

# **We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live**

pedro frança & Lucy Stein  
in Conversation with Raphael Gygax

On the occasion of the exhibition *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live: pedro frança & Lucy Stein*, curator Raphael Gygax had a conversation with the two artists pedro frança and Lucy Stein via e-mail in July 2022.

**Raphael Gygax: Let's start this conversation by discussing the exhibition title "We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live", a quote from Joan Didion, which struck me when I once again studied both of your works. Narration takes an important place in your paintings. You both responded very quickly and positively to my exhibition title suggestion. What importance do Joan Didion's texts have for you, when did you encounter them and what are your memories of them?**

Lucy Stein: I was very into Ernest Hemingway as a young reader so when I discovered Joan Didion in my twenties it made a lot of sense. Being on the cusp of the millennium at that time, I experienced her invocation of an American existential lineage as a crisp negotiation with the twentieth century and it felt enormous. Didion's blunt, or arch, machismo revealed itself slowly as a method for describing

a particular type of fragility or sensitivity that can't be disentangled from her gender and her experience as a young woman and then a mother. Her writing showed me a way to negotiate with the canon and gave me the confidence to be brutal and tender in my paintings. *Play it as it lays* and *Slouching towards Bethlehem* are most important to me. The image of Maria Wyeth tapping hard boiled eggs on her steering wheel never goes away.

pedro frança: I haven't read much of Didion's work, to be honest. But I heard a lot, and got a lot of excerpts, from people around me. I read *Slouching towards Bethlehem*. It's delightful and delirious. I like how raw and direct her observations are, especially when dealing with death and the body, and at the same time I feel the pictures she's portraying are always melting in uncertainty. I guess her words are a nice place for me to be in. I love this quote as the title for the show. And I love it also because it makes me think about its opposite: "We tell ourselves stories in order to live" – is it referring to our need to lean on fantasy to keep going? Or to the fact stories are the builders of community, of our life together? Also, what happens when we have no stories to tell, as in a traumatic experience? Finally, Laurie Anderson recently said something like: "We're drowning in stories" – and it's also true: stories can be our allies and our enemy. The exhibition title animates all those shadows around it.

**You both cite the formative influence of her essay *Slouching toward Bethlehem* (1968). In a 2011 conversation with David L. Ulin, Didion said, regarding her storytelling technique: "I thought it was important always for the reader, for me to place myself in the piece so that the reader knew where I was, the reader knew**

**who was talking... At the time I started doing these pieces it was not considered a good thing for writers to put themselves front and center, but I had this strong feeling you had to place yourself there and tell the reader who that was at the other end of the voice.” How do you deal with the issue of “narrative voice” in your own work?**

LS: It’s fascinating to read this quote as I find all her writing denies the idea of a stable coherent self. The “I” she speaks from is always fragile, unstable, consciously rooted in culture and place but on the verge of falling into an abyss of panicked chaos at all times. That’s why I love it. One of my favourite essays from the book *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* is “on self respect” which she wrote for *Teen Vogue* and really addresses this closeness to fragmentation, this sense that things can really quickly fall apart and the rituals or performances people enact in order to keep themselves together.

Painting can play all of this out of course. I like my painting edges / horizons to be in dialogue with this beautiful terror. I was brought up in a family that talked constantly about psychological damage, suicide, alcoholism. My parents and older siblings had suffered a lot so my earliest understanding of the world was “things fall apart” and if a person makes it to old age without having been institutionalised or attempting suicide or drinking themselves into incoherence that’s a miracle! My take on narrative is what I read into Didion’s work: the place, the culture, the myths, the textures move through the “I” and in that sense everything personal is political, but at the same time the “I” goes in and out of focus, goes under and comes up again. Sometimes “I” am archetypal, sometimes petty, though rarely am I as emotionally detached as Didion’s depressive Maria Wyeth persona. Sometimes painting for me

is like swimming, I move through psychological states like a body shifting through water. Pedro and I talked about Manaus and the Amazon recently, I have such vivid dreamy memories of swimming in black tepid water with my dad there in 2014. Despite all the fearful creatures in the water we both felt held and ecstatic.

pf: As Lucy said swimming is a good metaphor for the painting process. Swimming in dark, muddy waters, in which you almost dissolve yourself. A friend from Ueinzz, the theatre group I'm part of, said it beautifully: "Theatre is a place where one can die a little." So is painting. When I think about this "I", I immediately think of the "eye", the point of observation. I never have this emulation of a single point of view in my paintings, or in my videos, and installations. Maybe the work is the site where the "I" disappears into a myriad of other perspectives that are invited into or invade the process. There are those groups paintings I make... maybe as an allegory of that multiplicity.

