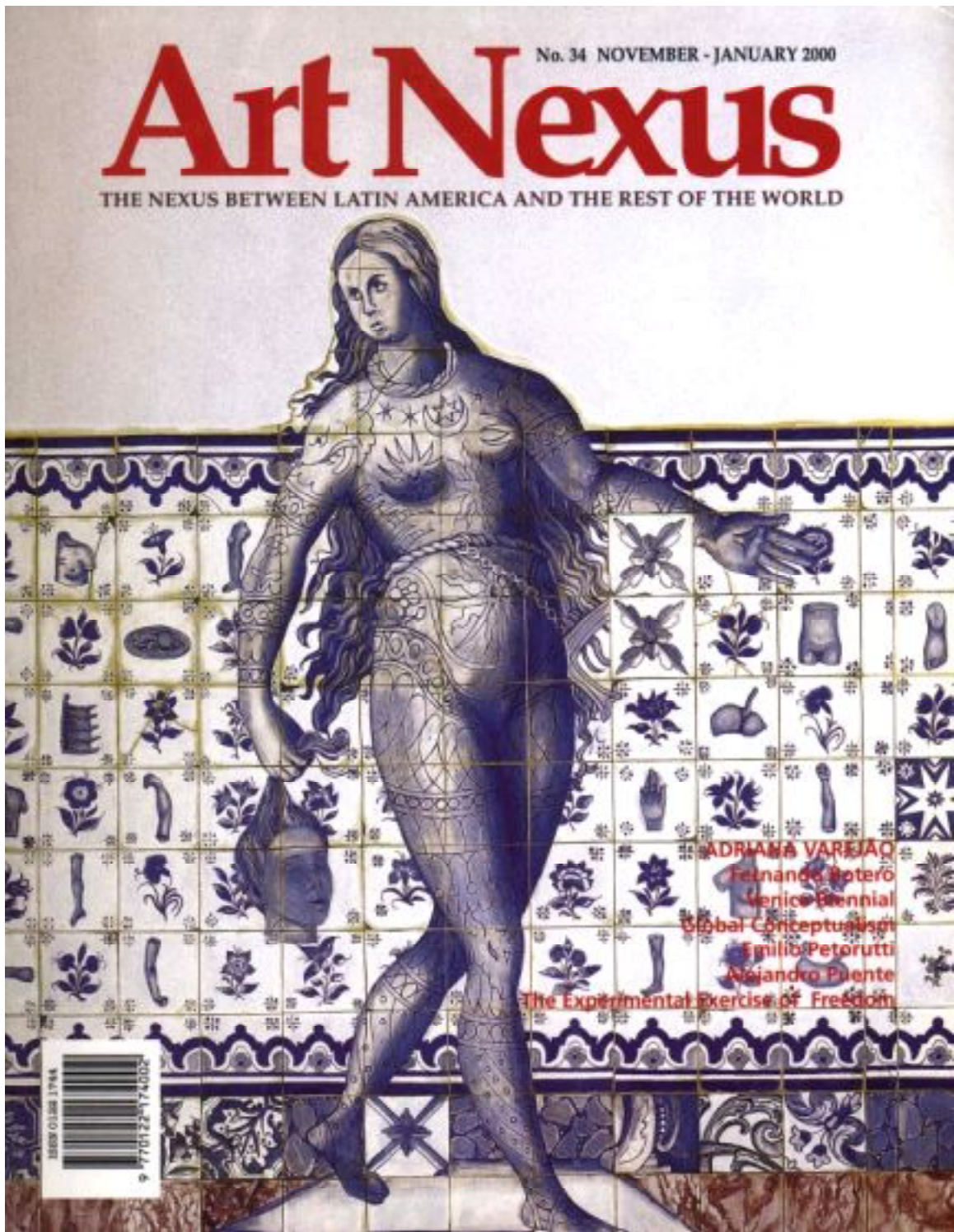


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THE NEXUS BETWEEN LATIN AMERICA AND THE REST OF THE WORLD

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Adriana Varejão
The presence of painting

