

This quote came to solidify lots of things for me in thinking about still life and its various connotations, as well as abstraction. "I believe that nothing can be more abstract, more unreal, than what we actually see. We know that all we see of the objective world, as human beings,



never really exists as we see and understand it..."

9. Sergio Mendes, Ye Me Le

Though the only Sergio Mendes record that I actually like is called Raizes, this one has one of my favorite record covers, with a painting by Ivan De Moraes. The record is titled Ye-Me-Lê and its image has lived in my studio for the last 5 years. In doing research to find out about this painting, I came across a poet (below) who has become the inspiration of my latest work.

10. Algia Adamus

The premise of my upcoming show in September at Tiger Strikes Asteroid is the Brazilian poet Algia Adamus. Adamus wrote poems in a favela type house she constructed inside of her living quarters where she composed her poetry, often in made up or incorrect Portuguese. She later began to feed her recitations through a makeshift sound machine that would make her voice and verses dissipate into pure sound. Adamus disappeared in 1975, leaving numerous compositions taped over a Sergio Mendes Ye-Me-Lê cassette tape, pictured here. Adamus would keep the LP cover of the same record by her bedside, without the vinyl.

Rubens Ghenov is a Brazilian-born artist working in Philadelphia. His upcoming solo show will be at Tiger Strikes Asteroid in September. He likes the world laced with Satie, beats and Oolong.