

SQUARING THE CIRCLE

Self-taught artist Daniel Gonçalves talks about what he wants to convey with his intricate drawings

TONY THORNE



Gonçalves in 2016, photo: Nuno Marques, Cruzes Canhoto Gallery
opposite: #294, 2018, ink on paper, 28 x 39 in./ 70 x 100 cm

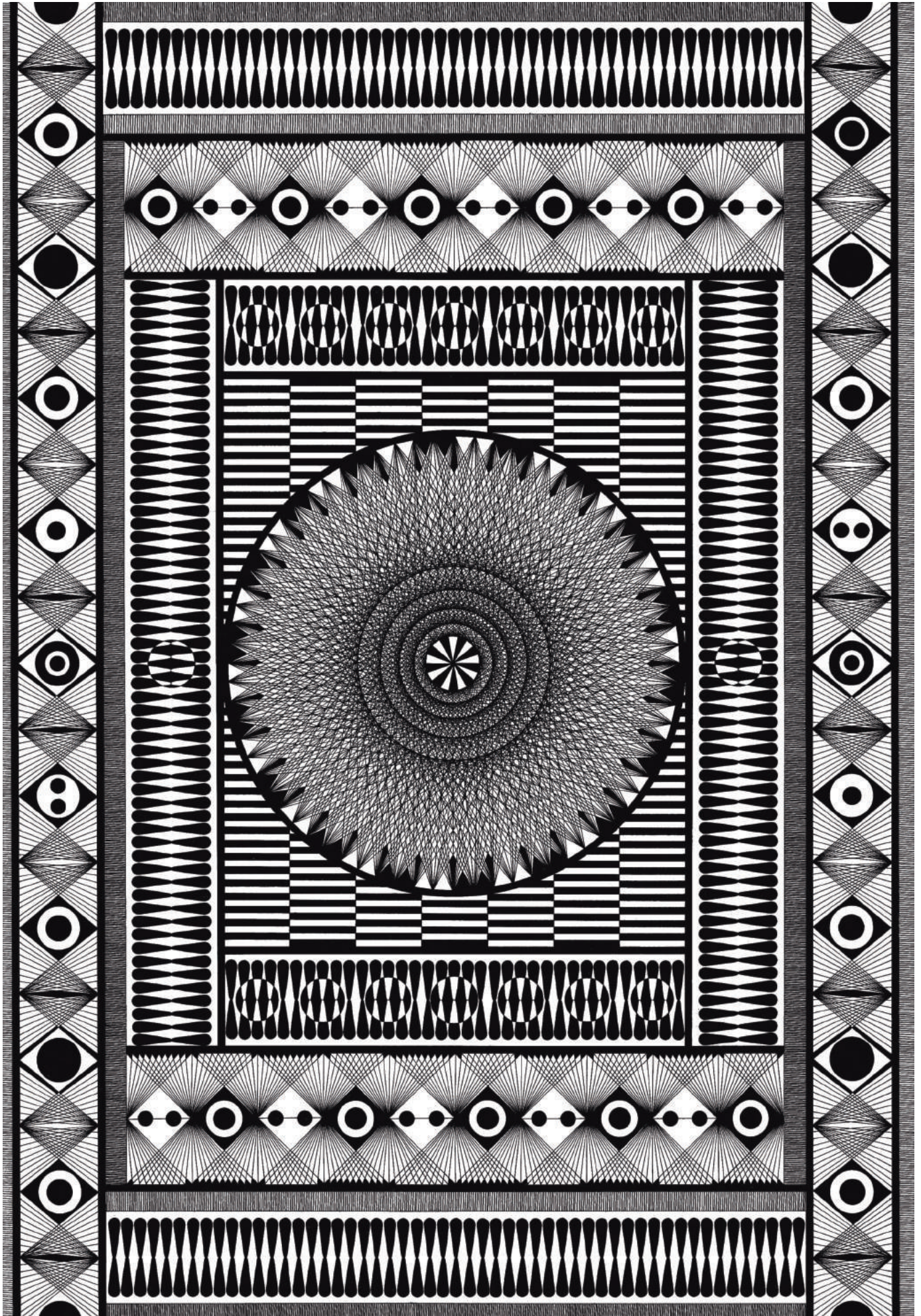
Their strict geometricity can evoke implacable, uncompromising images: the graven metal doors of a bank vault, the cryptic symbology of masonic regalia, bitcoin iconography. At the same time, their almost supernatural symmetries can work like tantric images, like mandalas, as an inducement to and a focus of contemplation. Their patterning suggests the “mobility” of Art Deco whirligig motifs, and modernist works of vortices. For all the associations they might trigger, the works are supremely accomplished, masterfully complete and unique in themselves.

