PRISCILA FERNANDES

THOSE BASTARDS ON HOLIDAYS

Priscila Fernandes (b. 1981) is a Portuguese visual artist based in Rotterdam. She graduated from the Piet Zwart Institute, Rotterdam with an MA after obtaining a BA from the National College of Art and Design, Dublin. She was an artist in residency at IASPIS, Stockholm; at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin; and recently at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin.

Recent solo exhibitions include *¿Y el Arte?* at Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona; *Ces Salopards en Casquettes…*, PHAKT, Rennes; and *Against the Enamel*, Temple Bar Gallery + Studios, Dublin. Group shows include *Playgrounds* at Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid; *Learning for Life* at Henie-Onstad Kunstsenter, Oslo; *Abstract Possible*, Tensta Konsthall, Stockholm; and *12 Contemporaries: Present States*, at Serralves Museum, Porto.

The first time I really looked at neo-impressionism was when I came across a painting by Paul Signac titled *Opus 217. Against the Enamel of a Background Rhythmic with Beats and Angles, Tones,* and *Tints, Portrait of M. Félix Fénéon in 1890*. This seemed to be a bizarre painting without parallel in late nineteenth-century French art: hypnotic, colourful, symbolic, figurative, and abstract all at the same time. Then there was also the method – a laborious scientific dot-making. Why and how?

Intrigued by what this painting might mean in its peculiar form and content, my curiosity compelled me to investigate further. The painting opened up a completely new understanding of the neo-impressionist movement for me. The general approach – at least the one I was exposed to as a student – was that this art movement was influenced by a study of the sciences of perception. But nothing was said about the artists' political backgrounds and affiliations to anarcho-communist ideals, an essential key to unraveling what was really at the core of the aesthetic decisions behind neo-impressionism.

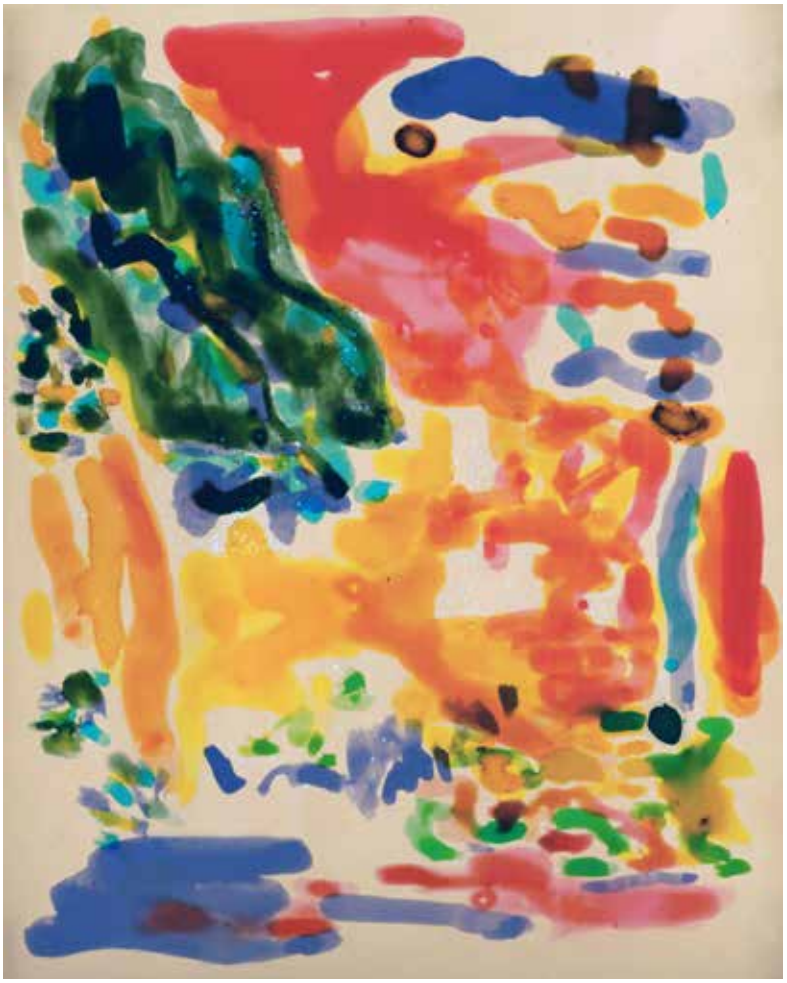
With the invitation to produce a new body of work for the exhibition *This is the Time. This is the Record of the Time,* I felt compelled to revisit this peculiar and short-lived art movement. What could I learn from these artists that would still be relevant for artistic practices today? The final outcome of my work, although far from resembling a neo-impressionist painting, entrenches the considerations I personally identified with the most: these were questions related to the boundaries of production and leisure, and the political agency of art.

