

José Gamarra

Whispers in the Forest

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Press release

José Gamarra
La vigie, 2024
Acrylic on canvas
74 x 100 x 2 cm
JGa025 4



Xippas Geneva

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Anthological exhibition, works from 1967 to 2025 Curated by Manuel Neves

Xippas Gallery is pleased to present, for the first time in its Geneva space, an exhibition dedicated to the Uruguayan artist José Gamarra. The anthological exhibition *Whispers in the Forest* traces fifty years of creation by this singular artist through an exceptional selection of paintings and drawings.

"We must return to the forest where the source of our words lies, the reliquary of signs and forms that haunt us — not knowing whether it threatens us or is favorable to us."
Édouard Glissant

In José Gamarra's 2024 painting *La Vigie* (the watcher), we see a canoe peacefully crossing a river. Four figures are inside. At the center, Jesus of Nazareth is flanked by a dog and escorted by a demon, both watched over by a Spanish conquistador armed with an arquebus.

Everything described appears consistent with the narrative of colonial Baroque art created in the Americas, but the scene is completed by one final figure who not only adds an incongruous and fantastical dimension to the work, but also anchors it in the contemporary context it projects.

This final figure, the one steering the boat, is Superman.

The famous American superhero is cast as an emblem of North American culture and politics across the American continent (and the Western world).

Likewise, in the detailed jungle setting surrounding the scene described above, an Indigenous person can be seen observing the scene.

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The title of the work clearly frames its interpretation: Jesus Christ and the Devil, the Conquistador and Superman all traveling together, “in the same boat,” guided by the power of American culture.

The only witness to the event is this anonymous figure watching over them, along with the vast, lush natural world that seems to resist quietly.

Likewise, in the work *Amigos*, created in 2021, we see within a sumptuous depiction of the jungle three figures: an animal, a human, and a mythological being, along with two creatures observing them.

In both works, the jungle serves as the setting and the space where a story unfolds. In the first, it is both witness to and victim of an imperialist policy; in the second, it is the only possible space where real and imaginary beings can coexist “the law of the jungle” and *The Jungle Book*.

The anthological exhibition *Whispers in the Forest*, presented at Xippas Geneva, retraces fifty years of work by this singular artist through an exceptional selection of paintings and drawings.

José Gamarra was born in Uruguay in 1934. After living for a few years in Rio de Janeiro and participating in the Venice Biennale (1964), he settled in the Paris region in the mid-1960s.

The first series of works created in France reflects certain aesthetic directions of Narrative Figuration (Adami, Arroyo, Arnal, Castro, Cueco, Días, Fromanger, Rancillac, Recalcati, Télémaque). Gamarra was involved for some time in the back-and-forth of this heterogeneous figurative group, associated with media imagery, comic books, and the entertainment industry, which in a way embodied the highly politicized atmosphere prevailing in Paris during the 1960s.

During the 1970s, the depiction of nature and particularly the tropical jungle gradually gained prominence in the artist’s pictorial compositions. At the beginning of the following decade, the representation of the jungle became more formally sophisticated and occupied almost the entire space of Gamarra’s paintings.

José Gamarra’s artistic project, centered on painting but also involving drawing and graphic production developed since the late 1960s, introduced the depiction of the forest or jungle as a possible scenario for human development. For the artist, the jungle, the forest, the selva is the theater of all conflicts and all agreements, a fundamental space of human action, the primordial setting of myth and fable, the impenetrable mystery of the unknown.

In this infinite and mysterious setting, the artist presents unusual stories where diverse characters from different cultures and historical moments coexist and interact: The Pope and Superman, the Spanish conquistadors of America and mythological animals, or the Yanomami and American sailors. The jungle landscape witnesses and suffers all these conflicts and stands as an ontological space of resistance and resilience perhaps the last possible one.

As with all great creators, Gamarra’s artistic project is not only contemporary by its relevance and creative originality but also because it acts in the present by projecting images that reveal fundamental questions and issues. Nature, culture, society, and politics; the geography from which life comes; the vital space of entropy and the hearth of negentropy this fragile yet resilient space may be the last frontier nature offers to humanity and its culture.

The last frontier.

- Manuel Neves

José Gamarra is one of the most important artists of Uruguayan origin. Born in 1934 in Tacuarembó (Uruguay), he has lived and worked in Arcueil, France, since 1963, and has achieved international recognition.

At the age of sixteen, he began participating in National Salons, then entered the School of Fine Arts in Montevideo, where he studied painting and printmaking. In 1959, he received an Itamarati scholarship from the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to study printmaking at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro with Johnny Friedlaender, and painting at the Institute of Fine Arts in Praia Vermelha with Iberê Camargo.

After a year in Rio, he was appointed professor of painting and fresco at the Alvares Penteado Foundation in São Paulo. The four years he spent in Brazil (1959–1963) were fundamental to his artistic development. In 1962, he participated in the 3rd Biennial of Young Painters in Montevideo and the 3rd Biennial of Young Painters in Paris, where he won the painting prize and a French government scholarship.

His curiosity, his desire to see original works, and his encounters with other artists led him to Europe. The European experience proved essential upon his arrival in France in 1963. In Uruguay, artists were influenced by the Torres García school a very strict school with a rather dark palette. “In Europe, I discovered the explosion of colors,” recalls Gamarra.

In Paris, he found a new creative dynamic. His perspective on the American continent changed: he began to observe and explore Latin American nature. The painter evokes various periods, events, figures, and objects from the conquistadors of the discovery of the Americas to indigenous peoples, and the armed conflicts of the 1970s, with helicopters, planes, and tanks. The deep greens of the landscapes, the precision of details, and the anonymous figures in positions of defense, attack, or anxiety surrounded by animals and objects create both drama and lyricism within a perfect aesthetic balance. His lush vegetation scenes unfold like a novel, where the magical jungle landscapes describe an entire aesthetic and social universe.

Social engagement and concern for the preservation of nature have long been central themes in his artistic practice. José Gamarra has always believed it is possible to live in harmony with nature; the ecological message is an integral part of his work.

José Gamarra's work is included in prestigious public and private collections such as the Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA; the Rockefeller Foundation, New York, USA; the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, France; the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris, France; the Fonds National d'Art Contemporain (CNAP), Paris La Défense, France; the Musée d'Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne (MAC/VAL), Vitry, France; the Rothschild Bank Collection, Zurich, Switzerland; the Museo de Arte Moderno, Buenos Aires, Argentina; and the Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, among others. He has recently exhibited at the Iberê Camargo Foundation in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and at the Museo Nacional de Artes Visuales in Montevideo, Uruguay. He received the prestigious Premio Figari in 2024.

A catalogue will be published on the occasion of the exhibition Whispers in the Forest, with texts by Manuel Neves and Philippe Dagen.