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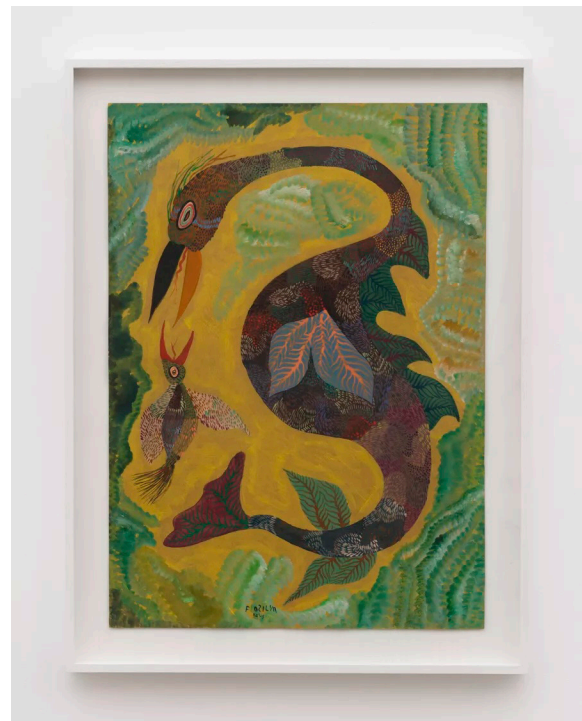
Chico da Silva's Mystical Paintings Are Enchanting the Art World Once Again

