

Exhibition: **A Giant By Thine Own Nature**

Valencian Institute of Modern Art, IVAM
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Curators: Wilson Lazaro and Rafael Gil

Organized by: Valencian Institute of Modern Art, IVAM

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The title “A Giant By Thine Own Nature” is a verse taken from the Brazilian national anthem and it clearly summarizes two of Brazil’s great strengths: its extraordinary physical magnitude and nature’s powerful presence in all aspects of daily life. The exhibition, which consists of a reflection on current art in Brazil, joins about seventy works of art by prominent artists such as Adriana Varejão, Bispo do Rosario, Ernesto Neto, Volpi, Guignard, Anna María Maiolino, Ivan Serpa, Ivens Machado, Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, Marepe, Vik Muniz, José Medeiros, Artur Barrio (Velázquez Award 2011), Cildo Meireles and Rivane Neuenschwander, among others.

For the exhibition, a catalogue has been published that reproduces the works of art on display and joins texts by Celso Amorim, Guido Mantega, Paulo Herkenhoff, Auterives Maciel, Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda, Roberto Conduru, Consuelo Císcar, Wilson Lázaro and Rafael Gil.

This sample intends to reveal a reflection on art in Brazil, from a modern art approach, passing through contemporary art and arriving at current art. Brazil is the driving centerpiece that serves to show thoughts, impressions and feelings towards the country, through Brazilian artists or those who have lived in Brazil. The pieces that portray these emotions provide a chronology that starts in the 1940s and goes up until the present. Because of this, the main point of reference and centerpiece of the exhibition is the heart, for three reasons: for its clear analogy with the orography of Brazil; for its red color which expresses its

intensity; and for its physical symbolism of generating life, a beating heart, as a reference to an artist's impulse to create. So, the most distinctive features are illustrated, showing the changes made in the present-day, giant country of Brazil, a country that is still widely unfamiliar and full of surprises.

The driving force of the exhibition is rhythm. Rhythm is a creative movement that differentiates this country from others. Because of this, even the exhibition's own title comes from the concept of borrowing a phrase from the Brazilian national anthem to provide the discourse of the show. As this discourse is followed, the rhythm in movement can be observed, with different musical notes, just like the mixture of people who are reconstructing the country. It is a country where nature has its own rhythm, depending on the geography of the place it is established. An invasive type of nature that prevails in the city. An anthropophagous type of nature.

The artist selection for "A Giant By Thine Own Nature" forms a picture of how the creation of Brazilian artists has been and how it is now, in relation to the country's geography. So, more than artists, the exhibition plants the idea of artistic Brazilian creation as a collection of works of art, of pieces that speak about Brazil, that feel Brazil, that express Brazil and through them, Brazil's rhythm is marked. Because of this, different spaces are established in the display, through different resources that speak about rhythm:

In **Sound and Form**, the installation "Mientras estamos aquí" (While We Are Here) by Ernesto Neto can be seen. It bears witness to the architectonic and organic constructive sense. The artist understands art as a sensitive act or as a practical experience. Additionally, the video by Roberto Evangelista, *Mater Dolorosa – In Memoriam II*, can be seen. In this piece, the artist expresses his far-fetched vision of the Amazon, understanding it as a place of survival, a place where people live with drama and they learn from tragedy, as has been stated by the artist.

In **Samba Rhythm**, a deeply-rooted role of this festive musical genre is meant to be emphasized as a main cultural manifestation. The samba is a type of dance practiced by freed slaves towards the end of the 19th century that finally became a symbol of Brazilian national identity towards the end of the 1930s. As a result, *Estrela do Norte* (North Star) is being shown, among others; it is by Delson Uchôa, one of the most important color study artists in Brazil and whose painting consists of a celebration of color through a monumental piece of art, where transparency, luminosity, distinct textures and the chromatic scale are cherished.

We must also mention the short film by Cao Guimiarães, philosopher, artist and filmmaker, entitled *Quarta-feira de cinzas* (Ash Wednesday), made together with Rivane Neuenschwander, in which an everyday situation is explored over a long period of time. It is about a moment after the Carnival celebration where a group

of ants are playing together, hiding, collecting pieces of confetti from the floor, converting itself into a fable about one of the greatest shows on earth.

Diverse religions, cultures and ancestral rites are founded in present-day Brazil. This is why this convergence is shown in **Rhythm of Faith**, because the proliferation of different religions coexists today in Brazil with the constant presence of rites and traditions that come from African heritage, sometimes even fusing the two together. In this show, faith is presented more as an attitude rather than a reference to any religion.

This section figures in the work of the young artist, Niura Bellavinha, whose main artistic characteristic is the frequent use of monochromatic compositions where she often opts to use intense reds and blues. In her work, we see a clear, sensorial relationship with Brazilian baroque as well as Chinese painting. The video *Sabará – Mangueira* uses containers filled with pigment powder as a base of investigation. The result is a piece of art charged with magnetism and mysticism, wrapped up in mystery, allowing the senses to fly away to infinity.

We must also cite two small pieces from the series *African Women* by Barrio, done in oil on cardboard. The artist evokes ritual African painting through simple, clean, ornamental, quick and effective lines. Undoubtedly, the most obvious antecedent of these pieces is found in the artist's six-month stay in Angola in 1952. There, Barrio had the opportunity to discover African culture in all its vast expansion: the simplification of means and forms, expressive and concrete nature, strong chromaticism and the magic, fantastic and religious contents.