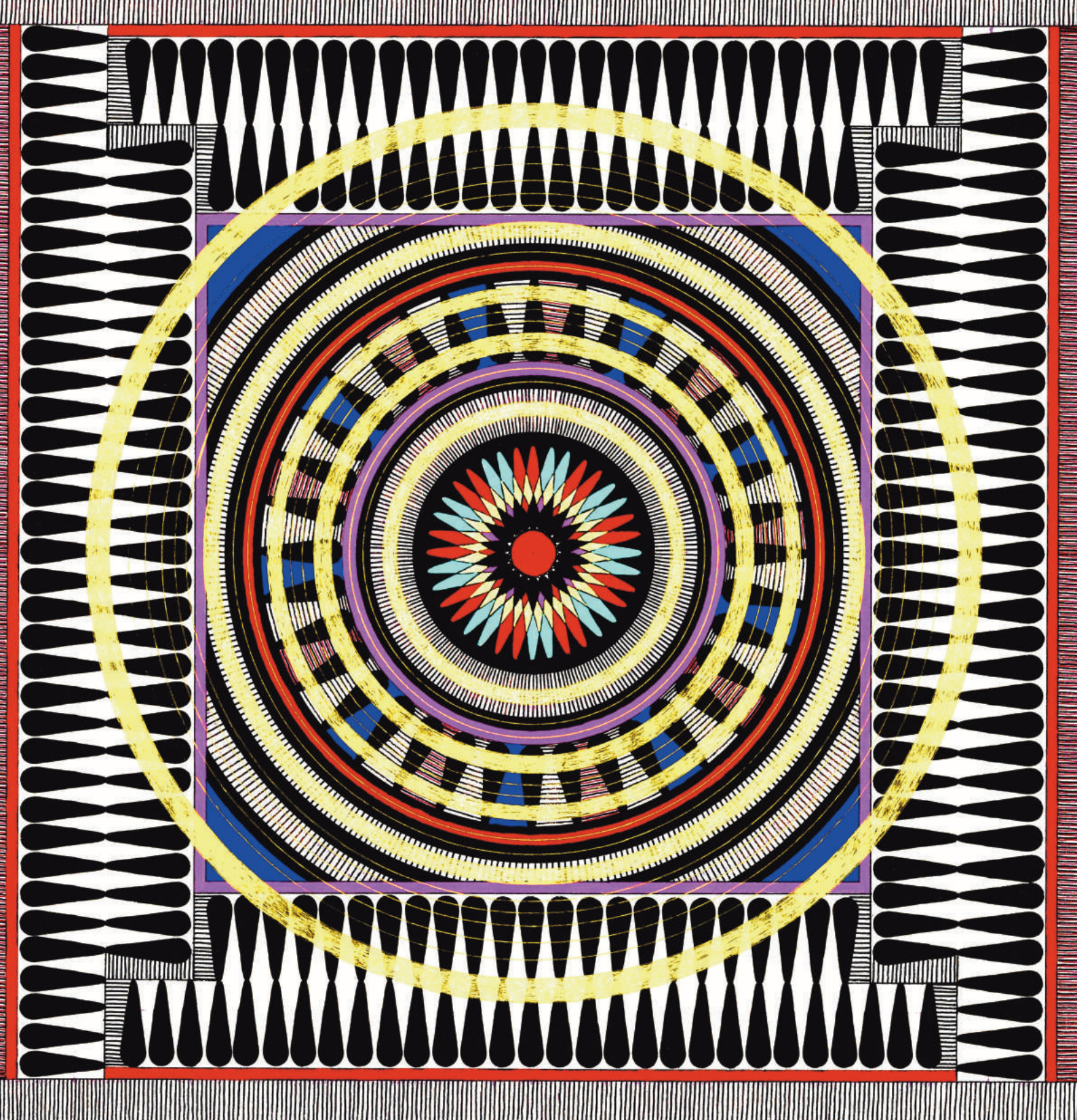
The vectors, radials, row-and-column matrices and tessellations, halos, suns, eyes and wheels-within-wheels are all generated not by algorithms but by a single human – or superhuman – draughtsman, the hallucinatory designs painstakingly executed on paper with pen and India ink. “I use archetypes from our collective