To think that the neo-impressionists were artists who used multi-coloured dots, or merely painted in a pointillist style is a widespread mistake. The method developed by Paul Signac and Georges Seurat, followed by Maximilien Luce, Henri-Edmond Cross, and Théo Van Rysselberghe, was called Divisionism or Chromoluminarism. It was influenced by the advances in physical and physiological optics and the study of the psychology of colour.[1] The neo-impressionist painting method was based on scientific reasoning as a rational process for depicting social-political realities and as a means of inscribing the work with social intent. In that sense, notions of harmony and aesthetic beauty were met with ideas of morality and justice in society.

This is clearly visible in the artists' choices of subjects, specifically in works inspired by the Parisian context. Feelings such as alienation and anomie, driven by the shifts of a market economy in which exchange value and mass production were overruling the role of the artisan, are some of the topics covered by the artists. Their critiques of the modernization of society meet with the anarchist movement of the 1880s and 1890s, influenced by the thoughts of Jean Grave, Pierre Kropotkin, and Elisée Reclus.[2]

With these considerations in mind, how can we then interpret the shift in subject matter that flourishes mainly at the latest stage of neo-impressionism, from the 1900s onwards, and that moves from depictions of the working class in Paris to the decorative images of the Mediterranean shoreline? What can these landscapes tell us of the artists' political positions?

My interpretation could be based on the changing conditions of labour in the urban environment; the artists' rejection of a series of violent anarchist activities taking place in Paris;[3] and even the finding of symbolic value in the anarchist dreams of a future society in the geographic setting of southern France. Such is the case in Paul Signac's painting *In Time of Harmony: The Golden Age is not in the Past, It is in the Future* (1894–95), which was originally titled *In Time of Anarchy,* the setting of which is the St. Tropez shoreline.



►
Capo di Noli, 2014
Inkjet print, 60 x 75 cm

Courtesy of the artist

In the painting, Signac's political ambitions are clearly explicit; he depicts people engaged in such leisurely activities as reading, playing games, dancing, and painting, in juxtaposition to such labour activities as folding laundry, picking fruit, and working in the fields. Both types of activity are idealized. As such, he exposes the elements of social harmony of the anarcho-communist future, including the belief that technology would allow everyone to have free time and to need work only for a few hours.

Signac and Cross settled permanently in the South of France from 1892, but they never fully engaged with the community in which they lived. Even when their paintings represented the rural workers, it was from a detached or outsider's position – from what John Urry calls "the tourist gaze," which entails a form of "visual consumption through constructing the physical environment as a landscape not primarily for production but embellished for aesthetic appropriation."[4] What impresses me most here is that the aesthetics of the paintings and the political intentions of the artists are mainly dealt with through the employment of divisionism as its guiding ideological principle.

Neo-impressionism had a tangible engagement with abstraction. On the one hand, the artists employed a method that divided colour and light into brushstrokes of a reduced palette of pure colours. Rather than mixing them on the canvas, the colours had to be optically mixed by the viewer.[4] On the other hand, they formulated a parallel between aesthetic values and the moral values of harmony and beauty. Their motivation was to put forward a political critique by means of aesthetics, a critique that refused to adopt the proto-capitalist economies of the modern urban age. This resulted in a painting process that resisted declaring itself as a direct form of commentary, but rather addressed its subject in a circumvented way.

Another element that further intrigued me in my research was the suggestion that the neo-impressionist method dismantled the idea of the virtuoso artist. Divisionism was considered to be a rational method of painting that keeps the brain focused rather than being infatuated or distracted by the expression of a brush stroke.[5] Despite these artists' stubbornness in using scientific theories and rejecting procrastination as valuable for the creative process, I can identify with the resistance to show-off and the rejection of an individual style.