On the other hand, the discontent of the photographer José Medeiros (1921-1990) after becoming acquainted with the photographic series done by the Frenchman Henri-Georges Clouzot about the *Candomblé* ritual in Bahia, published in *Paris Match* on March 12th, 1951, lead him to make an ample graphic report towards the end of that same year, about the ceremony that surrounds the initiation rite to *Candomblé*. The photographs that he took in a *terreiro* (garden) in the outskirts of Bahia, where three *iaôs* (supreme deity) were being initiated: *el terreiro de oxossi*, *de la mãe-de-santo* and *Mãe Riso da Plataforma*. They are photographs about the stages of the initiation ritual and the departure celebration for the religious medium of the Afro-Brazilian cult. In *Iaôs, Candomblé*, which is far from a mere ethnographic document, Medeiros paints the portrait of what is sacred, a magic and religious world which emphasizes the objectivity that frames it and in which the human body functions as a ritualistic support.

Admiration, ritual and cult of the body are characteristics that have been forever established in the atmosphere of Rio de Janeiro. In the piece by Alair Gomes (1921-1992), *Beach Triptych, # 25*, the main theme of this photographic piece is the reproduction of the beauty of the male body. His photographs are of a

descriptive nature; twisted, fragmented bodies shot from diverse angles, as if he were trying to capture classical sculpture.

Along the same path also exists **Diverse Perspectives of Rhythm**; in other words, different groups of sound that make up the music of Brazil. Artists who think and artwork that represents the Brazilian “giant.”

This is the case of the *Mapa Mudo* (Mute Map) by Ivens Machado, a giant heart made from shards of green glass stuck into a cement surface and meant to represent the map of Brazil. The piece dates back to 1979 and was made during a military dictatorship. It simultaneously evokes the thick, Brazilian vegetation and the top part of the protective walls that surrounded certain homes, acquiring a symbolic value of the country’s social and political boundaries. Contrasting tactile art, this piece by Machado is a clear declaration of principles through an object that hinders any sort of contact by the observer.

The piece by Walmor Corrêa, *Curupira da série Unheimlich*, made in 2005, also stands out. Curupira is a diabolical character from a Brazilian legend that tends to attack Indians in forests. As a result, the Indians leave bird feathers, arrows and other objects as a sort of offering to the being so that it does not harm them. Curupira is a persistent Brazilian myth. Even today, in the north and northeast of the country, people describe him as a small, agile being with feet turned backwards, a shaved head and, sometimes, with just one eye, devoid of sex and without any orifices. He is the master of the hunt and vegetation and he is the protector of the forests. Curupira is, without a doubt, a fantastical being. This piece of art excels in the precision and rigor used in every single details, eliminating the background and using the foreground almost exclusively.

On the other hand, the economic and social differences of this great country are still quite extreme and, although the middle class is beginning to grow within the whole population, it still represents a very small portion of all Brazilians. The strong social, economic and cultural inequalities form different societies within a common territory. This proves a **Social Imbalance**, where the rhythms are very different in the city and in the countryside, in the north and in the south, downtown and in the outskirts.

Maybe for this reason some artists prefer to create works that inspire another reality, which take the viewer beyond the real space in which they live, by creating fantasy, by inviting him or her to daydream. Three collages by Rivane Neuenschwander, *As mil e uma noites possíveis* -43, 45 and 49- (A Thousand and One Nights) are a good example of it. The artist uses different materials, methods and strategies to present her work. Each collage is a confetti constellation made of pages of copies of *A Thousand and One Nights* which is compiled of Arabic tales from Medieval Middle East. It is placed on a black background. Neuenschwander does research on astronomy as a scientific discipline focused on celestial objects and extraterrestrial phenomena. The artist is inspired by

nature when she creates her pieces and she explores their phenomena by constructing them with the Brazilian conceptual narrative. She establishes organic connections among topics such as nature, language, temporality and poetry.

And maybe because Brazilian reality inspires the need to create and encourage dreams and discover hope, it is important to promote a **Wind of Change** that recreates personal experiences, that provokes the development of fantasy and that makes utopia possible.

In this respect, the video *Meu mundo teu* (My World Yours) by Alexandre Siqueira is very illustrative. It tells the love story of two teenagers, Jefferson and Tayana, who live on two different banks of the Amazon, keeping them apart. The magnitude of Brazilian nature stands in their way. His research is not about images but the story he tells and the creation process of his work. It is a story about affection, emotions and chimeras.

It is similar to the works by graffiti artists Os Gêmeos, *Pavão misterioso* (Mysterious Peacock), inspired by the work by José Camelo de Melo Redenze *Romance do Pavão Misterioso*. This romance was written in the late 1920s. It is a story about love and heroism.

The show ends by tackling another characteristic feature of Brazilian culture, which has given it international importance and has set the country as a worldwide referent for its architecture. A sort of gesture architecture that has been influenced by masters such as Oscar Niemeyer and Lucio Costa (1902-1998). The buildings are unique because of the way they conceive line, volume and space and they are characterized by clean, elegant and simple strokes. It is the gesture of rhythm, a boost for the spirit.

Many artists have the perceived importance of gesture and have transferred it to their work. This is the case of Pedro Varela, who presents his interpretation of a city in his site specific piece. The oeuvre of Varela invites the viewer into his city in order to promote critical thinking regarding contemporary urban spaces. Emptiness refers to Eastern landscape, especially those paintings created by Buddhist monks as a way of achieving a higher degree of contemplation. The artist creates a different atmosphere than that of today's cities. It is a thought-up, imagined, unreal city. It represents the dream of a city.

The main features of current Brazilian art can be discovered through the different aforementioned artistic proposals following an irregular rhythm with uneven and asymmetric sounds. Nevertheless, it is unquestionably full of surprises, suggestions and audacity.