unconsciousness. I hope to convey purity, accuracy, perfection, balance, and forward that energy to the viewers, based on elements that are common to all. For instance, the circle is represented everywhere around the world and it can be the sun, the moon, the earth, magic eyes, cells, the womb, the mandala, the universe...”, explains the artist, Portuguese Daniel Gonçalves.

Entirely self-taught, he was first brought to public attention by the Cruzes Canhoto gallery in Porto, where his work was initially exhibited in 2016. Then, in 2017, he also participated in an exhibition at the Oliva Creative Factory in Portugal. Most recently, pieces of his have been exhibited in galleries in France, the US and the UK, and at the Outsider Art Fair in New York in 2019.

He explains that his creations were not always so systematic: “They used to be more organic and over time have become more geometric because of my idea – my





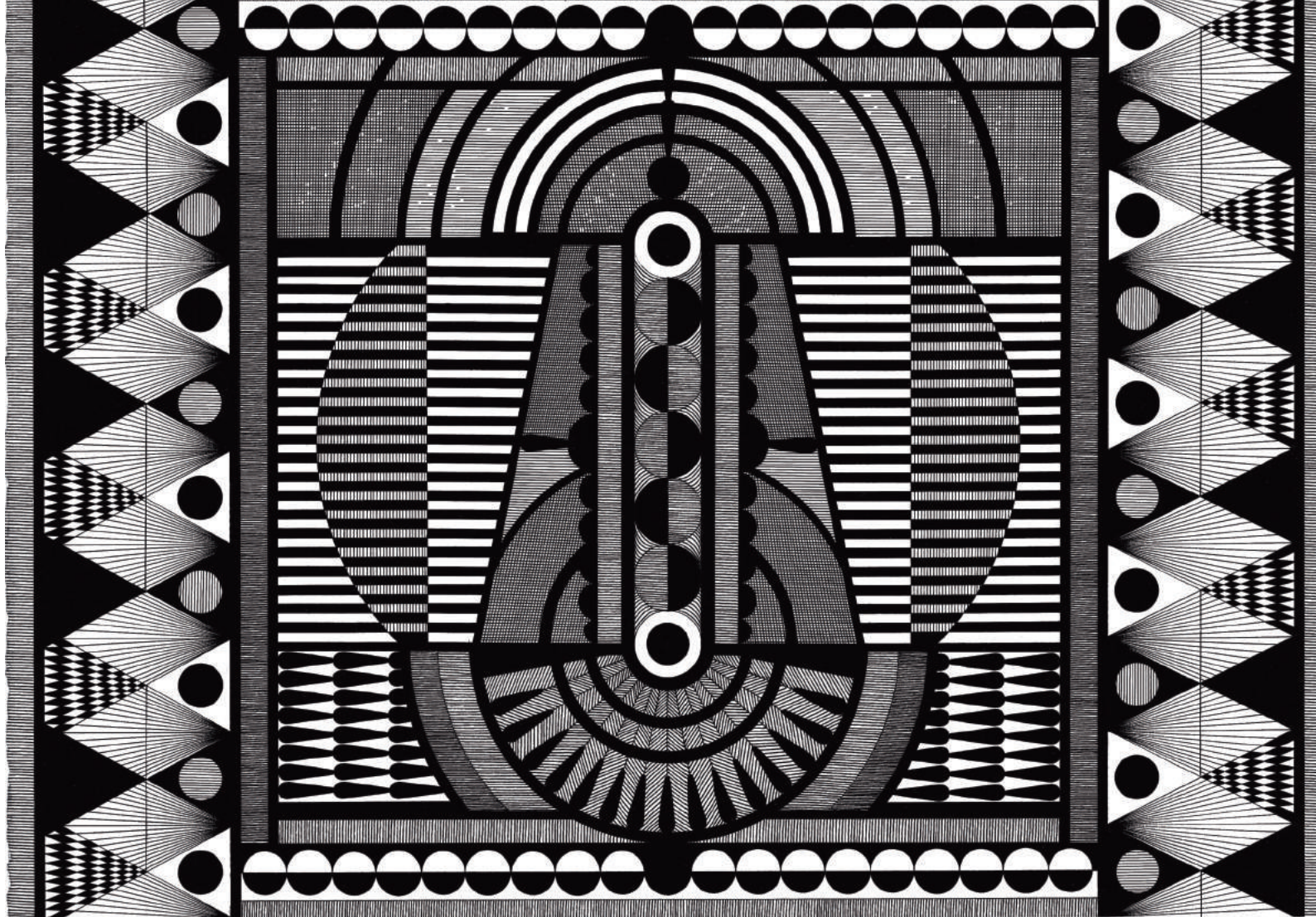
#270, 2018, ink on paper, 14 x 14 in./ 35 x 35 cm