by STELLA TEIXEIRA DE BARROS

A lot has been said about the symbolic premises in the work of Adriana Varejão. In fact, outstanding in her painting are the relationships between symbol and history of repression, elements that, stemming from the dream of the Conquest and the beginning of the colonization process, confronted the European imagination with a radically different type of society, with a culture never before seen. And Westerners never hesitated to impose onto that culture, by force, their perception and conception of the world. Perhaps the essence of iconography in her work is, truly, a history of repression. To be more precise, a history of transmutations and shifts printed in records of the period, thus configuring the oppression exerted by the Europeans after the seafaring discoveries in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Those records surpass the contours of Portuguese colonization in Brazil, for, by covering both East and West, they achieve a universal size penetrated by a pan-humanistic tone that evokes the synthesis and fusion of elements of different geographical horizons, of diverse cultures and histories that touch one another as a consequence of the great maritime expeditions.

In her painting there is no insistence on reinventing time, nor is there an attempt to make the past present, for past and present are shown completely. Memories shift among nostalgic motivations; they are mirrors of ourselves that envelop us like whirlwinds. Few artists are able to develop like Adriana Varejão the ability to show coherence and freshness in painting based on the symbolic elements of a historical reality. Freeing herself of the imposing and limiting sense of a mere transposition of images and symbols, she realizes a subversion of the imagination stemming from the Portuguese colonial inheritance manifested in the cruel abuses implicit in power relations. Subversion often begins through references that extend inside or outside the space of the canvas. The artist gives a new dimension to painting as she approaches or distances herself from the two-dimensional plane: the images decompose into a dissociating effect that transforms the pictorial matter into intoxicating condensations, into contractions, and into impulses of desire and blood, of destruction and death.

Recourse to an excess of pigment, which at the beginning of her career as an artist seemed to turn to an exacerbated opulence of a baroque nature, gradually began to take other directions. The images, bodies, objects, maps, decorations, and tiles all spoke of a cartography in which the history of colonialism makes evident that its anxiety for power and possession of wealth encompasses the globe. Parallel to the process of corrosive destabilization unchained by the conquistador from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, the missionaries reorganized the indigenous customs: they cover their nudity, they attempt to make them literate and, principally, they try to catechize them. In spite of the missionaries' good intentions, which were frequently able to contain the savagery of slavery and the massacres undertaken by the colonizers, the effect of their intervention did not turn out any less devastating for the native cultures.

This is a matter of a pictorial work that reflects the wrenching of our own time, which rarely limits itself to the plane of the canvas. At times, a deep blow tears the painting, as in *Mapa de Lopo Homem* (Map of lopo Homem). There are moments in which, on the contrary, the pigmented matter arrogantly extends outside. If the incision resorts to spatial ambiguity, as in Fontana's scratch—to the relation between inside and outside, and especially to the precise cut and line—then it distances itself from that conceptual proposal as it signals that the numb fist sure opens like an ethnographic wound, like an outgrowth of agitated entrails, not completely scarred over. Another experience is revealed when the pictorial matter abundantly flourishes from the canvas, dissolving among plates and pieces of oriental porcelain, as in *Linea Equinoccial II* (Equinox line II), and spreading into decomposed forms of torn flesh (*Lengua*) (Tongue): in these cases, the fleshy prominence maintains a certain resonance with the dissolving neurosis of Francis Bacon when, upon diluting the image it transforms it into chromatic matter and makes the figure lose the privilege of representation, for the figure itself is treated as matter.

The artist shifts through various strategies and her work simultaneously speaks of the body and of the history of humanity, of the spirit and of the flesh, of the center and of the periphery, of Brazil and of the world, of archeology and of races, and principally of the history of art. To once again use the codes of the past and insert them into the present is an activity that does not create a mythical space-time, but rather brings to the present all the baggage of history. We know that, after the discontinuous crystallizations and appearances of the past, the past is here, the present does not exist without the past.