Maxwell Rabb

Mar 12, 2025



Portrait of Chico da Silva. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

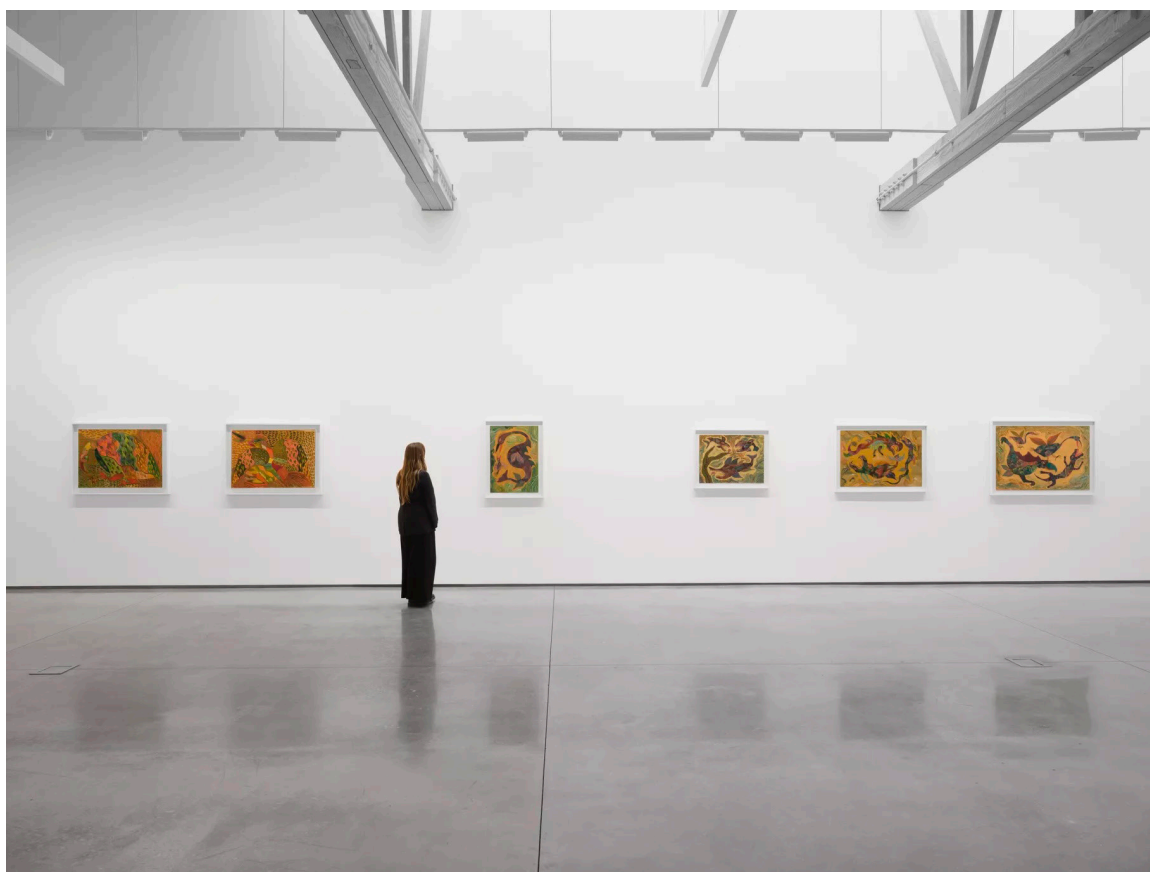


Chico da Silva, *Untitled*, 1965. Photo by Jeff McLane. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

In the early 1940s, striking murals began to appear on the walls of modest fisherman homes along the beach in Fortaleza, Brazil. These images of mythical creatures, rendered in charcoal and chalk, spawned from the imagination of then-unknown Brazilian Indigenous artist Chico da Silva. These pictures, portraying sharp-beaked birds and colossal fish, were how Chico taught himself to draw.

In 1943, Swiss art critic Jean-Pierre Chabloz first stumbled upon Chico's work, and was so struck by its originality that he became Chico's patron and champion. This support catapulted Chico to international fame, culminating in the inclusion of his work in the Brazilian pavilion at the 1966 Venice Biennale and the 1967 São Paulo Bienal.

This attention would soon turn sour. Coinciding with his success, the Brazilian artist had founded the Pirambu School, an informal workshop that evolved into his collective art practice—a studio approach reminiscent of Andy Warhol's Factory. However, this collective approach did not sit well with Chabloz, who publicly denounced the artist's practice and questioned its integrity. This condemnation, coupled with Chico's escalating alcoholism, precipitated a decline in his popularity, causing his legacy and work to remain on the fringes long after his death in 1985.



Chico da Silva, installation view of "Amazônico" at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles, 2025. Photo by Elon Schoenholz. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

Four decades later, Chico is now experiencing a renaissance. Tomorrow, David Kordansky Gallery is opening "Amazônico," a solo exhibition of Chico's works from the 1960s, alongside three rarely seen works from the 1980s, on view through April 26th. In 2023, the gallery mounted the first major solo show of Chico's work in New York, which coincided with the largest survey of his work to date at the Pinacoteca de São Paulo. In the last two years, Chico's work has been

presented worldwide by galleries such as Secci, MASSIMODECARLO, and Almine Rech. Now, the show at David Kordansky Gallery demonstrates that Chico's work belongs in the annals of both Brazilian art and the art world at large.

Instead of a survey, "Amazônico" presents a more selective introduction to some of Chico's essential works. Here, these 15 works exemplify some of the best of Chico's creatures, all of which are decorated with a hypnotic pointillist technique, providing an entryway to understanding the long-neglected artist. Ana Lopes, artist liaison at David Kordansky Gallery, explained that the gallery was putting on the show of Chico da Silva to show "how central he is of a figure painting in Brazil, how prolific he was, and how immensely successful it is."

Chico da Silva's early life



Chico da Silva, *Untitled*, 1960–65. Photo by Jeff McLane. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

Born in the Amazonian region of Alto Tejo, Brazil, around 1910, Chico da Silva was shaped by his early years spent in the rainforest, a region teeming with the biodiversity that later populated his work. After his father's death from a rattlesnake bite, Chico and his mother moved to Pirambu, a coastal town in eastern

Brazil. It was here, as a teenager and young adult, that Chico first began visualizing his creatures—inspired by birds, snakes, iguanas, fish, and more—on the walls of seaside homes.

"I was fascinated by the ways in which his career followed the trajectory of so many [contemporary] art stars and sort of presaged so many people in a way like Banksy," said Graham Steele, a private dealer and collector of Chico's work who has been crucial in reviving the artist's legacy. "He was discovered by painting essentially graffiti murals in the small towns where he was living and working as a carpenter."