obsession – that they have to be perfect or at least close to perfection. My drawings have evolved from something more figurative and colourful towards something more based on black and white, more abstract, assuming perhaps more symbolism through geometric, minimalistic elements such as circles, triangles, arches.”

Gonçães can be forgiven for wanting to find order and perfection. Born in Porto in 1977, one of five brothers, he endured a troubled – almost Dickensian – upbringing

at the hands of a father who gambled, drank and had a violent temperament. However, his father was a highly skilled carpenter and gave Gonçães an appreciation and respect for manual work, and for drawing something beautiful out of unpromising raw material. “I think that was the only decent thing I inherited from him. The capacity to improvise and create,” the artist says.

Raised without affection or stability, the Gonçães brothers all ended up in prison for lesser or greater



#291, 2018, ink on paper, 28 x 20 in./ 70 x 50 cm

“The only decent thing I inherited from my father was the capacity to improvise and create”

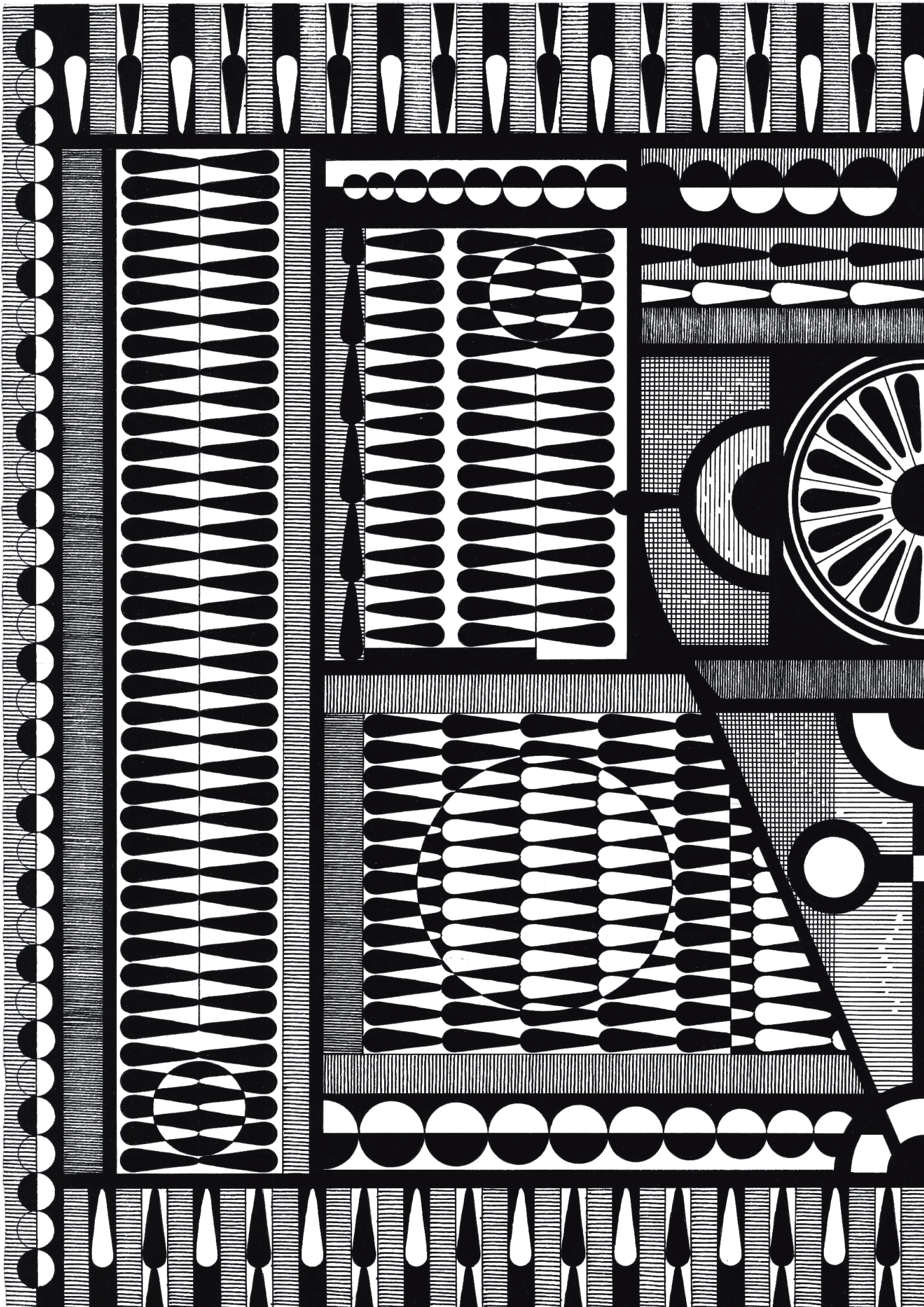
crimes – with the exception of Daniel, who at the age of twelve was sent to the seminary to save the family some money and to cultivate a vocation. Maltreated there too, he lost any religious faith that he may have had.

