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By Jill Langlois

Their Art Movement Is Also a Mission

The members of MAHKU have become a staple of Indigenous art in Brazil.

By JILL LANGLOIS

SÃO PAULO, BRAZIL — As Cleiber Bane began to sing, he looked up at the purple, red and yellow fish painted along the wooden slats of his home in the Brazilian Amazon. Colorful crabs and birds, as well as an Indigenous man wearing a blue-and-red-feathered headdress, flanked the aquatic creatures, while geometric shapes outlined in black covered the shutters.

The images, seen during a video call, were a representation of the words that tumbled from his mouth in a low grumble, a centuries-old spiritual called “The Light of Underwater Visions.” It’s one of the many sacred chants and myths that he and other members of MAHKU, a group of Huni Kuin Indigenous artists, depict in their paintings as they retell their oral history in a medium they hope will endure and help preserve their culture.

“It’s so we don’t forget,” said Bane, whose father, Ibã Sales, first conceptualized MAHKU (for Movimento dos Artistas Huni Kuin). “So that, in the future, our young people don’t lose their identity.”

In just over 10 years, this movement of

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CASEY KELBAUGH FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

MAHKU, a group of Huni Kuin Indigenous artists, decorated the facade of the Central Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in April with a 2,460-foot mural depicting the “Alligator Bridge” myth about the separation of peoples.

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artists — they make it clear they are not a collective but individuals working toward the same goal — have become a staple in contemporary Indigenous art in Brazil. They have shown their work here at the São Paulo Museum of Art (known as MASP), the 2023 São Paulo Biennale and the Carmo Johnson Projects gallery. (Currently there are eight artists in MAHKU, but the group fluctuates.)

They have also stepped out internationally, showing at the Fondation Cartier in Paris in 2022, and, this week, at Art Basel Miami Beach. This year, they took on an intricate 2,460-foot mural at the Venice Biennale of the “Alligator Bridge” myth, about the intercontinental separation of peoples and the consolidation of the Huni Kuin identity, which they have said acts as “a central image in strengthening ties between foreigners around the world and the role of art as a means of resistance.”

But MAHKU’s approach goes beyond making connections and spreading awareness to keep their culture alive. Their biggest ambition is summed up in the slogan its members live by: “Sell paintings, buy land.”

The Huni Kuin, who live along the border between Brazil and Peru, have a long history of intense and violent contact with the rubber industry, which began ravaging their land as early as the 19th century. Trees needed to be tapped at regular intervals to extract milky-white liquid, so thousands of men invaded the lands where they lived and were a constant presence, pushing them off their territories or persuading them to work alongside them.

At just 10 years old, Ibã Sales was already working on the rubber plantation in the Chico Curumim village where he grew up. By the time he was an adult, the Huni Kuin would demand that their territory be recognized as protected Indigenous land, and their desire to reconnect with the forest and their culture, including the chants and myths that would eventually be depicted in MAHKU paintings, would re-emerge.

“We do this for a reason,” the Yanomami artist Ehuana Yaira said of the sharing of Indigenous art with the world. “We want to show that our culture is strong. We want to defend the forest. By way of our art we wonder: Will we be able to maintain our forest and keep it healthy? We share our art in other places because of the people who come here to destroy the forest. It’s a way to ask for help and support to keep the forest standing.”

Sales, 60, was inspired to reconnect by his father’s voice. Chants are integral to sacred Huni Kuin rituals, which are performed with ayahuasca, a psychoactive drink made from plants from the Amazon. Sales knew his father was a keeper of these chants, and he decided he wanted to get to know them better to make sure they would be passed down to future generations, including to his son, Bane.

After a 2009 meeting with Amilton Pellegrino de Mattos, a social anthropologist interested in Huni Kuin history and culture, Sales decided to carry out his own study, writing down for the first time all 153 chants his father could remember. He translated them into Portuguese in a book called “Spirit of the Forest.”

It was an unexpected feat, but he knew it wasn’t enough. There was too much meaning in the chants — depictions of the visions seen during ayahuasca rituals — to be put into the written word. So with the support of de Mattos, Sales pulled together funds to run his first drawing workshop, in 2011.

Bane, an avid artist who had been curious about the sacred ayahuasca chants he had heard his father sing since he was a boy, was an eager participant.

“I used to walk home from school scribbling in my notebook,” he said. “I would draw different animals and objects I heard my dad sing about. It was my way of learning what the songs meant and remembering not just the music, but the words too.”

That first workshop was the catalyst for MAHKU, a project Sales and Bane would debut officially in 2013 with the hopes of selling paintings to buy land. The idea was to put money back into their community.

Like the work on Bane’s home and at the Venice Biennale, MAHKU’s paintings are rich characterizations of their connection to the forestland, vividly colored and outlined in black to give their pieces a graphic quality.



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VIA CARMO JOHNSON PROJECTS, PHOTO BY SAMUEL ESTEVEZ



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Top, from left, Ibã Sales, Acelino Sales, Cleiber Bane and Pedro Mandá, members of MAHKU. Above left, “Kapewe Pukenibu,” by Acelino Sales, and right, Bane’s “Nahene Wakamen.”

“The paintings about myths reframe spaces to tell stories,” said Carmo Johnson, the owner of Carmo Johnson Projects, a gallery representing MAHKU at Art Basel Miami Beach. “So there’s a linear narrative — the images don’t spread across the canvas in an unconventional way. They’re more structured.”

“But there’s a surrealism in their works that represent chants. They’re able to paint based on an experience, a feeling and a creative vision. It’s a whirlwind of circular motions.”

When their first painting sold, in 2014, the members of MAHKU bought a plot of land next to their village, where they hope to build a cultural center that will house items like Sales’s book and MAHKU’s paintings, as well as a shop where community members can sell their handicrafts, giving a boost to their local economy. (Prices for their artworks at Art Basel Miami Beach range from \$20,000 to \$35,000.) Since then, they have also bought homes and boats (transportation in the Amazon is almost always on rivers) for Huni Kuin families, as

well as food and other necessities for community members in need.

“The idea of selling art to buy land demonstrates the practice of a solidarity economy that permeates the nucleus of the MAHKU collective,” Naine Terena, a curator, art educator and professor who belongs to the Terena Indigenous group, wrote in a text that accompanied the MAHKU exhibition at MASP in 2023, which was called “Mirações” (“Visions”). She added that the movement’s shift to buying other types of support, as well as land, undermines critics who “falsely claim that Indigenous people under the tutelage of the state are unproductive, failing to contribute to the country’s economy.”

She was referring to the government support some Indigenous people receive in the form of official land recognition and protection, as well as health services and other social welfare programs. They are a legacy of colonization, which left members of the communities vulnerable to new diseases and the destruction of their cultures.

While the rubber boom in the Brazilian

Amazon has long waned, other extractive industries have taken its place, continuing to leave a trail of destruction in the rainforest. Cutting trees for logging, setting fires to clear land for cattle farming, and contaminating the land and river with the mercury used in mining to separate gold from unwanted minerals are among the biggest culprits that have left many Indigenous people struggling to protect their territories and take care of their families.

MAHKU has bought almost 26 acres of land with the paintings they have sold. It’s a small dent in what is a challenging situation to combat — Indigenous people, who make up less than 1 percent of the population of Brazil, are among the poorest in the country — but it’s a start.

For Bane, the shift in image for Indigenous people is vital. “We want to better the situation of our relatives who are in need,” he said. “It’s not about me earning money to buy things for myself. A lot of Indigenous people are in difficult situations. If we can help some of them get out of that with our art, why wouldn’t we?”