ARTFORUM

JANUARY 2012 INTERNATIONAL

WINTER PREVIEW

HANS HAACKE AND SASKIA SASSEN
ON THE SPACES OF OCCUPATION

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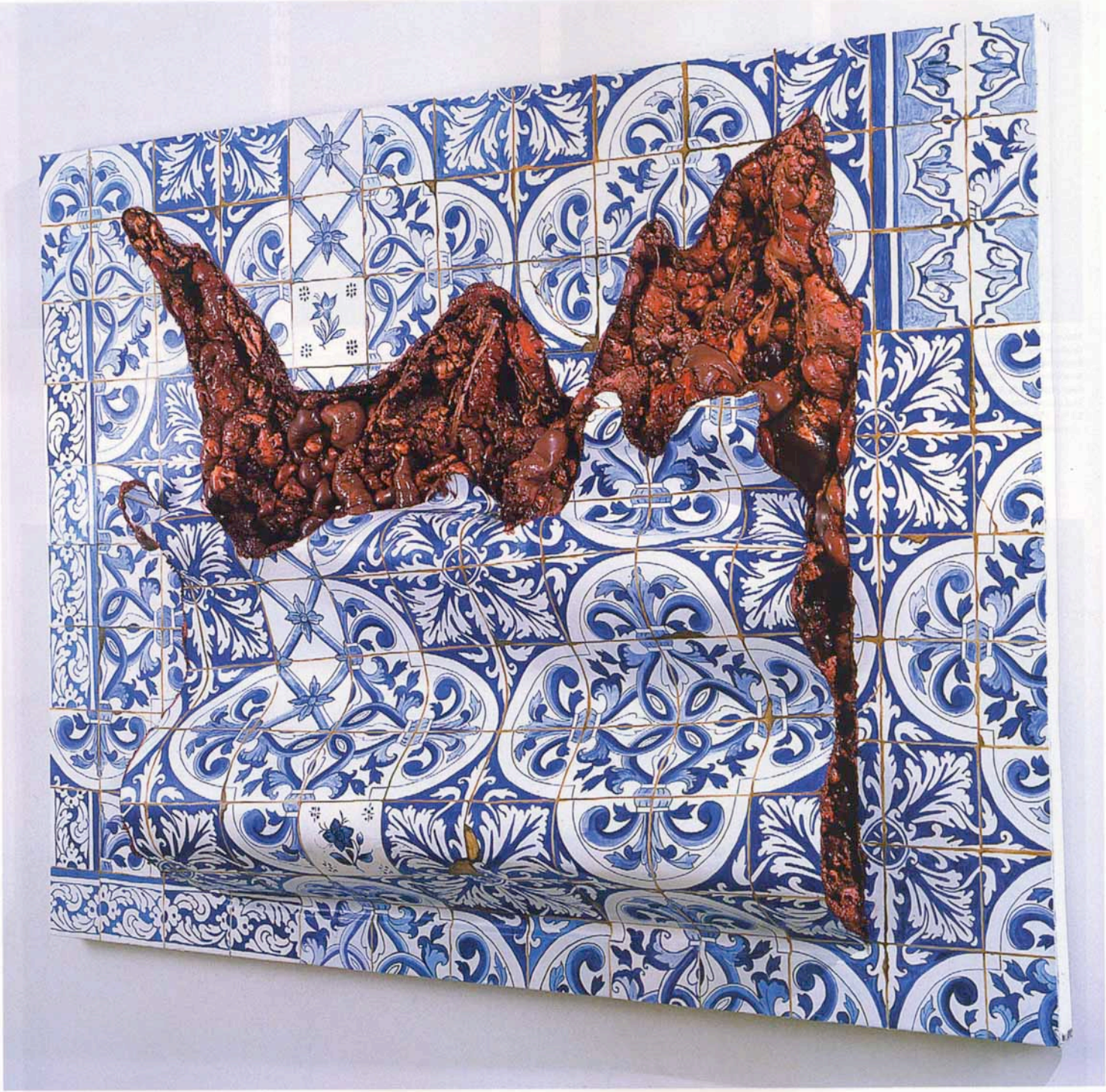
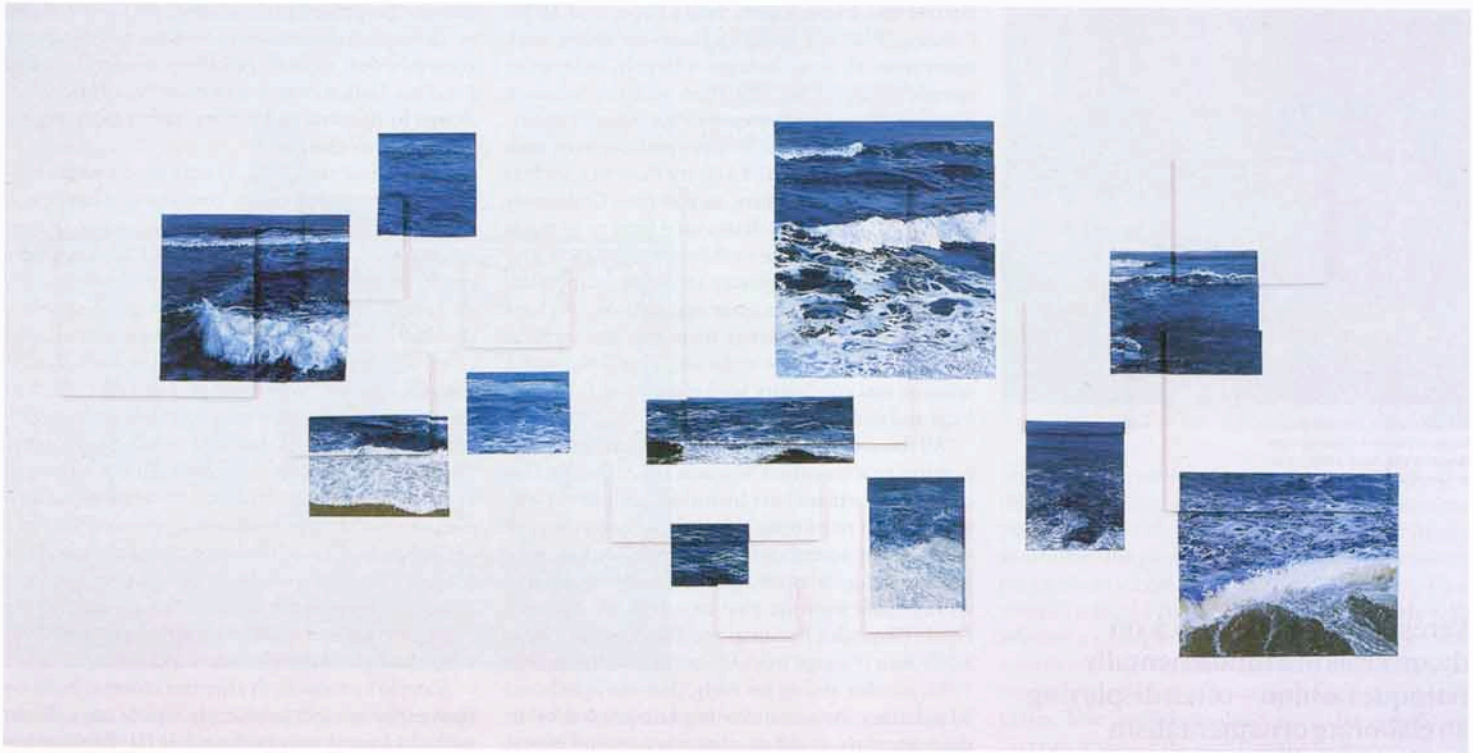