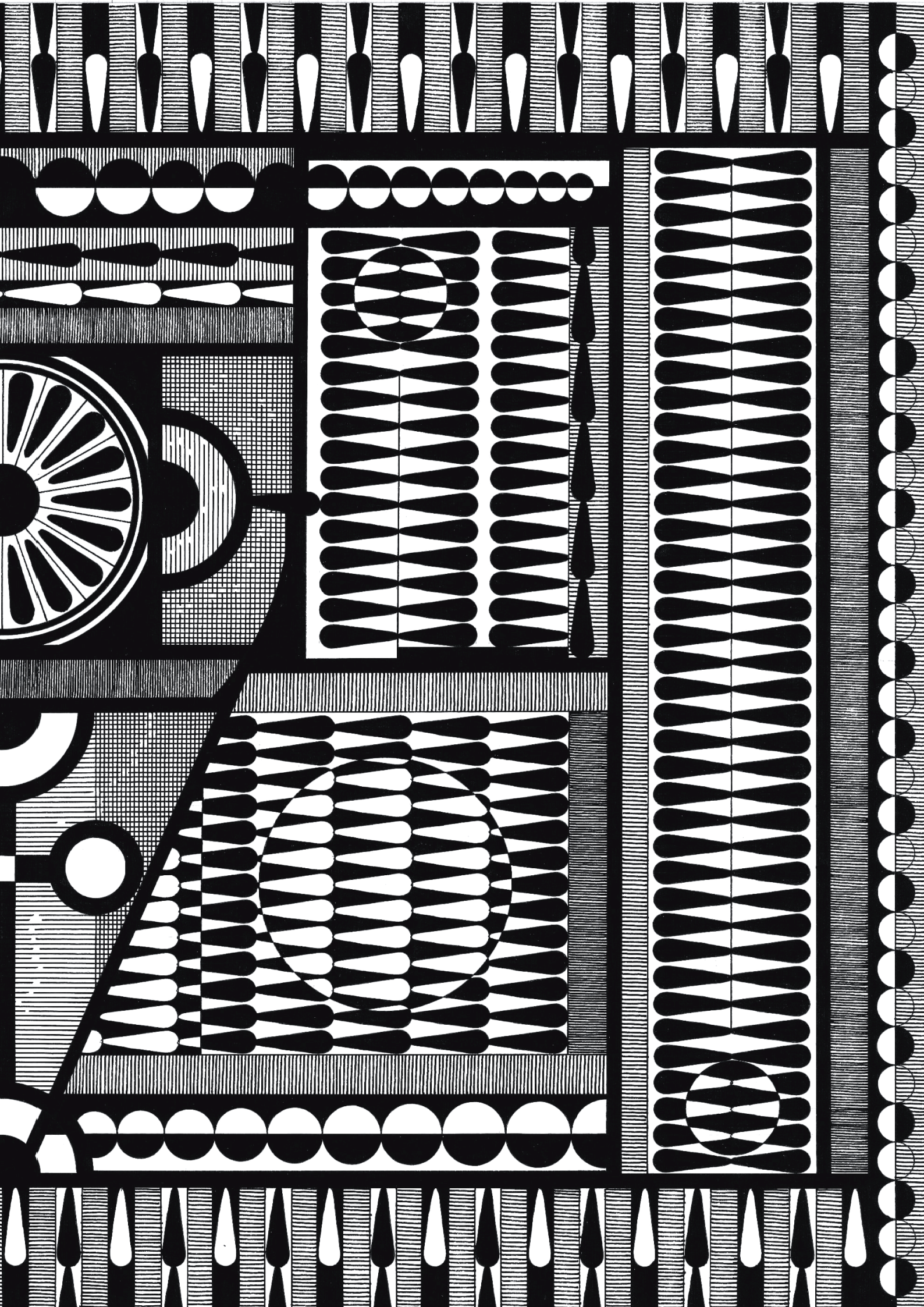
He returned home hoping to learn his father’s trade, but further physical violence and chaos caused him to move on. He tried working in quarries, then as a bricklayer, then a mechanic, but nothing stuck and he found his way to London where he spent two years as a waiter in a club. Once back in Porto, he worked in bars, restaurants and cafés, but loans, debts and accumulating bills led to bankruptcy and the loss of his house and car.

Tracking Gonçalves’ artistic experimentations from their beginnings is difficult, partly because of his troubled, ever-changing living circumstances but also because early examples of his work no longer exist: “Unfortunately, almost everything I produced between 1992 and 2015 was given to family and friends or lost while moving, and the

rest was destroyed. After three or four years without producing anything and after undergoing one of the most depressing periods of my life, I destroyed everything. Even now, when I finish a drawing I put it aside and try not to return to it, mostly for fear of not agreeing with what’s there and destroying it.”

