



Rafael Trelles, *Axis Mundi I*, 2020. Oil on linen, 183 x 122 cm. Courtesy the Artist and October Gallery, London.

Rafael Trelles

Axis Mundi

17th June – 24th July 2021

October Gallery is pleased to announce this first solo exhibition of new works by Rafael Trelles, which will open in June 2021. His new paintings explore the notion of the *Axis Mundi*, a mythic tree that represents a portal between this and other worlds.

In 2018, Rafael Trelles exhibited a set of exquisitely hand-drawn works, depicting mysterious, magico-mythical realms, as part of October Gallery's *Portal* show. His latest solo exhibition, entitled *Axis Mundi*, presents a newly completed series of mixed media paintings that develop similar themes in novel and unexpected ways. The exhibition's title refers to that central 'world tree' around which the universe supposedly revolves. This notion, common to many ancient cultures in Africa, the Americas and Europe, situates a giant tree at the centre of some ageless, sacred wood. One example, from the Norse sagas, tells of the great ash tree, *Yggdrasil*, which from its topmost branches to its deepest roots connects nine different realms, passing from the heavens to earth before plunging down into the underworld below. Trelles' haunting paintings present themes linking the enchanted forests of his native Puerto Rico with these widespread beliefs that see forests as sites of refuge and transformation in a natural world increasingly challenged by crises of species extinction and climate change.

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Every painting in the *Axis Mundi* series was realised in a two-step process adapted from a technique popularised by the Spanish Cubist, Oscar Dominguez. Known as *decalcomania*, the technique was adopted by Surrealist artists such as Max Ernst and André Breton, who were interested in letting the unconscious manifest in their works by using spontaneous or automatic techniques. Initially, layers of coloured acrylic paint are spread across the canvas. Before the paint dries, Trelles uses crumpled cloths to impress the painted surface creating a series of arbitrarily patterned effects. When repeatedly worked over in this way the resulting canvas becomes an abstract stain of entirely random forms. This then becomes the ambiguous ground on which Trelles first discovers then defines emerging forms, which he further highlights with conventional painting techniques in oil. The canvases resulting strike a balance between elements originally generated by unconscious impulses and the artist's conscious refashioning of those forms into figures of significance. Trelles insists that while, inevitably, he is the first spectator to be startled by the interplay of portents looming out of the depths, he may well be the last to understand their implications.

Confined to his studio in San Juan during the year of the global pandemic, to Trelles, the initial forms arising through the layers of paint appeared as archetypal trees of the island's ancient forests. Those tropical forests full of precious hardwoods like mahogany, are still recovering from the catastrophic destruction caused by Hurricane Maria, in 2017. Similar natural disasters of wind, fire and flood have been increasing in force and frequency of late. As his revelatory paintbrushes outlined various abstract shapes, they metamorphosed into mythic figures from the legends of the indigenous Caribbean peoples and their sacred trees, the Royal Palm, the Ceiba and others. In later times, when enslaved Africans escaping from the brutal sugar-cane plantations sought refuge deep within those forests, the same sacred trees confirmed the protective presence of their own ancestral guardian spirits. The paintings arranged themselves into a natural sequence of visions of a dreamlike forest world, where humans, surrounded by elements of the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms, appear as integral parts of an ordered system. Half hidden spirit-figures also manifested, appearing as silent observers bearing critical intelligence of past, present and future crises that concern us all.

In describing his personal perspective, Rafael Trelles has said, '*I am interested in creating metaphors that express the unity of the world, the relationship between nature and culture and the interdependence of all human beings with their surrounding natural environment.*'

Notes to Editors

Rafael Trelles began studying painting at the age of eleven, under the guidance of Spanish painter Julio Yort. In 1980, Trelles did postgraduate studies at the University of Mexico, Mexico City. In 1985, he moved to the Canary Islands in Spain and began to explore alchemy, mysticism and magic. He developed the technique of combining naturalistic drawings of flora and fauna in ways that suggest overtones of ethereal significance. His paintings are suffused with hints of hidden insight and awareness. He

first showed with October Gallery in 2018, as part of the exhibition *Portal* with a series of works called *Flora*, in which he invited the viewer to partake in a naturalist trance.

Trelles has been exhibited internationally including, Elite Fine Arts Gallery, Florida; Queens Museum of Art, New York, USA; the Caribbean Museum Center for the Arts (CMCArts), Frederiksted, Saint Croix, US Virgin Islands; and Galería de Arte del Complejo Cultural BUAP, Puebla, Mexico. In 2018, a major exhibition *Santurce, un libro mural*, was held at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Puerto Rico. His work is in many collections including: Museum of Contemporary Art of Puerto Rico, Santurce, Puerto Rico; Ramapo College Museum, New Jersey, USA; and University of Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia.

In 2018, works by Trelles were part of the group exhibition *Portal*, at October Gallery. In 2021 Museo de las Américas, Puerto Rico, presented a solo show of Trelles' work, entitled *The Imagined Word*, the exhibition was inspired by the artist's readings of works by writers including Lewis Carroll, Gabriel García Márquez and Franz Kafka.

Rafael Trelles: Axis Mundi will be accompanied by an exhibition catalogue.

For additional press images and credits please see here:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/jruufaagip6ei13/AAAtHpLS2RIs5pNcTLuuhxT6a?dl=0>

Exhibition:	<i>Rafael Trelles: Axis Mundi</i>
Dates:	17 th June – 24 th July 2021
Venue:	October Gallery 24 Old Gloucester Street London WC1N 3AL
Telephone:	020 7242 7367
Opening hours:	Tuesday – Saturday 12.30 – 5.30 pm
Admission:	Free
Website:	www.octobergallery.co.uk
Email:	press@octobergallery.co.uk or paige@octobergallery.co.uk
Nearest tubes:	Holborn/Russell Square
Buses:	19, 25, 38, 55, 168 and 188
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Image Credit:	Rafael Trelles, <i>Axis Mundi I</i> , 2020. Oil on linen, 183 x 122 cm. Courtesy the Artist and October Gallery, London.

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