By using neo-impressionist considerations such as the importance of light, the simultaneous contrast of colour, and a focus on landscape painting, I have re-interpreted several paintings from these artists for my own project. Although it is possible to establish a parallel between my chosen method of work and the one developed by the neo-impressionists, what is far more interesting to me is to observe the effect of such a chosen method. I decided to work with large photo negatives, which I exposed to light, applied photo dyes, and pierced. Each negative corresponded to existing neo-impressionist paintings. Working with photo negatives meant that I did not exactly know what would be the outcome of my designs until the very moment the photos were developed. To see the final outcome for the first time in the studio meant that I had to adjust myself to its aesthetics and accept the visual consequences of my actions. The final artworks complicate, or at least delay, immediate categorisations of the work: Which specific temporality can be assigned to these images? Are they reproductions of early twentieth-century artworks? Are they paintings or photographs? What kind of affect does the luminosity and specific use of colour produce? In addition, the project problematizes my understanding of our modern-day society that privileges labour over leisure vis-à-vis the neo-impressionists' position that privileged leisure over labour.

1. Neo-Impressionist artists were greatly influenced by colour theories formulated between 1839 and 1889 by Charles Blanc, Michel Chevreul, and Charles Henry.

2. In a letter to Jean Grave, Signac proudly states that he is a politically committed artist, nourishing the principles of his artistic practice on the political theory of anarchist communism, following values such as individual freedom, but also collective ownership of production, the abolition of private property, and the egalitarian distribution of wealth. Cfr. Robyn Roslak, *Neo-Impressionism and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France – Painting, Politics and Landscape* (Aldershot, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 15.

3. Most of the anarchist acts, which climaxed in 1891 with the assassination of President Sadi Carnot, involved violent confrontations. As a result, the anarchist press, anarchist meetings, and any association to anarchism were forbidden. Maximilien Luce, Jean Grave, and Félix Fénéon were arrested and imprisoned for a few months in 1894.

4. John Urry, "The Tourist Gaze Revisited", in *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 36, November-December 1992, 178. Quoted in Robyn Roslak, Neo-Impressionism and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle F*rance – Painting, Politics and Landscape*, Ashgate Publishing Limited, England and USA, 2007.

5. Paul Signac states: "At the distance required by the size of the painting, the technique of the Neo-Impressionists will not be shocking: at this distance, the touches disappear and all that the eye will perceive will be the charms of light and harmony that they produce." In Floyd Ratliff, *Paul Signac and Color in Neo-Impressionism* (New York: Rockefeller University Press, 1992), 215.

6. Paul Signac states: "This means of expression, the optical mixture of small, coloured touches, placed methodically one beside the other, leaves but little room for skill or virtuosity; the hand is of very little importance; only the brain and the eye of the painter have a part to play." In Floyd Ratliff, *Paul Signac and Color in Neo-Impressionism* (New York: Rockefeller University Press, 1992), 214.

SECTION I: Artists in Paris

Maximilien Luce's subjects consistently included paintings of workers celebrating the artisan in the workshop or the intimacy of life at home. In fact, many of the concerns of the neo-impressionists were determined by an admiration for craftsmanship, the working classes, and the negative impact of commercial capitalist production. This position was shared by the anarchists' longing for small-scale, decentralized communities with artful and skilled manual labour.

Similarly to Luce, Signac's position towards the artisan is represented in *Milliners: Finisher and Trimmer (Fashion)* (1885–1886), in which the precarity and the struggle of the worker are represented by a leaning figure retrieving a dropped pair of scissors.

Conversely, Georges Seurat chooses to represent the working classes during leisure time, outdoors, on a calm Sunday afternoon. Both in *Un Dimanche à la Grande-Jatte* (1884) and *Une Baignade à Asnières* (1883–1886), Seurat shows static and stiff figures who express, as the German Marxist Ernst Bloch has stated, "one single mosaic of boredom."[1]

In the paintings *Chalut* (1889–1890) and *The Circus* (1891), with their extravagant dangling acrobats frozen in mid-air in front of an audience that seems to be in a state of hypnotic trance, the world of spectacle and passive spectatorship arises.