Today Gonçalves is married with three children and has found some stability. For the last 20 years, he has used the same materials, the same pen and compass, always sitting on the same chair, always facing east. The same old table folds into three parts allowing him to increase or decrease the dimensions of the drawings (although, recently, he has started to feel that perhaps its size might be limiting his work). He prefers to work during the night and follows a strict ritual which demands just the right light, the right music, the right instruments precisely arranged – it all creates the ambience which compels him to concentrate and to work.





“I don’t always think of myself as an ‘artist’. I’m just an ordinary man who happens to make drawings”

He begins by dividing his paper into four parts with a pencil and ruler: “I must find the centre of it. It’s like finding my own centre, arranging and ordering little things so as to get to a mindset that compels me to the making. I’m completely obsessed, everything has to fall in the right place. I do not plan or preview what I will bring to the paper through drawing. The work reveals itself as I am developing it. For me it is as if I am in a trance, as if my hand is driven by a higher energy or force. Through drawing, I achieve a sense of peace and balance that I cannot always get from other aspects of my day-to-day life.”

Gonçalves is alert to the contradictions involved in artistic creativity, especially where compulsion comes into play: “This is a question I often pose to myself, ‘Am I an artist?’, and the answer is as often as not ‘I don’t know’. What I do comes from a place of need and I’m not always sure if what I make has the quality and relevance to be considered art. Certainly (and fortunately), though, there are people who see those qualities in my work. I want to think that there’s an energetic, invisible force that circulates around the world like a wave. And that I have a special connection with it. I don’t know its name. But I would rather have that connection and say it’s guiding my hand than be considered crazy. Or, perhaps I am crazy and the drawings are just means whereby I can reconcile that with myself. I do not feel famous, nor do I like the idea of fame. I don’t always think of myself as an ‘artist’. I’m just an ordinary man who happens to make drawings”.

Gonçalves is, as he himself says, obsessive, sometimes hyperactive. In some ways, he is very different to the commonly held notion of the solitary, inward-facing outsider artist: “I don’t consider myself a recluse – I have some social life, I am married, I have three children, the two girls are in school. I have a very busy life. At the same time, I am an individual who needs only a few hours of sleep and that is what allows me to create. I used to have a paying job until five years ago, but I never felt fulfilled. My social life is my family with some excursions to international events such as art fairs or other shows – but I try not to stay away too long.”

He is well informed about art and artists, expressing admiration for traditional African art, Indian Madhubani

designs, Central American art, sacred Tibetan geometries. He’s proud to be mentioned alongside, or share exhibition space with, the likes of Adolf Wölfli, Augustin Lesage, Charles Dellschau and Forrest Bess. His work shares the defining characteristics of *art brut* – obsessive attention to detail, and endless repetition coupled with infinite variation. But does he see himself as an outsider or visionary artist?

“As for the categories in which I might be included, for me those are just labels that we create to fulfill the need to ‘pack everything onto shelves’. I certainly fall outside what people usually call ‘art’, making me in that sense an ‘outsider’. I certainly have my vision and my individual mythology if you will, but am I a ‘visionary’? It has been said that there is a mediumistic quality to my work, that all my drawings are made from an aerial perspective.”

When asked for his future hopes and expectations, he responds, “As far as artistic ambitions, I always give the same old answer: my biggest aspiration is to live long enough to complete my life’s work and to perceive its meaning. To show as much as I can in curatorial projects and get to places such as collections so the work can take on a life of its own. I don’t measure the success of what I do in terms of merchandising or of monetary value.”

In the meantime, order reigns, everything is in place. Gonçalves has mastered his space and the world follows its course quietly – in his drawings at least.

previous page: #290, 2018, ink on paper, 28 x 20 in./ 70 x 50 cm
opposite: #287, 2018, ink on paper, 28 x 39 in./ 70 x 100 cm

Tony Thorne writes on cultural history, innovation in language, design and communication, and outsider art. He is a consultant at King’s College London.

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