Chico da Silva, *Untitled*, 1966. Photo by Jeff McLane. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

Chabloz provided Chico with his first painting supplies—gouache paint, durable paper, and canvases—encouraging the development of his distinct style, characterized by mythologized renderings of fauna and flora composed with meticulously arranged patterns. These early works feature kaleidoscopic, grotesquely shaped creatures, often epic in proportion and popping with bright gouache paint on paper.

For instance, an untitled piece from 1960–65, one of the earliest in the Kordansky show, features an intricately patterned and colorful depiction of two birds,

surrounded by a richly textured background suggesting foliage or feathers. The warm earth tones, combined with greens and reds, create a visually dense composition that emphasizes the natural forms and decorative quality of the birds.



Chico da Silva, *Untitled*, 1964. Photo by Jeff McLane. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

Chico frequently reused patterns across different pieces over the years. Several featured works from 1964 and 1966 incorporate similar stippled patterns on his creatures. For instance, one untitled work from 1966 features a fish with alternating blue, red, and green scales that appears once before on a sea monster in a 1964 painting. Elsewhere, the rippling scales on the three fish in *Untitled* (1964) closely resemble those on a dragon-iguana hybrid depicted in a 1967 piece.

As Chico refined his style, his paintings began to feature creatures suspended against abstract, almost ethereal backdrops—often bright yellow environments devoid of horizon lines or suns. In a 1968 work featured at David Kordansky Gallery, two gnarled bird-like creatures battle against one such yellow background, allowing the reds, greens, and blues to stand out. These battles became an increasingly prominent theme in his later works. By this time, his work had caught the attention of the international art world, largely thanks to Chabloz's and Chico's first dealer, Henrique Bluhm.