SECTION II: Anarchists and Tourists in the Provence

With the turn of the century, the neo-impressionists transitioned more towards landscape painting. Why did they start depicting scenes that at first glance look like romanticised rural landscapes and seascapes? Was their anarchist disdain for the emerging capitalist economy gone? Perhaps they capitalised on an emerging art market of the upwardly mobile bourgeois for whom the pursuit of leisure had become possible? Or, rather than representing the revolution or the oppressed classes of society in an urban setting, is the political critique articulated by idealizing a future paradise in southern France, to which the painters themselves relocated? Not only did the light of the southern coastal towns of France enforce the neo-impressionists' interest in the science of light, but also moving towards the light was a firmly established metaphor for the revolutionary awakening in the anarcho-communist context, with the rising sun as a symbol of anarchy itself. For instance, Signac's painting *In the Time of Harmony – the Golden Age is not in the Past, It is in the Future* (1894–1895) alludes to the French anarchist Sébastian Faure's ideas on what the anarchist future would look like.[2]

SECTION III: Utopian Landscapes

The expression of a perfect, idyllic, non-urban world inspired by anarchist ideals is, by today's standards, hard to distinguish from the culture of modern tourism.

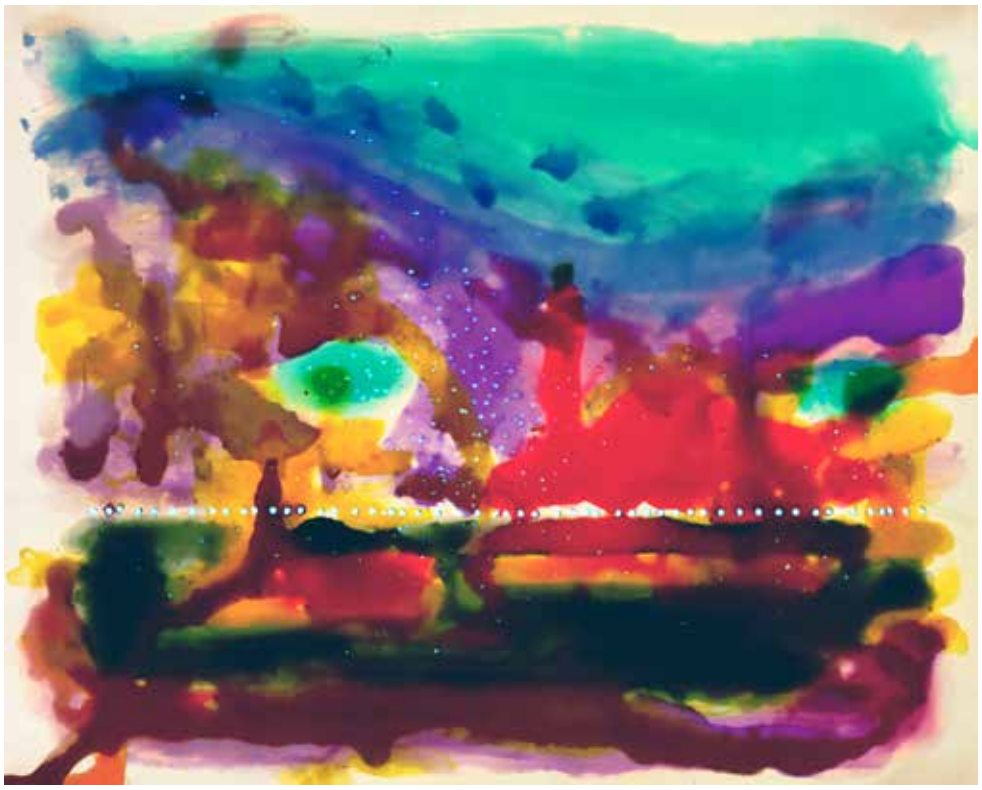
The landscape paintings by Henri-Edmond Cross from 1903–1906 do not attempt to portray the reality of the towns he claims as his new home. Instead they are idealisations represented in Arcadian form, where the distinction between labour and leisure is blurred into a warm and sunny topography. The Mediterranean landscape becomes a site of potentiality and subjective projection of one's own desires, whether these are political, cultural, or aesthetic. Consequently, the scenes depicted by these artists were distant and aestheticized, far from such dreary details as the economic or physical survival of the rural worker.[3]