Dreams might offer a good analogy here: it feels weird to say "I" made or had a dream. Because it seems that dreams are not the result of my subjectivity, but the product of many different forces from the outside, of the desires, traumas, joy, moods, and intuitions that circulate outside of myself, among me and others, so that every dream that "I" have is actually the dream of others – of society, of the world – in me. It's the same with the images conceived in an artwork: they're not "mine" in any sense: not in their origin, nor in their destination I've been involved in collective practices and doing individual work for about the same time. I feel that, in collective practice, when things are going well, one feels deep solitude. And, in the lonely process of painting, if I'm in the right place,

then it's a quasi-death experience, and what could be thought of as my narrative voice dissolves into multiple whispers that are not myself. It's both a collective and lonely activity. The narrative voice is a chorus. The best artistic experience is to look at a painting and say: Here's what we did. I love this quote from Clarice Lispector.

LS: I totally agree with that "Here's what we did." For me the "we" is usually an invocation of family and cultural ghosts as well as place spirits. Someone once said I could start a fight in an empty room and that describes my painting project quite well. The others are with me at all times.

**pedro, you have just mentioned your activity in the Ueinz Theatre Company, and I know from you Lucy that music, be it as a member of different musical formations, takes an importance in your artistic practice. I would like to talk a little more about this interaction, to what extent these activities in other artistic fields are made fruitful for the painterly practice.**

pf: I have been working with Ueinz Theatre for twelve years. The group brings together people with very different life trajectories. As Peter Pal Pelbart, a founding member of the group wrote: "We're lunatics, therapists, performers, artists, vagabonds, teachers, "normopaths"... on stage, no one can tell the difference." Some are absolute experts in the art of living, of surviving, of playing dead." We've been working without a director for 10 years, making theatre in a dynamic of collective creation. It is the most radically horizontal experience I have ever known. I mean horizontal in political terms, but also in the sense of a less complicated relation to gravity: It is a place where you can go to a rehearsal, fall

asleep in a corner and no one will find it strange, be worried or try to get you to work.

Many of my works are influenced by this relationship with Ueinzz. Props used in the performances became installations or installations became costumes. Some works have been installed with the group, in a kind of rehearsal or ritual; some paintings and large drawings were carried around during the performances, or used as blankets. I feel painting and theatre are very similar: it's the feeling of being hanged by a thread, the absolute cruciality and the impossibility of "undoing", the hallucinatory state. And especially that abyss of realizing there's nothing there... until miraculously something alchemically appears.

I love that feeling when you sit in front of a painting, and the painting is just there, still, either distracted with their own business or staring back at you. A painting has a presence in time which is also very theatrical. I always take this "present acting" aspect in consideration when I'm painting. It has to do with the physical and performative aspects of the painting in relation to the environment: the weight of the canvas, the opacity of the surface, the interactions with the light; sometimes the windows are open and the breeze comes and animates the unstretched cloth. The analogy could also extend to the gestures and the use of colors: I personally don't like large, dominating gestures, you know, those heroic brushstrokes that want to take over the whole stage. I prefer small brushstrokes, because they energize the whole surface in a more decentralized way. And I know that this intuition is somehow related to Ueinzz scenes in which different sounds are being made without one dominating the other, stepping in and out the threshold between word and sound.

Finally, many of the motifs and characters I paint are inspired by the performances: Bodies that are inconsistent in their identities, moods or actions; bodies that are not standing or laying, bodies that are and aren't there. I feel there's a very telluric aspect in the group's aesthetics, which I can absolutely identify in my paintings. Ueinz became part of the way I think and feel, like an extra organ of my body.

LS: Collaboration has been so important to me, but is less so right now as I'm raising a young family and have to perform the role of the competent mother. This is a very taxing performance and my time alone is precious and scarce. There is this amazing twisted telepathy that you can get when you work together in artistic collaboration though. I'm not gifted musically but I am very sensitive to textures and atmospheres so I have often collaborated with musicians to create loaded spaces for performance.

