

Art in America
September 2000
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Adriana Varejão at Lehmann Maupin
by Edward Leffingwell

As well as linking the existence of colonial Portuguese export tile and chinaware to the subjugation of indigenous people and the creation of slavery and a global trade empire, the recent work of the Brazilian artist Adriana Varejão further complicates the resemblance of her paintings to the objects they portray. In one section of this exhibition, Varejão emphasized a trompe l'oeil effect that appears to conflate an inherent vice of ceramic manufacture (the slippage of glaze decoration from a pottery object during the firing process, exposing the terra-cotta beneath) with an over-the-top representation of exposed raw meat and viscera. A more conceptual encounter with her topic of choice was offered in an installation of stretched canvases with showers of decorated pottery shards suspended from the paintings and gallery walls.

The simulated tiles of the 5-by-6-foot relief *Carpet-Style Tilework in Live Flesh* (1999) appeared to rupture at the center, rippling like an unrolling sheet of linoleum to expose a glistening, protruding mass of blood and guts. Varejão has refined this grisly shorthand for violence against the colonized to the point that her controlled massing of polyurethane foam seems like a finely modeled porcelain support. On the surface of this inelegant material, she works up a palette of oils to simulate real gore, and adds a gloss varnish for the look of life. Works like this recall her earlier paintings on found tableware, in which she represented the rape and butchering of indigenous people.

The three large installations that occupied the main gallery are among the most abstract the artist has produced. In two of them, she layered stretched canvases figured with marine paintings that overlapped the edges and ran onto the surface of the wall itself. The installation *Equatorial Line III* (1999) alluded to the vastness of global enterprise, indicating geographic longitude with lines of colored cord and ornamented with shattered ballast crockery that showered from the ceiling and fanned out on the gallery floor. Varejão also stacked gessoed tondos and stretched canvases, either unpainted or carefully figured with representations of Portuguese tile, the motif extending once again onto the wall. In works such as these, the artist seems to have expanded her preoccupation with colonial history to include issues more concerned with the making and presentation of art.