

# frieze



Alexandre da Cunha, *Free Fall I*, 2016, flagpole, parachute, rope, 3.8 × 2.6 × 7.2 m. Courtesy : the artist and *Thomas Dane Gallery*, London, UK

Slap bang in the entrance to Alexandre da Cunha's fifth solo show in London is *Free Fall III* (all works 2016), a squat concrete form that, at more than two metres wide, almost obstructs the doorway of Thomas Dane's space at 3 Duke Street St James's. A hollow, triangular shape, its sides tapering at unequal diagonals to a corner, the piece is not one of the artist's design but a 'precast', readymade building element. Concrete, in the hands of a Brazilian artist, inevitably invites associations – with the country's 'neo-concrete' movement of the late 1950s and early '60s, for one, and with the architectural landscapes built by Oscar Niemeyer across the country around the same time, for another – though these are less visual than verbal, more a matter of punning. "It's almost as if they were words", da Cunha said of his works in a 2012 interview, "ready, and I just re-arrange them".

Da Cunha thrives on unexpected assonances in which both hackneyed or kitsch imagery and icons of 20th-century art chime together in found forms. The wild elation of rhyme, its ability to momentarily bridge the semantically distant, is evident in earlier series such as 'Nudes', shown at Thomas Dane in 2012 – canvases with straw beach hats sewn into them so that their crowns protrude like nipples (or, upturned, offer dark recesses, distant cousins of the slashed paintings of Lucio Fontana). Here, the interventions are also simple: a single steel circle inset into one concrete edge of *Free Fall III* is enough to further unbalance the asymmetric form; the whole thing reads like an abstract illustration of abuttal. Moreover, the work is almost viscerally ungainly although also weirdly elegant, like a shoulder blade.

The spine of the exhibition, and its showstopper, is *Free Fall I*: a four-metre-high steel structure over which a full parachute is slung, forming a draped semi-circle on each side. There are echoes of the human body here, too: the piece recalls museum displays of kimonos on ikou frames, while the ghost of Helio Oiticica's "Parangolés" capes is also hard to banish. The suggestion of national dress, seemingly confirmed by the fact the steel frames are repurposed flag poles, is enhanced by a whiff of the tropical: the parachute fabric is broken into coloured segments of dead lime, sour orange and yellow, like slices of giant, unappetizing citrus fruits.



Alexandre da Cunha, exhibition view, Thomas Dane Gallery, London, UK

What impresses above all is the work's feeling of weight: a sense of massive stillness, in spite of the fluidity of the parachute silk and the suggestion of the floating buoyancy it was designed to achieve. (Not coincidentally, adjacent to the great cascade of parachute is a metal gridiron propped against the wall, the joints of which are circled with fat concrete rings, like doughnuts, entitled *Fatigue [Diagram II]*, 2015.) With these intimations of heaviness, of being loaded down, da Cunha's parachute acquires the air of catastrophe. Is the titular 'Free Fall' an experience of exhilaration or dread or, somehow, both at once?

There is a line in Elizabeth Bishop's poem "Brazil: January 1, 1502" (1960) about moss growing in "lovely hell-green flames". Pleasing yet infernal: Bishop's words don't really make sense together, but somehow their meaning is exact. Da Cunha's compositions, simultaneously minimalist and maximalist, work similarly: their impression of plain speaking betrays complex contradictions and ambivalence.

The final piece in the show is a canvas sheathed with fine white netting behind which, in two places, just-seen seashells bulge (*Sound I*). With its erotic dips and hollows, it's another sexy variant on the beach hat series; but it also dramatizes the hiddenness of sensations behind their descriptions, the inevitable slip of things into networks of meanings in which they don't really belong, but can't otherwise be grasped. As when you cup your ear to a shell and hear your blood echoing back, the sound of the real always in retreat.