

**Galerie für Gegenwartskunst, E-WERK Freiburg i. Br.**

**Jaime Welsh, *The Inheritors***

12 September – 10 November 2024

In his solo exhibition, Portuguese artist Jaime Welsh delves into the darker aspects of Portugal's history during the dictatorship, prompting reflections on contemporary socio-political issues.

The Estado Novo (New State), established by Antonio de Oliveira Salazar in the early 1930s, persisted until 1974. This authoritarian regime derived its legitimacy from Portugal's purported civilizing mission, positioning itself as the oldest colonial power. The 1933 constitution framed the colonial empire as essential for Portugal's national identity, promoting the notion that Portuguese colonialism was superior to that of other nations.

It was argued, that Portuguese colonialism was “benign, interactive, and harmonious” as it was driven by a civilising mission, and not by economic gains as the colonial endeavors of other powers (Abele 2017: 56).

Despite the wars of independence that erupted in the Portuguese colonies starting in 1961, the regime perpetuated the connection between colonialism and nationalism, enforcing this ideology militarily until the Estado Novo's demise (Piçarra and Castro, 2017: 7). This imperial fantasy's legacy endured, even as historical realities diverged sharply from these narratives (Abele 2017: 58). Contemporary scholars assert that Salazar's colonial policy was fundamentally economic in nature (Abele 2017: 58).

Welsh's photographs are set against the backdrop of two significant buildings from the Salazar era, constructed or renovated in the 1950s for central institutions of the regime. Both structures exemplify the official architectural style of the dictatorship. The artist captures children in these spaces of power, selected through an extensive casting process, and later composes their images into compelling visual narratives. The processed textures, surfaces, bodies, colors, and tonal values exhibit a painterly quality reminiscent of European Salon academic painting.

Among the works, the large-format photographs *Hearth* (fireplace) and *Swans*, along with the smaller piece *The Red Jumper* were taken in the renovated offices of the former headquarters of the Banco Nacional e Ultramarino (BNU) in Lisbon. Founded in 1864 as a bank for the Portuguese colonies, the BNU was a cornerstone of Salazar's protectionist colonial economic policy. In 1953, Salazar extended the bank's contract, granting it a monopoly for an additional 30 years, thus ensuring state profits from colonial monetary practices. This renewed agreement ushered the BNU into a prosperous phase following a period of crisis.

The BNU headquarters, where Welsh's *Hearth*, *Swans*, and *The Red Jumper* are set, underwent significant renovations between 1951 and 1967, directed by architect Luis Cristino da Silva (Vaz Pinto and Ferreira Calado 2024: 27). A pioneer of modernist architecture in Portugal, da Silva played a crucial role in establishing the Estado Novo's architectural identity (Bodenschatz and Welch Guerra 2019: 434). His renovation of the bank was monumental, austere, and neoclassical, symbolizing the power and imperial grandeur that both the bank and the nation aspired to project.

Welsh's photograph **Swans** is taken in the former office of the governor of the BNU. This room was renovated 'in the style of French imperialism' (Vaz Pinto and Ferreira Calado 2024: 9). Intended to evoke Napoleonic France, the Empire style was meant to metaphorically express the power and reach of the bank which encompassed the entire Portuguese colonial empire.

Welsh's diagonally composition shows only an empty corner of the imposingly decorated governor's office. The vanishing point of his image literally brings the architecturally staged imperial fantasy to a dead end. The monumental geometric rhetoric of overpowering intended to intimidate and discipline subjects and bodies, is further deconstructed by Welsh's asymmetrical pictorial composition. The massive mahogany panelled door with gilded nautical motifs and swan ornamentation<sup>1</sup>, for example, appears to the side of the centre, distorting its rectangular forms as an expression of authoritarian disciplinary claim.

The boy in school uniform, lying on the ground off centre with his bare feet in a fetal position further deconstructs the rhetoric of overpowering asserted by the Empire style. The school uniform brings to mind the Catholic authoritarian values of the Salazar dictatorship. During that time school pupils were instructed to obey authorities in the name of God (Prutsch 2012: 72).

Frightened and unprotected, caught in the imperial architecture of power, the boy is subjected and exposed to our gaze. His anti-heroic pose reflects his vulnerability in face of the institutional powers of the Estado Novo and its allied institution such as the bank and the church, disciplinary forces that are still at work today. By returning our gaze and thereby rejecting the regime of subjugation, the boy creates a space for himself that empowers him to gain agency. The boy

<sup>1</sup>This swan motif is an attribute of Empress Josephine, Napoleon's wife.

appears in a close-up wrapped in red fabric in **The Red Jumper**. With his eyeball rolled under his eyelid, he looks monstrous, as if he embodies the repressed, abject world behind the façade of triumphalist architecture in Gilles Deleuze's sense (Jobst and Stead 2023: 389). As a queer element, he undermines the established order.

Welsh's large-format photograph **Hearth** presents an edited view of the bank's lounge on the sixth floor, accessible only to senior administrative officials. The composition highlights a monumental majolica mural in front of a fireplace, depicting early modern Lisbon during Portugal's imperial zenith. On the right, Portuguese warriors are portrayed conquering Muslim peoples, while on the left, they are assaulting the tent settlements of South American inhabitants. In the centre of Welsh's photograph, where the fireplace once stood, a small naked girl sits cross-legged on a stair-like platform, facing away from the viewer. Above her looms the truncated cone of the smoke flue, ominously accentuated by Welsh's processing, symbolizing the historical weight she bears.

The artist's restrained composition emphasizes the majolica wall as a stage-like space within a space. His perspective transforms the windows above into hatches reminiscent of a spaceship, creating the illusion of a time capsule that bridges past and future. In doing so, Welsh draws attention to the anachronistic fantasy of Portugal's colonial mission embodied in the mural—a fantasy that persisted beyond the Estado Novo (Piçarra and Castro, 2017: 7).

By placing the girl within this time capsule, Welsh positions her as a representative of today's generation, tasked with inheriting a collective history that remains only partially resolved. Through her presence, the photograph confronts viewers with the legacy of the

Portuguese dictatorship, prompting reflection on how we might engage with this legacy in an era where autocracies and neo-imperial ambitions are resurging globally. This inquiry into our attitudes and responsibilities is central to Welsh's photographic narrative.

Heidi Brunnschweiler, September 2024

#### References

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Jaime Welsh (\*1994 in Lisbon, Portugal) lives and works in London.

2021 MA in Fine Arts, Goldsmiths College, University of London

Solo- and Group Exhibitions: Art|Basel Statements, Basel; Ginny on Frederick, London; Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon; South London Gallery, London; Madragoa, Lisbon; Firstsite Museum, Colchester; Elvas Museum of Contemporary Art, Elvas.  
Awards: Bloomberg New Contemporaries 2021; *Tomorrow* by White Cube 2021 and Circa Art Class of 2020.