The dissolving figure/ground relation in pedro's work really spoke to me when I first encountered it – this dissolution or merging is what I'd always want to get to in performance and painting. The idea of the "Super Natural" experience is also interesting to me. The most active collaboration I have going right now is mine and Sarah Hartnett's pilgrimage along the Mary ley line in southern England. This project foregrounds dream work, intuition, telepathy, the idea of the journeywoman and pleasure. We follow dream signs and synchronicity in order to move forward. Sometimes we move in circles. It was a purposefully slow project, even before Covid we planned to take 3 years over it. Now it's extended to 4. The ley line drags us into our unconscious and makes us disgorge owl pellets of reconstituted knowledge. Following it gives us emotional strength and inspiration.

**I would like to talk in more depth about the exhibition and the theme of the anthropomorphic, the attribution of human characteristics to animals or vice versa. In the exhibition you show different images that deal with this theme; with you pedro it is the motif of the “wolf human” and with you Lucy you in the work Ungrace (2022) or (In her Piety) (2022). Could you talk more about these works and their background?**

pf: What is called “animism” is often referred to as something related to our cultural past. And when it’s related to painting, it’s easy to approach it as an evocation of old mythologies or something like that. But I feel it as quite the opposite. Animism poses a set of questions to our collective future, because they’re founded on the inexistence of a hierarchy between humans and animals plus other sentient beings. “Animism” is a cosmological tool, stigmatized as “primitive” in the colonial discourse and yet to be learned and used by most of us. It refers to notions long forgotten by the modern west and by all the “wests” in the globe, or by the “west” inside our heads and bodies, and they’ll have to be relearned should we want to live and die well on this planet. I would love to also hear Lucy about that, because she seems to be interested in the imagery of a premodern Europe.

When I deal with those subjects this is often the kind of background I have in mind. The wolf painting came from a daydream of a theatre scene, in which two persons merge with a wolf. In the image, it’s not clear whether they are “dressed” as a wolf, or merged with the wolf, or if the wolf is inhabited by them... who became who? It was also important that they’re two people inside the wolf, so it’s not just a one-to-one transformation. This motif first occurred to me



as an idea of a costume for a performance, but I ended up developing it as paintings. And the nice thing about a painting is that it holds all the possible interpretations of the scene together, contradictory as they are. In its stillness, painting maintains a myriad of stories alive, simultaneously – painting has always been a multiverse.

I've also been thinking a lot about hiding, camouflaging, escaping, inventing strategies to become invisible. The wolf in the painting is a “Lobo Guara”, a kind of Brazilian wolf, very common in the Pantanal area which was heavily devastated by huge fires in 2020. So maybe the painting is a tale about survival, either for the people, the wolf or both. I don't want to over interpret it. I made two small versions of it early in 2021, and then returned to the subject about one and a half years later. I made a small painting of this motif with a dark background, but when I engaged it in a large format, I ended up with a very warm and feverish blue. This was not planned. It was a hot day.

LS: pedro's answer has activated memories of moving to the west coast of Ireland in 2010 and having what I felt at that time to be a “Celtic epiphany”. I was searching for a sense of an outside (or perhaps it was a sense of premodern Europe I was searching for) by heading as westerly as I could go within European territory. I thought of it as Heavy West. Here I felt immanence. I listened to a lot of folk music, started the band Death Shanties in Glasgow, and eventually settled in West Cornwall to make a home. I was possessed by this sense of the edge of the continent, where suicide has occurred in my family (my grandfather), where some of the best British art of the last century was made, and where extreme poverty meets tourist economy wealth and ethno-nationalism can be a

byproduct of this encounter. Meanwhile Brexit was happening and I found myself in the alternative rural echo chamber talking to farmers and fishermen. I felt as though I were writhing around in the belly of the beast to quote from pedro's work.

