

Through the looking glass

Portuguese artist Gil Heitor Cortesao evokes a lost or forgotten world in his images of largely empty interiors. Intrigued, we caught up with him prior to the opening of his first solo UAE show

You have an interesting technique – painting ‘backwards’ onto Perspex. That can’t be easy?

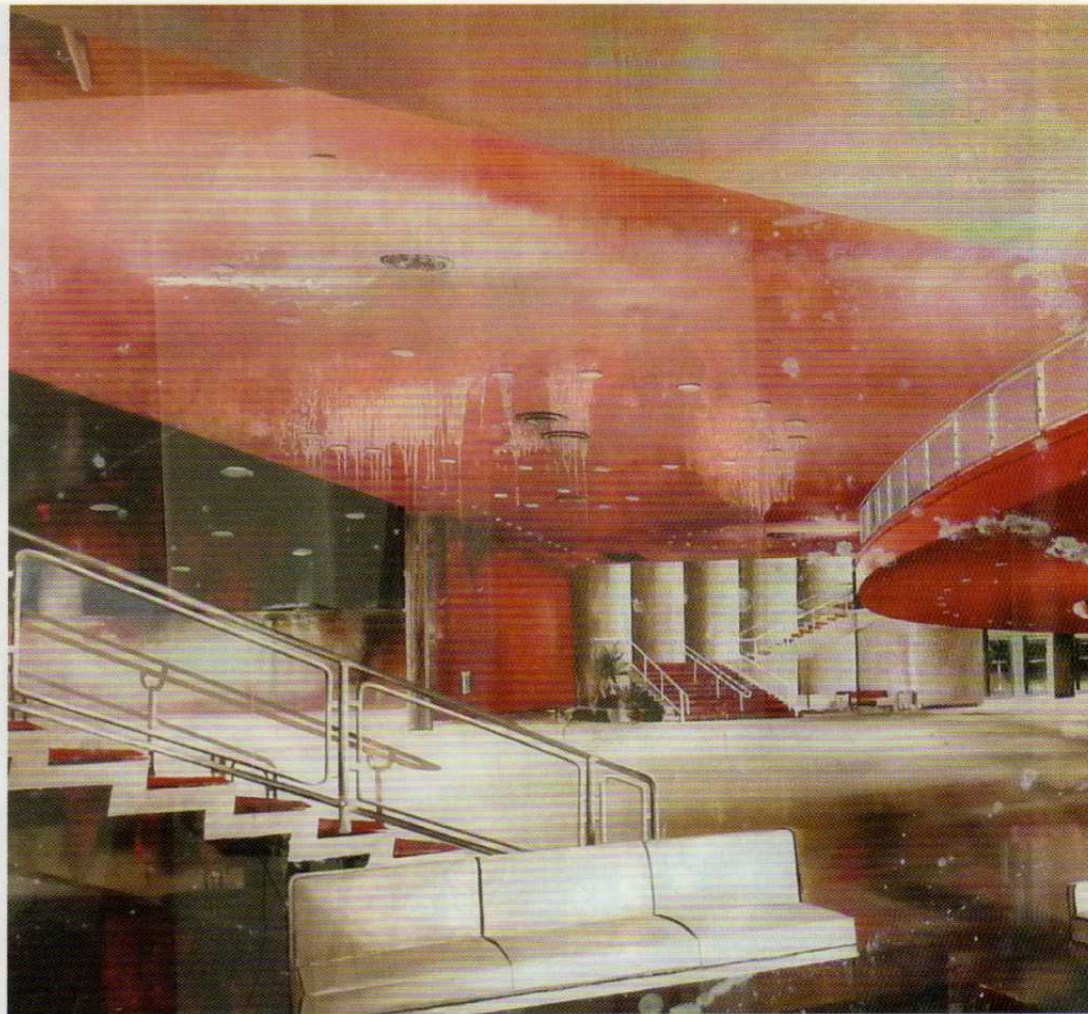
I paint on one side of the Perspex and show the other. Even if my sources are photographs, I’m not really interested in realism of any sort, and the use of glass and Perspex allows me also to get away from it. It removes the weight and the density of the painting; they become almost immaterial, dreamy. The glass acts the same way that dreams alter the weight of our own bodies. When I’m painting, turning the glass over is like crossing through a mirror – it’s like Lewis Carroll’s *Alice Through The Looking-Glass*.

Using this technique is, as you say, like ‘painting backwards’: I start with the details and the background comes in the end. It’s no longer difficult for me, but perhaps returning to the ‘normal’ process would be a challenge, after all those years painting backwards!

Why do you work that way?

Transparency has always fascinated me. When I was a fine arts student I used to paint on canvas, but wasn’t satisfied with the results – at the same time I was also drawing on translucent sheets of paper, and that work stood much more for what I was trying to achieve.

I also studied painting in Turin, Italy, and that city had



a very strong link with Arte Povera, a 1960s art movement that abandoned traditional painting and sculpture and started using common, everyday materials. Unlike the Poverists, I didn’t feel that painting was ‘dead’, but I also realised that, in order to keep on painting and achieve something meaningful and new, I would probably have to adopt other techniques and media. Painting on Perspex, as I have been doing for several years now, seems a natural development of this process. **Many of your works seem rather haunting – these are places built to entertain people but you depict them as almost derelict.**

I think that the haunting quality has a lot to do with the fact that these spaces are mostly empty. I use a lot of photos from the 1950s, 60s and 70s as source material. A lot of them are unsettling for me because they show something – a building, for

example – that was futuristic in its day, but that now is ‘retro-futuristic’ or even just plainly obsolete. They are haunting because it is difficult to locate them – do they belong to the future, or to the past? I’m very much interested in these kinds

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