

“But you’re an artist?”

The thought that came to me when current Artist-in-Residence Igor Villares Rosa (Brazil) revealed that he first chose to be a chef, after his father, a photographer, implored him to seek a profession that didn’t tie him to one place. Despite working in an art gallery, it’s not often that this thought comes to me when sitting with an artist, but hearing Igor speak about the way his self-taught practice simply flows through and out of him and has since he was a child, I was curious why the artist chose to be a chef after his father’s sage advice, when painting seems so natural to him and affords him the same freedom.

The answer didn’t come simply, it came fifty-seven minutes later as I wondered from the studio back to the gallery. Igor chose to be a chef for love, for life. It’s clear Villares Rosa isn’t a man who pursues things he isn’t intimately connected with, and from a young age, it was food that tethered his family. “My Nonna is ninety-two and we still go to her house every Sunday at 11am and cook and talk and drink wine until someone falls asleep on the couch and then we do it all again until 11pm.” I watch him crouch down mimicking planting a seed in the soil of his Nonna’s garden, explaining how the intention and time that is infused in a plant becomes imbued in the ingredient it eventually becomes. But when we switch focus to his career as a chef, Igor loses fervour, and it becomes clear that commercial cooking wasn’t infused with the same love that ceremonial cooking is for him. This gave painting it’s opportunity to sprout upward from a dormant psyche and take it’s hold, first entering Igor’s life as an overwhelming vision during an acupuncture session.

Igor’s familial passion returns when he speaks about what painting means to him. “It’s a meditation” he says. “I just do what is in me to do.”

“I usually paint alone. When people are around, they sometimes offer me direction. I take in only what I feel to. I try to be flexible and keep an open mind while painting ensuring the work remains a true reflection of me.”

We talk about the balance between personal integrity and being humble to new direction. It’s a conversation only for those who have lived enough to know that they don’t know everything, and it strikes me that painting is a way for Igor to meet himself, to push through boundaries both born within him and made. He later sends me a clip from “Eternity’s Gate” where Willem Dafoe, as Vincent Van Gogh, says “I paint to stop thinking...to stop thinking and I feel that I am a part of everything, outside and inside of me”. His practice is fluid, rooted in an idea born within him and planned yes, but like the ingredients that land on his Nonna’s plate, his process is fundamentally organic and responsive to the conditions he finds himself in.

‘Extinct?’ is Igor’s first solo exhibition in Australia and is a commentary on the precarious nature of all life through a series of images of endangered animals native to Brazil. Expect beauty but don’t get too attached to it, these portraits are as real as they are surreal, with Igor aiming to reveal only the truth; that in each of us lies a battle between the aspects that grant us survival and those that grant us refuge from it. Like the iconic Basquiat crown that adorns each of his works, this show is a homage to evolution, be it creative or cultural, and how nothing is set in stone, no one is gone until the last breath taken, and it ain’t over ‘til it’s over...and crucially, how the power is in our hands to create and cultivate life in whatever manner we choose to.

- Written by Monique Di Russo