



## Terra Cobre

MARCO DA SILVA  
FERREIRA & JOÃO PAIS  
FILIPE

## Metallic Pastoral



**Marina Srnka**

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Alchemy is not a perfect science, but the Portuguese dancer Marco da Silva Ferreira and sculptor-musician João Pais Filipe unearth grains of gold in their awkward yet endearing contemporary pastoral. Inspired by Portuguese cow-herding traditions, the performers combine austere percussionist precision and sensual physical abandon to subtly—and at times provocatively—deconstruct the conventional imagery tied to this masculine agricultural heritage. By juxtaposing folk dance and artisanal traditions with elements from urban and queer cultures, the result is a vital, joyous, and creative outburst that proves its mettle.

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'Terra Cobre' means 'the land of copper'. The two performers step into the room, their faces shrouded by long, black wigs, as if they were about to initiate a mourning ceremony. They take their places on a stage covered by two rust-stained metallic sheets, positioned perpendicularly on the floor, one rolling up like a wave or a small skate ramp to our right, the other disappearing beneath Filipe's impressive set of instruments on the left of the stage. Da Silva Ferreira starts to sing a lamentation in the vein of *saudade*, a nostalgic cry for the traditions that teeter on the edge of extinction as a result of the transformations brought on by industrialization and the digital age. The performers embody this duality—the raw earth of tradition meets the cold gleam of metal. That is why they appear as an odd couple at the beginning.

Pais Filipe, dressed in a dark shirt and leather shoes, commands a battery of drums, metal pipes, and gongs with serene precision. In contrast, Da Silva Ferreira, wearing only blueish-green tights over a pair of black Dr. Martens, is all raw sensuality as he swings a cowbell—an artisanal tradition of the Portuguese

Alentejo region—in a pendular one-hand motion while swirling on his heel. This movement strongly reminds of ‘Piano phase’, the solo part in ‘Fase’ by Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker. The insistent and subtly evolving percussion of Pais Filipe sounds of a piece with Steve Reich’s rhythmic meditations anyhow. Da Silva Ferreira’s muscular build, big boots and heavy cowbells however does not emulate, the effortless geometric precision of the Flemish classic in this drawn-out opening section. The connection between the rippling rhythms of the clean-cut percussion bells of Pais Filipe and the rough, agricultural clunks of da Silva Ferreira’s artisanal cowbell is not even immediately apparent. Yet, somehow, over the course of the hour-long performance, this contrasting duo finds common ground.

Staged in the Chamber Music Hall of Concertgebouw Brugge, the audience—seated on the small and intimate parterre or along the gallery that swirls three times around the stage as a ramp—would be excused for letting their gazes rest on the gloomy percussionist rather than the dancer. A drum performance is, after all, a visual and visceral experience as much as an aural one, and witnessing a virtuoso performer paint a canvas of rhythms and melodies to a subtly developing beat is a pleasure on its own. And like in a concert, people in the audience felt compelled to take their phones out for photos or videos (Giving the benefit of the doubt, I interpret this compulsion as a carryover from concerts, hoping that it does not sign a shift in conventions of dance spectatorship).

## **With his butt pushed out and chest popping, this faun is also a drag queen balancing on imaginary heels.**

Yet, making the brilliant Pais Filipe the headliner would do a injustice to the voluptuous and faunish da Silva Ferreira. At first, he appears as a conventional heavy, powerful, cocky peasant, one hand grasping his groin. Later, he also takes on the looks of a bull, shaking every inch of his muscular back as he strikes the metal sheets in a ferocious rhythm, kicking his legs back in preparation to charge. However, when Pais Filipe plays the gong with a bow, the soothing buzz provokes a change. Da Silva Ferreira gradually evolves into something else when he incorporates wavy stomach movements, shoulder circles, and exaggerated pelvic thrusts. This gradual ‘queering’ of the pastoral imagery is no mean feat: In his fascinating amalgamation of folk fantasy, hip-hop physicality and vogue sensuality, da Silva Ferreira exudes an energy that ultimately wins us over. Often standing on the tips of his heavy boots, with his butt pushed out and chest popping, this faun is also a drag queen balancing on imaginary heels. Sometimes, this mixture makes for humorous effects on the verge of fetishist imagery. His androgyne performance at one moment mimics how a cowboy makes a whip crack or slays a beast. Standing on his head, facing the audience, he later on makes his stomach roll in a sensual, sweaty, upside-down belly dance.

By the end, as he hops and skips wistfully down the spiralling gallery, an orchestra of cowbells of various sizes bouncing from his shoulders and drops of sweat covering his naked body, the entire room is lured in by da Silva Ferreira’s magnetic presence. Whether his movements recall folk-dance steps or rapid voguing hand gestures, the fusion translates into his own style.

When in their element, both artists shine equally. However, curiously, it is the uneasy intermezzo in the middle that sticks out. The musician leaves his comfort zone to join da Silva Ferreira for a befuddling *pas de deux*. In silence, the ungainly and self-conscious musician and the drenched, sensual dancer engage in an encounter of two incompatible substances. After some circling embraces, pushes, and pulls, the scene ends with Pais Filipe dragging da Silva Ferreira's tights halfway down to reveal a pair of shiny buttocks, before slowly walking back to his sticks for the final climactic number. In contrast to the proficient musicianship and athletic displays of the other segments, this stood out like a messy, drunken one-night stand, complete with wobbling legs and foggy intentions.

The symbolic meaning of this particular scene eluded me. Yet, in all its awkwardness, it seems to epitomize this strangely tantalizing soil-meets-metal aesthetic.