The idea of human to animal transformation is central to Celtic folklore as it is in most indigenous storytelling. The Goddess culture that sprang up here in the 1960/70s hitched itself onto these legends and to the local traditional "old ways" of the west country cunning folk. People now give their lives over to educating themselves in these ways, and for a while during Covid the overlap with anti vaxx propaganda sickened me. I am feeling more balanced towards it now as I think we can take what we want from these examples of personal self actualisation and the rich body of knowledge and speculation that informs them. As an artist it is neither rational nor irrational to follow these pathways to gather knowledge. I personally was completely consumed in my research on the Celts and Celtic identity and how this related to English and European identity for many years. Celtic otherness has defined Cornwall and at its most rewarding, people of many different heritages are attracted to this, not as readymade identity (like teenage goths for example) but as a route towards personal transformation.

You can hitch a ride on these galloping or slyly meandering folk figures like Epona, the horse goddess, Reynardine, the sly fox, or Bucca, the priapic Poseidon figure, or folk song figures like Polly Vaughn whose boyfriend shot her thinking she was a swan. Like the ley line these are concepts that offer a space to enter and talk sometimes cynically sometimes allegorically about what I perceive is going on in my world, in my life as a

mother, as an artist, in art in general, in politics, in the climate crisis, in feminism...needless to say these are all intrinsic to each other. The motif of transformation relates to the unstable "I", but also to there not being any possibility of speaking for all women. Folk archetypes can embody collective passion, humour or trauma but they are as problematic and contested as the populations who invented / invoked them. In some ways working with the transformations of folklore validates the terrifying need to be endlessly adaptive that corporate capitalism demands of us and populist politics denies. We are obliged to live within paradox. Like pedro I am working things through and out in the work but they are not necessarily the subject in any literal sense. I don't tend to make narrative paintings, although I don't rule it out.

*(In her piety)* is in some ways about the female (or desired and subjugated) painter in relation to art history being huntress and quarry. The bird figures merging with Breton women who were obviously tropes from (male) modernist painting are also examples of the Jungian "anima" which is a theory that has guided my painting as well as the pilgrimage. The idea of an ultra femme, almost gynaecratic painting, a school of over developed frenzied anima is funny to me, and also anti heroic.

**pedro some of the works for the exhibition were created in New York, did this change of the place of creation of your works have an influence on them? Lucy you also work in Spain from time to time. Maybe you both could tell me more about what kind of influence the respective place of creation has on the work or if you also change it temporarily as we talked already quite a lot about the connection of the influence of place of residence and its socio-historical significance in regards of your work.**

LS: My ceramic works are heavily influenced by my time spent in Eastern Spain. There is this great shop in Gata de Gorgos called Ceramicas Monfort where the owner Jaime collects old ceramics from all over, and especially from Manises near Valencia. He told me some museums and factories to visit in 2013 so I went with my friend the potter Simon Bayliss and had an uncanny day out in the 40 degree heat. Manises, like most of Spain at that time, was deep in crisis, and yet the buildings were covered in these stunning elaborate tile facades. The confluence of this depressed hot town with almost everything closed down and these facades and “azulejos” tile panels which rely on abstractions formed by a distinctive green triangle tile really affected me. I began making tile works in earnest after that trip.

Tile panels are literally embedded into Mediterranean culture in a way that is not the case in the UK, except for in Newlyn where I work where there are panels of fishing boats on all the streets. Cornwall is isolated from the rest of the UK but feels connected to France and Spain because of the fishing industry. It also had a thriving china clay industry until recently. There is something about the permanence of these tile pieces, their commitment to exteriority, (and the fact that they survive the industry that created them) that operates in a necessary counterpoint to my paintings on canvas which are more about an interior monologue. At the same time the process of putting these painted tiles through the glazing process and the kiln is almost like adding a timeless prism to my paintings. The idea of embedding these tile works, slotting them in, is meaning more and more to me. It's funny because I define myself and my work so much in relation to particular places – West Cornwall where I live, Jesus Pobre in Eastern Spain where I spend a lot of time and have since

childhood, and yet the places that have probably shaped me more – Oxford where I grew up, Glasgow where I studied, Amsterdam, Berlin and London – I barely mention them. I think I need to create myths of belonging in order to work effectively.

pf: I did most of the paintings in the show between May and June in New York. For a few weeks I was working on a very small table, just making drawings on charcoal over found brown paper. After a few weeks I was able to get a studio for 40 days, and to finally do some painting.