Opposite page: **Adriana Varejão, *Azulejaria "De tapete" em carne viva* ("Carpet-Style" Tilework in Live Flesh), 1999**, oil on canvas and polyurethane on aluminum and wooden support, 59 x 74⅛ x 9¾".

Adriana Varejão, *Margem* (Edge), 1999, oil on canvas and wood, eleven parts, overall 7' 1⅛" x 17' 6¼".

Fluid Dynamics

CAROL ARMSTRONG ON THE ART OF ADRIANA VAREJÃO

THE CHURCH OF SÃO FRANCISCO in Salvador, the capital of the Brazilian state of Bahia, beautifully exemplifies both the early globalism and the warped chronology of the Brazilian Baroque. Its eighteenth-century interior is a classic example of the entirely gilt *igreja dourada*, or "golden church," which sings its Gloria Dei in a profusion of swirling columns, irrational volutes, angels, birds, clouds, and other bulging, swelling, inverting, and extroverting folds and protuberances, all in exaggerated sync with the high Jesuit moment of the Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese Baroque. The facade of the affiliated convent is also an exuberant piece of horror vacui, finished in the 1700s but bearing strong traces of Dutch and Flemish Mannerist architecture of the sixteenth century; its cloister is covered in narrative and allegorical *azulejos*. These blue-and-white tiles, imported from Lisbon, combine the Dutch-Flemish, the Moorish, and the Chinese in their style, their content, and their name, which comes from a combination of the Portuguese *azul* (blue) and the Arabic *zellij* or *zuleika* (tile).

