

# Jonatas DaSilva: Art with Turbulent Roots



Marilyn Fell Asleep

By Jan Engoren

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He may be young, but 28-year-old Jonatas DaSilva is an intense painter from Boca Raton with 600 years of Judeo-Spanish history on his shoulders. A native of Northeastern Brazil, DaSilva's family comes from Recife, a community with roots dating back to the Portuguese Inquisition.

DaSilva has lived in the United States for 10 years. He says, "One of the greatest missions in my life so far is my quest for identity." His ancestors left Southern Spain during the Inquisition, and traveled to Portugal and Amsterdam before coming to Recife, most likely with the sugar trade.

From approximately 711 to 1492 A.D., Jews, Muslims and Christians all lived and flourished together in Andalusia, Spain during a time period known as "La Convivencia." The time before the Spanish Inquisition was full of cultural, intellectual, social and religious tolerance.

When the Inquisition began, Jews and Muslims were forced to convert to Catholicism under penalty of death. Many fled to Morocco and Portugal. The Jews forced to convert became known as "Conversos" or "Crypto-Jews," practicing their religion in secret. If discovered, they could be burned at the stake and have their property confiscated. Many developed elaborate, secret rituals that were passed down through generations. Eventually, it was these empty rituals, devoid of any religious significance, that tied Conversos back to their Jewish heritage.

At the age of 18, DaSilva's parents sat him down and revealed their family's Jewish origins and traced their ancestry back to Spain, Portugal and the Inquisition. DaSilva was not completely surprised by this revelation. It seemed to make perfect sense to him. It explained some of those "weird" customs his family practiced, such as lighting Friday night candles inside a closet, not eating outside of the home and marrying cousins.

He began a search for identity, which led him to start studying formal Judaism. Says DaSilva, "I became the first person in my family to set foot in a synagogue in 500 years. I believe in genetic memory and I feel like a fish that has returned to the sea."

However, for DaSilva, the journey back to Judaism has not been an easy one. In a parallel to his Converso ancestors in Spain, DaSilva at first only told congregants he was a Sephardi, but due to his characteristically Middle Eastern features, they pre-supposed he was Israeli. Many in the mainstream Jewish community wanted him to undergo a formal conversion, which he resisted.

Instead, he embarked on a quest to have his heritage, and that of others in similar situations, recognized by the formal rabbinic authorities.

It took many years, but thanks to his strong conviction and perseverance, DaSilva was finally able to receive "A Certificate of Return" from the Sephardic Orthodox Rabbinical Court of the Abarbanel Foundation, presided over by the Turkish Rabbi Rav Abraham Deleon Cohen, under the guidance of former Sephardic Chief Rabbi Mordekhai Eliahu.

This is a major accomplishment, not easily won. "I didn't understand their reasoning. I was already Jewish. How could a Jew convert to being a Jew? I wanted some acknowledgement of who I was and where I came from."

It is this convoluted, tortured and secret history that has the most impact on DaSilva's works, for you cannot separate the artist from his history.

DaSilva, whose *nom de peintre* is Chimen, in honor of his great-grandfather, a sculptor, incorporates the whole of Judeo-Spanish history into his paintings.

Suzie Khalil, the curator of Exor Galleries in Boca Raton, says, "Jonatas embeds history, emotion, spirituality and personal passion into each painting. His family's story of a concealed religious identity has motivated his choice of subject matter. Chimen paintings substantiate the religious freedom that he has enjoyed uncovering."

DaSilva paints in the style of Spanish realists. Spanish realists are known for their attention to detail, for drawing your eye to a particular spot and for obscured backgrounds that recede from the canvas.



Play the Song of Songs

His painting *Soul of Iberia* depicts two clay vases atop a small table. The larger vase has a Jewish blue and white prayer shawl wrapped around its neck. The smaller vase, with a single sprig of yellow flowers erupting from its mouth sits atop a metallic, red, gold and blue Spanish brocade. The juxtaposition of the Spanish scarf and the Jewish prayer shawl, as well as the symbolism of the two vases, one barren and one fertile, speaks to DaSilva's roots and heritage.

He employs these same images in a different painting, *Bringing Together*.

This time the prayer shawl is unwrapped and draped loosely over an austere-looking fluted vase. A more voluptuous vase covered with the Spanish tapestry is laying on its side, water, a symbol of life, flowing from its mouth. What is DaSilva's intent? What is he trying to say with this painting? Is it a metaphor for Spanish heritage as a source of life compared to the Jewish heritage, which is stagnant?