The voyage of European culture toward the other side of the ocean, understood as an ethnic and anthropological step, results in decentralizations where contamination is inexorable. The result is presented, for example, in the diaphanous epiphany of the tattooed female bodies before the sea (photographic piece taken for the journal *Trans*),

and likewise in the bottles of castaways with messages relating to themes like Chinese porcelain, tiles, and female cannibals. The bottles refer to those that contain a first-aid kit and that have labels that allude to the sea, to the sky, and to the beach, like those found on the shelves above the old white tiles of *Distancia* (Distance). In Adriana Varejão's work, the absence of stable foundations is indicative of the fact that everything must be questioned. And the destruction of illusions implies the renunciation of the symbol, which forces us to always move between scenes and images in constant transformation.

Just as the approach of the I with the other constitutes the imagination of the traveler, the circulation and superposition of cultures affect Adriana Varejão's painting like material density of juxtaposed membranes, of condensed outgrowths, of epidermal inscriptions. The indigenous societies show the European what he did not know, namely, that different societies exist. To admit the difference without seeking to abolish it was the impossible task for Eurocentrism. The word *transformation* was key for the relationship with non-Europeans. In the paradise of luxuriant forests and societies "without faith, without law, and without a king," where the indigenous people are pagans who seem controlled by terrible demons, it became necessary to baptize them quickly in order that they might abandon their savage customs: cannibalism, polygamy, and the constant practice of wars with no apparent cause. The right to the conquest is a prerogative of the European, and his duty is to Christianize the idolatrous. For the European, there is no room for a social system different from his own. Therefore, he does not hesitate, in an unequal confrontation, to impose norms and institutions that reflect his way of conceiving society. In a bloody liturgy, the Indian cannibals believe they acquire the courage and the virtues of the enemy they devour. The Europeans only see cruelty in that custom. The recourse to catechesis, the interpretation and invocation of the divine will as a decisive and propitious occasion for the conversion of the idolatrous and the authoritarian, repressive paternalism of the missionary would serve as the master key to extend his colonization efforts.

The recovery of the tiles that the Ibero-Lusitanian tradition brought during the colonial period serves to restructure those situations of conflict that engender many of the contradictions of Brazilian culture. Obeying a rigorous and geometric sequential order, the craftsmanship of the decorated tiles (which pleased the Rococo taste in the eighteenth century) preserves, in Varejão's painting, a patina of time in the small, intricate grooves, in the crevices, in the dark bits, in the patches, and in the restorations. She speaks of many forms in which power relations are manifested, predominantly of those expressed as inscriptions of the body. Through the tiles, the artist points out moral and political tyrannies of the institutional discourse that underlies the representation of the body. From the cannibalism/catechesis dichotomy, as in *Propuesta para catequesis, Parte I* (Proposal for catechesis, Part I), to the insertions of sectioned bodies, as in *Azulejos azules* (Blue tiles) and *Varejão académico—Musas* (Academic Varejão—Muses). From the tattoos

that refute the decoration of the tiles on the human scalpels stretched over the cold surface, both in the West and in the East, as in *Piel a la moda de los azulejos* (Skin in the fashion of tiles) and *Irezumis gemelos* (Twin irezumis), to the internal disorder provoked by disordered montages of drawings, as in *Figura de invitacion* (Invitation figure) or *Tea and Tiles*. The spongy flesh of the diverse *Lenguas* falls abundantly near the tile like an enormous ripped wound, red raw, inside of which are mixed convulsed layers and layers of spilled mucous membranes. As an organ of taste, the tongue resorts to cannibalism. But as an organ of speech, it summons the fervent sensory perception of the lacerated flesh, thus provoking an extermination process in which it eats itself.