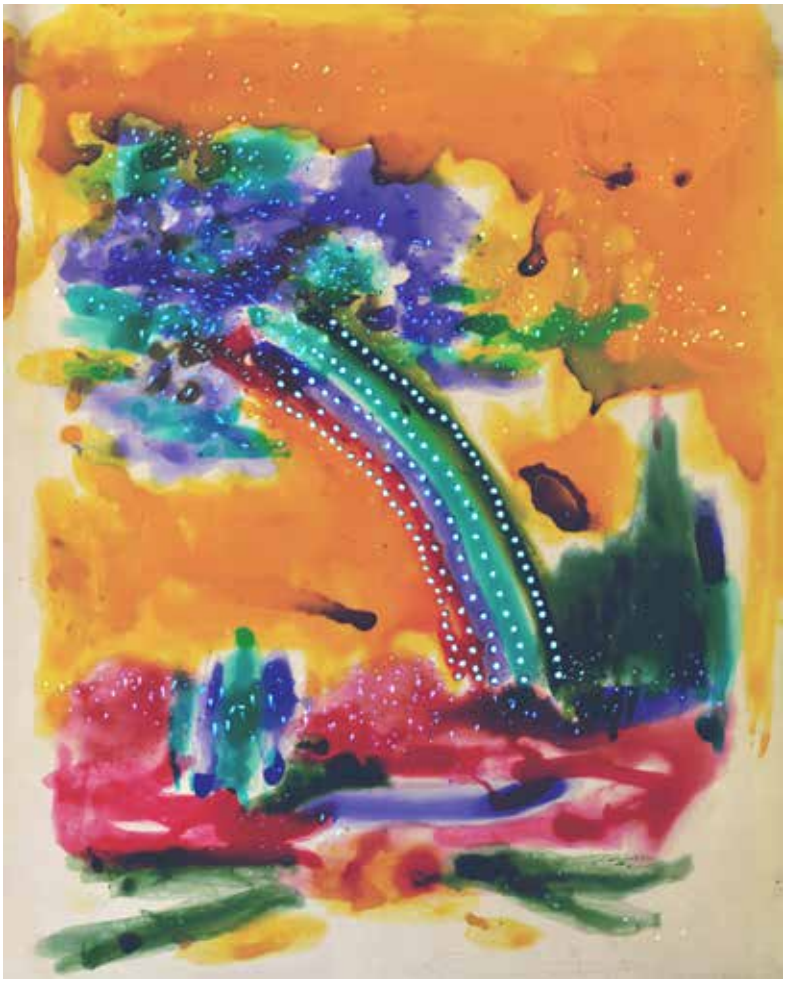
With this distant perspective toward the subject matter comes a certain liberation for the artists, an aesthetic freedom that is explored in all its constituencies: political, social, moral, and aesthetic. In this sense, it is interesting to look back at Seurat's painting *Une Baignade à Asnières* (1883–1884) and compare the alienated figures, with their expressionless contemplation of the Seine, with the other paintings such as *La Fuite des Nymphes* (Cross, 1906) or *Luxe, Calme et Volupté* (Matisse, 1904), where the figures finally find themselves at ease with *la dolce far niente*.

1. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope,* trans. by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), vol. 2, 814.

2. Sébastian Faure wrote in 1893: "The past is obscurity, ignorance, unhappiness; the future is light, knowledge, happiness. One does not turn back to the past, one goes, inevitably, toward the future… The golden age is not behind us; it is before us, radiant and accessible!" In Katherine Brion, "Paul Signac's Decorative Propaganda of the 1890s," *RIHA Journal,* 14 July 2012, http://www.riha-journal.org/articles/2012/2012-jul-sep/special-issue-neo-impressionism/brion-signacs-decorative-propaganda [last accessed July 2015]

3. In this sense, the geographical writings by Elisée Reclus in *La Nouvelle géographie universelle* (1875), which influenced the neo-impressionists greatly, celebrates a certain kind of perspective: "Seen from above and afar, the diversity of features intermingled on the surface of the globe (…) presents an image which is not chaotic but on the contrary reveals to him who understands it a marvellous ensemble of rhythm and beauty." In Robyn Roslak, *Neo-Impressionism and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France – Painting, Politics and Landscape* (Aldershot, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 100.





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Avignon, 2014
Inkjet print, 60 x 75 cm

Golfe Juan, 2014
Inkjet print, 60 x 75 cm

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Arc en Ciel, 2014
Inkjet print, 60 x 75 cm

Courtesy of the artist