The Pirambu School

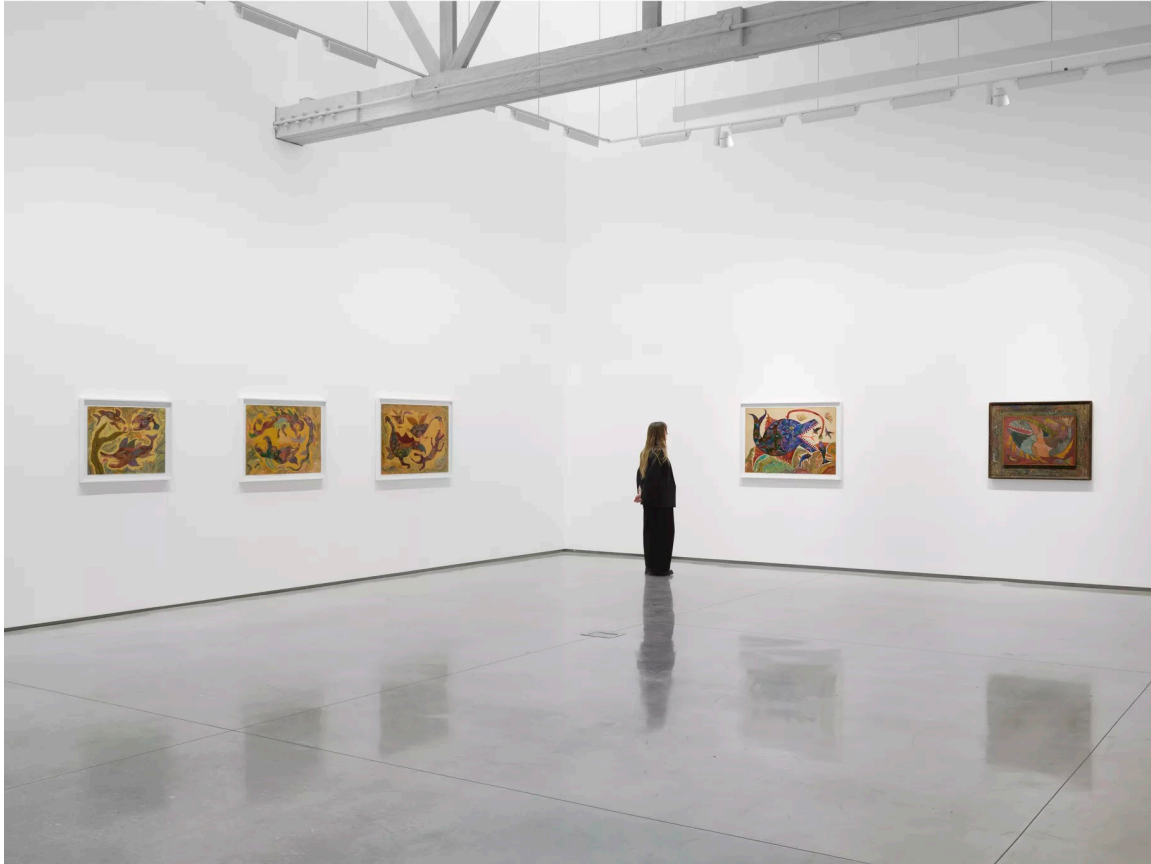


Chico da Silva, *Untitled*, 1968. Photo by Jeff McLane. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

Back home in Brazil, Chico was channeling his refined techniques into the Pirambu School. Initially envisioned as a workshop for children and local artisans (banned, like all collective gatherings, under the military dictatorship of the time), the school rapidly evolved into a place for collective practice. Here, studio assistants learned from Chico while also crafting their own pieces, effectively broadening the artist's own visual language.

European and American critics often distorted the narrative surrounding Chico's studio practice, labelling the work as the "primitive" or "naïve" product of an Indigenous artist. And yet Chico's approach could also be seen as revolutionary in its own right, said Lopes. "A lot of the narratives that were built around Chico when he was gaining his success, being [a] 'primitive artist'—this did not align with [Chico's] very contemporary and radical studio practice," she said.

"These are all an amazing, imagined universe," said Steele. "Of course, they come from legends, from animals that he'd seen, but there's so many more things that he's imagining. He's taking quite traditional markmaking and brushwork...and really expanding it and making it 100% his own. He created a language, and he created a style of painting that then was embraced and continued by the school."



Chico da Silva, installation view of "Amazônico" at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles, 2025. Photo by Elon Schoenholz. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

However, the school infuriated Chabloz, who accused Chico of saturating the market by increasing the volume of works produced through the Pirambu School, as well as taking credit for the work of studio assistants. With Chico's growing international profile, bolstered by his appearance at the Venice Biennale, there was growing scrutiny and further questions of authenticity that ultimately dismissed him from the international stage.

Later life, obscurity, and a budding renaissance

Alcoholism made things worse, pushing Chico into frequent hospital stays at rehabilitation centers. Despite the challenges, his passion for painting endured; while hospitalized, Chico continued to produce several critical works. By the late 1970s, he had returned to his studio, albeit with diminished health. "He left in-patient treatment in 1978-ish, and from then on, his health was really never the same," said Lopes. "He operated on a much smaller scale, but what he did was far more focused and really directed towards a kind of legacy—a consolidation."



Chico da Silva, *Untitled*, 1980. Photo by Jeff McLane. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.



Chico da Silva, *Untitled*, 1980. Photo by Jeff McLane. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

Some of these final paintings revisit his mythic animals with nostalgia, two of which are on view at David Kordansky Gallery. One example, *Untitled* (1980), features two dueling reptilian creatures with jagged teeth, hypnotic eyes, and stippled bodies. However, rather than a traditional void-like background, the creatures are superimposed onto a grid of animals in circular frames, drawing from snakes, birds, and mythical sea creatures in previous paintings. The second, another untitled work from 1980, is evocative of a quilt featuring 12 small scenes, each a vignette of his fantastical natural forms. According to Steele, these works serve as "mini-retrospectives," offering a window into the artist's forgotten oeuvre.

Even after the art world turned its back on him, Chico never stopped painting a world as fantastical as the one he first envisioned on the walls of Fortaleza. His work, populated by hypnotically patterned creatures, is enchanting the art world once again, anchored by the same bold originality that first earned it acclaim 60 years ago.

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Maxwell Rabb is Artsy's Staff Writer.