Adriana Varejão's work inscribes itself in the terrain of the exploration of the body and reveals how the impact caused by the perception of another sexuality was transformed into a fertile field for the exercise of domination. A wider cultural promiscuity corresponds to the promiscuity of bodies, for the mechanisms of domination that ground promiscuity have not been extinguished. On the contrary. As Foucault pointed out, such mechanisms tend to make themselves more complicated through time: they lose the apparent virulence while they create more efficient strategies. This is how, under the innocent appearance of academic paintings like *Testigos oculares X, Y y Z* (Eye witnesses X, Y, and Z), the ethnographic self-portraits of a European woman, an Indian woman, and an Asian woman inquire into these women-objects that pay tribute to crossbreeding. Before each painting, a ceramic eye and a magnifying glass can help whomever wishes to explore, without forgetting that that spherical eye is a box that, when opened, reveals a small photograph of tattooed cannibal women, an image taken from the unadorned recollection of one of the witnesses in a destabilizing circulation of epidermis.

In the work *Reflexos de sonhos no sonho de outro espelho* (Reflections of dreams in the dream of another mirror), a study of Pedro Americo's *Tiradentes*, the artist approaches the theme of Pedro Americo's painting, as in *Tiradentes descuartizado* (1893) (Tiradentes quartered [1893]), interested more in semantics than in rhetoric because of the didactic insistence with which the work is reproduced. The representation of the unequivocal grandeur of the drama of Tiradentes conforms perfectly to the role of mythic hero, necessary as a tool of reinforcement for the period of the Republic's implantation. It is worth recalling that the dream of the ideal of liberty that Minas Gerais inspired in the eighteenth century, and which was related to the discovery of the other, had led a small group of enlightened conspirators to be inclined toward an independent republic in the region, an ideal that was quickly suffocated by the Portuguese Crown before a revolution could begin. Some of those involved were condemned to exile, but torture and quartering were reserved for Tiradentes. The event fell into oblivion during the Empire and was recovered as a pictorial narrative by several republican artists during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. But not only the republicans

adhered to the figure of the martyr; his transformation into a national hero was an adequate contribution for the political and ideological unification, permeated by what Machado de Assis called "nationality instinct." Adriana Varejão executes an exhaustive reading of the references of the hero and destroys the literalness of Tiradentes: she molds a fragmented doll out of the divisions of ripped and bloody flesh in Pedro Americo's painting. In a room she spreads out the segments of the mannequin hanging by threads, in conformity with the proportions and staging of the composition of the original painting. The slices of meat are reflected over 21 mirrors attached to the walls, changing each angle upon which the gaze fixes and generating a continuous instability of the bloody modules. She portrays each mirror and reproduces them faithfully in the pictures. The result is an installation of segmented outgrowths that are multiplied with the reflections of the mirrors/paintings in an unbridled carnal lust. It is a painting generated by metaphoric pulsions of violence and laceration that proposes new articulations of images, but which remains a diffuse and malleable materiality.

Happiness, the theme of one of Adriana Varejão's most recent pieces, is propagated in the photographs of the marketplaces of Taxco and Xochimilco (Mexico). In these images, amid the warm colors of daily life imbibed by the ruckus of workers and passersby, pieces of bleeding meat spread across the counters of the butchers' shops abound. The meat market provokes the curiosity of a child who looks at a pig stretched over the counter. It also provokes the perception of the shiny smoothness of the dense textures and of the related crimson tones as it says that "happiness is the acceptance of reality," as inscribed on one of the light boxes. By inverting a possible presence of pop, these photographs remove reality in order to demarcate the intensity of the carnal fabric and living color while procuring once more to tie down a time without interruptions, a harmonious time, and one illuminated from within.

Once more, the artist offers us a rich game of semantic suggestions where the course of history is no longer delineated as before. The autonomy of the symbol engenders a reality gathered from the material itself. That is, "it is the hand of the artist," as Bachelard fittingly recalls, "that seizes reality as it works a material that, at the same time, resists and yields like a loving and rebellious flesh." She thus procures to rescue memory, not as the actualization of the past, but rather as its prolongation into the present, for the present depends on the past in order to manifest itself. Adriana Varejão's work is a release transposed with rare mastery for the world of painting. Through a powerful and free transfiguration, she evokes testimonies of memories and of the present, made of matter and rebellion, dream and reality.