I feel New York, and the US in general are now dealing with the trauma of stepping down from being the number one superpower in the world. In this process there's grief, the feeling of decadence... and some people get in denial and put on that infamous red hat. Others, in grief, put their hopes in the Democratic party. And finally, I feel that for many people this decadence is a good thing, a relief that opens the space for other discussions and for a more radical political and aesthetic imagination. It feels like a part of society is now able to relax from this superhero role and just do as they please. Decay as emancipation. It's a very interesting context: the emergence of radical native thinking into the mainstream, the huge flow of political imagination after BLM and how it challenges the military structure of US society. But there's also a renewed conception of that they are, indeed, Americans, the sense that they are connected to the rest of the continent, to the whole America. Perhaps it's because their politics are now very similar to many latin american contexts, like Brazil, and that means: destruction as a daily fact, collective fragility, rising inequality and the consequent revolts. The sense of falling apart is maybe new to them, but not at all to us in

Brazil. It's weird, New York now seems like a museum of the 20th century and that's not necessarily bad – as I said, it feels that for many communities and for many discussions it's a new ground of possibilities. It reminds me of a beautiful quote by Clarice Lispector: “what I desire has no name yet”

It was stimulating to work against this background. When in São Paulo, I was painting with oil on linen. In New York, I couldn't buy linen, so I decided to paint over burlap. But that pushed me to work with gesso and tempera, because the burlap feels a bit like the screen that is often used as the structure gesso in fresco painting. Tempera is a kind of cheap paint, in the sense that it's very common and nontoxic. It's the painting of frescoes and murals but also of school projects and finger painting. So, it's vulgar and chic – and I love it. It's much more basic, so you have to work harder to push it into a certain complexity. It feels like I'm making a mural on a roughcast wall.

LS: pedro, my sister said to me recently that (broadly) anxiety is about looking into the future and depression involves chewing over the past. You mentioned grief in your comments upon America, which is also commonly linked to depression, as a sort of undifferentiated grief. I wonder if you think about your works in relation to these states of mind?

pf: For me, making art is about projecting those two glances simultaneously, to the future and to the past. It's like every gesture has to spread in time, and connect the ghostly presence of the past with possibilities of the future. It's way to deal with those two temporalities is the opposite of the mechanisms of anxiety / depression that you describe. Maybe we should be chewing the future (like ruminating it – almost eating, almost spitting before swallowing) and looking into

the past, that is, projecting our expectations in transforming it – it has never been more evident that the past is an open battlefield.

Ailton Krenak, a Brazilian indigenous philosopher, talks about “ideas to postpone the end of the world”, deploying an ancient cosmovision to describe what we are all about to go through. Is this cosmovision something from the past or from the future?

I’ve been alternatively working on paintings and on “new media” projects (3-D renderings, VR and AR pieces etc.) And I try to deal with them as both old and new techniques, pointed simultaneously to future and past. Dealing with new technologies of virtual presence, they only interest me insofar as they’re related to very old modes of virtuality, like dreams, delirium, etc. Painting can give you a glimpse of what’s to come – image making as an oracle, that’s an ancient futuristic tool. In feel I can only paint things that are related to the future.

I have a final question for you Lucy which occurred during the unpacking of your works in the gallery. I was very surprised by the amount of building / destruction on them, specially on the small ones (talking about ruminating...) A friend from Ueinz Theatre used to say when we were sinking in a mess during a rehearsal and someone got anxious: “that’s ok, we have to beak things first”. I wonder if you could say something about is dealing with destruction for you, in the process of painting, also as something collected to daily life.

LS: This idea of precognition is important to me too. I concur that a painting can offer a glimpse of what’s to come. I

become sort of devoured and devourer and am often really intrigued to see what is unloosed. I think this sense of negotiating with the ghosts of futures past is also what you are seeing in the destruction and rebuilding. The surface registers a series of psychological events, sometimes in quite a frenzied way. I like it always to feel a bit funny too, as though certain marks or brushstrokes or intersections break the fourth wall so to speak) and go “ha ha” or “hi mum!” but only in the most subtle way possible. In that humour there is always somehow a lament, or pathos. The build up of paint is never for its own sake, it is always relational. I hate paint porn! If I find myself getting lost in “mark making” I have to destroy it. For me making a painting is the most “mindful” activity I can think of and one of the only times I seem to be able to lose myself in the present.