Khalil says, "Jonatas' paintings have a remarkable quality about them in which they appear to radiate, rather than reflect, light. They parallel his personality. He's so full of life—a passionate painter and a deep thinker. I'm certain that they carry his spirit because he lives his passion through his paintbrush."

Da Silva studied at the Centro Livre de Artes Bosque dos Buritis in Brazil and with Conchita Firgau of the Art Institute of Weston, who in turn studied at the same institute as Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dali.

He paints "100%" by DaVinci's technique, a technique called "wash-in", whereby the painting is first sketched in charcoal on canvas. He then mixes burnt umber and sienna with oil and turpentine and brushes this onto the canvas in a brown-colored monotone. With cheesecloth wrapped around his fingers, DaSilva works to coax out the light and highlights of the painting and, like a make-up artist, will blend, blend, blend. Only when this first level is dry does he go back to the canvas and apply the color to the picture.

"This technique lays down a foundation, creates contrast and captures depth. This way of painting increases the level of perfection. Nothing is perfect, but I am able to check my drawing at least three separate times before the final touches are applied and correct any mistakes," he says.

Besides traditional still-lives of vases and bowls of fruit, and his passion with his roots, DaSilva paints women — lots of women.

The women in his portraits are glamorous and feminine, exuding sexuality. They are juxtaposed alongside rotund, open vases and ripened fruit. The symbolism is apparent and sexual innuendos abound. The females amidst the fruits echo Caravaggio's paintings of cherubic boys offering up their baskets of fruits for sale. Paradoxically, often times they are austere, presented alone, isolated and detached. There are no men, no other figures. Could it be they dance, sleep, flirt, beckon and work to entice us, the viewer?

The viewer is exhorted explicitly in *Finish Me Please*. This portrait, with the double-entendre title, is of a woman wearing only a headscarf, her eyes lined with kohl, peering demurely over her shoulder. The portrait is done all in shades of umber, except for one silver earring dangling in the woman's right ear and a tinge of red on her lips. In the upper left corner of the painting, DaSilva leaves his paintbrush hanging and a tube of half-used paint in the bottom right hand corner. Is it the painting, or the woman, that needs to be finished?

*Marilyn Fell Asleep* depicts a young woman sleeping on her side, her left arm draped languorously onto her stomach, a wooden bowl of apples by her side. A number of the apples have rolled out of the bowl and frame her sleeping figure. Is she a modern-day Snow White, having tasted of the poisoned apple and waiting for her prince to awaken her?

DaSilva needs inspiration to paint, and, when inspired, he will paint a series of 10-15 paintings along the same theme. Historically, his inspiration is history, genealogy and heritage. Not surprisingly, one of his themes is masks. By hand he creates Venetian-style masks, builds the framework, sews the cloth and hand paints the masks before he translates them onto the canvas. He loves to paint to loud music such as Pink Floyd, opera, such as Carmina Burana, or tango music by Argentinian composer Astor Piazzola. He will usually have a glass of dry red wine, such as Sangria or Muscato, to help him relax.

Khalil comments on DaSilva's painting, *Play the Song of Songs*, in which a mask appears. "Jonatas presents us with a mask, two mandolins, a piece of draped Spanish tapestry, and a page of sheet music, inscribed with musical notes of *Hatikvah*, the national anthem of Israel. Though elegantly quiet, the message speaks Jonatas' mantra—pick up an instrument, play your music, live your life, and be who you are by proudly shedding your mask."

Currently, DaSilva is reading up on the conquistadores and the Jewish pirates of the Caribbean. His newest interests include ships, maps, and the history of the Americas. "I knew from the age of three I wanted to be an artist. I didn't like the badly drawn cartoons I saw on TV. Great art is political. I want my work to be inclusive. I don't want to limit my audience," he says. "My biggest accomplishment is in developing a personal style. I speak to people who have something they wish to express and I try to express these feelings for them. Art speaks to people and opens their hearts. It breaks down barriers and artificial walls imposed by race, religion and social status. Art is the language we share."

Jonatas DaSilva's paintings are on exhibit at the Exor Galleries, 291 Via Naranjas, Suite 45A, Boca Raton, Florida, 33432, Tel: (561) 361-7474.



Soul of Iberia