

Nothing old can stay

Carbon 12 re-opens at its new Al Quoz address this week with an exhibition by **Gil Heitor Cortesao**. Words *Chris Lord*

A lot of effort goes into keeping Dubai looking this way. By this, we mean its curious interpretation of the future. Pipe-irrigation drips the city green, vaguely futuristic buildings are constantly on the rise. And, by character, nothing old can stay.

It's hard not to think of Dubai when looking at Gil Heitor Cortesao's work, who inaugurates Carbon 12's new Al Quoz space with a solo show this week. The Portuguese artist rips out pages of '60s interiors magazines and reproduces them meticulously, with an almost photorealist's eye, directly onto glass. Starting with the details of an image first, Cortesao works out from there in layers, painting the background on last and eventually laying a piece of plexiglass over the top. This plexiglass, inevitably, has drips and slashes of paint permeating its surface. The effect, over the chic white '60s minimalist interiors, is one of decay. A stark, Kubrick-esque living room, with its utilitarian idea of cosiness, suddenly appears as if ruin is slowly creeping in.

On the phone to *Time Out* from Lisbon, Cortesao explains that these spaces are a vision of an era he didn't know, but with which he feels an intangible familiarity. 'I was born in '67. I'm fascinated [with these spaces] because they are familiar in that they were still there when I was a kid, [and yet] feel like they are from the past.' He talks about the atmosphere of loss that we see in these scenes, a melancholia for something that was never fully realised. 'To many of the designers and architects at this time, it was really about creating a space to fit well with a new society, a modern society where a lot of things from the past would be overcome. The interiors have this sense of belonging to a Utopian space that was never really realisable, never built.'

The melancholic atmosphere that Cortesao refers to sits deep within these images. We feel like a voyeur, as if we've stumbled into a decrepit museum of mid-20th century aesthetics. The sense of decay, of abandonment, becomes inextricable from the ideas that hovered beneath



the surface of these quaintly utopic visions of what the bright, ordered future would look like. Even the few figures that feature in the collection seem beyond our grasp. They are shadowy and peripheral – a couple frozen mid-frolic next to a pale blue swimming pool.

What lies beyond these scenes is particularly interesting, and only just hinted at by Cortesao. In the '60s white-red interior, we can see, through a set of bay windows, a rather foreboding forest just beyond. This sense of a chaotic, unknowable world outside seeps into a lot of the images, even in the scenes without people. A living room with a foreboding orderliness and the curtains drawn is simply eerie. 'Perhaps it is because there are no people in that one,' says Cortesao. 'We're more aware of an absence, we're made the protagonist in these scenes. You feel more alone



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looking into these spaces.'

But it's also part of Cortesao's overall intention with the work. He's demonstrating to us the decay time has wrought on the idealism of that time. The chaotic world beyond could not afford the sort of order that the '60s proposed as the future. And he reflects this, also, in the chaotic, disfiguring effect of the paint-marked plexiglass. 'It's a little like something Francis Bacon said, that you have to instil some chaos in an image so that it becomes more vital, more intense as a painting,' Cortesao says.

The artist continues: 'It's trying to negotiate your way between chaos and order and that, I think, is one

of the main things we do in art and architecture. To create an absolutely ordered and efficient society, a Utopia, is to create something really oppressive.' We can sense the oppressiveness in these scenes, in the stiff architectural lines of a lobby, the silence of a carefully ordered room. 'There has to be some space for something more spontaneous and out of order that contrasts with this, and I think art is about this – about control and losing control.'

Talk turns to Dubai. 'I'm very curious about it,' says Cortesao. 'I can only compare it to Brasilia where there was nothing and then they created this city out of nowhere.' We mention the city's own futuristic idealism, and the difficulty we have in imagining what it will look like in 10 or even 20 years. 'Places can seem very fresh, they can seem almost without weight and quite dreamy perhaps,' he responds. 'In another sense they seem to be decaying, there's an ambivalence about them. Perhaps it's the same ambivalence I perceive in these spaces from the '60s which are now obsolete.'

Memories From The Future is at Carbon 12, October 15-November 15. For their new address, see listings

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