The city and state to which this church belongs exemplify the three-way stream between Europe, South America, and Africa that constitutes Brazil, the famously polyglot nation that is currently experiencing an economic boom—witness mining magnate Bernardo Paz's fairyland art park Inhotim—while the rest of us seem to hover perpetually on the edge of another deep recession. The home of the Afro-Brazilian religion *candomblé*, a synthesis of Catholicism and African animism, Salvador was once the center of the Brazilian slave trade. Later it was the home of the French ethnographer Pierre Verger, who traveled between Brazil and Benin to study the reciprocal influence between Africa and South America, and now it is the center of the worldwide efflux of Brazilian popular music, with its African-derived counterrhythms, which have in turn had their effect on modern African music and dance. (And by the way, while only the United States could have a B-movie actor as president, only Brazil could have a Bahian pop music star—Gilberto Gil—as its minister of culture.)

Why, you may ask, do I start an essay on the contemporary Brazilian artist Adriana Varejão, who makes her home in Rio de Janeiro, with a description of a church in Salvador and a disquisition on the hybridity of Brazil? Because some knowledge of both

Adriana Varejão, *Passagem de Macau a Vila Rica* (Passage from Macau to Vila Rica), 1992, oil on canvas, 65 x 76¾".

Varejão's works turn back on themselves in a fundamentally Baroque fashion—often displaying an elaborate ornamentalism foreign to both Northern modernism and Brazilian Concretism.

is indispensable to understanding the lexicon of references, stylistic and iconographic, material and conceptual, that inform Varejão's art, which, like Brazil itself, discombobulates so many of our beloved binaries: local/global, historical/modern, primitivist/historicist, pagan/Christian, Catholic/libertine, black/white, occidental/Oriental, Renaissance/Baroque, depth/surface, structure/ornament, outside/inside, abject/transcendent, rational/irrational, illusion/disillusion, nature/culture, and so on. Varejão's work makes plain the absurdity of such binarisms; it lays bare the parochialism, if not provincialism, of those who assume the Manet-to-Mondrian-to-Pollock trajectory and look to the rationalist clarity of the grid, the puritan whitewash of the white cube, and the medium-specific purity of painting as modernist points of departure. And against the background of Brazil's own modernist traditions, it also offers an alternative to the Constructivist-derived abstraction of Concrete art, to Neo-concretism, and even to the forms of sensual exploration found in the work of figures like Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape, and Hélio Oiticica. What sets Varejão's binary-troubling work apart from all these lineages is largely, in fact, the specific nature of her affiliation with the Brazilian Baroque. If the neo-Baroque, or baroque, is apparent in the work of some Western philosophers, such as Gilles Deleuze; art and literary theorists, such as Mieke Bal; and filmmakers, such as Peter Greenaway and Sally Potter, their claims on it tend to be made from a certain historical or theoretical distance. And although some contemporary artists might approach Varejão's capacity for ecstatic maximalism, it is hard to think of a living artist from the West who is invested in the baroque in the way Varejão is, with a sense of real continuity with a past that is at once local and global.

All this means that Varejão's work can be a provocation to a so-called Western (or rather, in this context, Northern) art historian such as myself, who is used to putting things in a certain sort of order. Let me nevertheless take recourse to a more or less chronological order as I cite a sampling of these works made over the past two decades. *Quadro Ferido* (Wounded Painting) and *Passagem de Macau a Vila Rica* (Passage from Macau to Vila Rica), both 1992, number among her early, chinoiserie-inflected oil paintings. Stained and/or beginning to crack (like the craquelure in old paintings or certain Chinese ceramic glazes), they seem to be injured, to be bleeding, to be turning inside out. Here far-flung histories converge as China meets Brazil, and painting begins to declare its own material linkage to the stories of carnage that it is used to depict, while fragments of the deeply carnal dimension of Catholicism and the ways it is intertwined with Brazil's colonial history begin to emerge.

Also in 1992, Varejão took up the tradition of the azulejo in a number of blue paintings with giant craquelures, such as *Naufrágio da Nau da Cia. das Índias* (East Indies Company Shipwreck). Appearing like collages, though they are technically not, these works are painted to resemble shards of mismatched azulejo tiles, as if glued together in disarray, with fish appearing to swim through colliding fragments of plain, foliate, geometric, dragon-embellished, and cherubic patterning. These paintings manage to evoke, all at once, the destructive history of colonialism, water and the "mechanics of fluids" (as Luce Irigaray might say), Julian Schnabel's broken-plate paintings, and much else besides. They thus combine an eclectic mixture of postmodern moves with more specifically targeted cultural narratives and theoretical constructs. At the same time, they turn back on themselves in a neo-Baroque rather than a modernist fashion: stating their own surface and support by means of a faux-ceramic illusionism, a kaleidoscopic disunity as opposed to the unity of the picture plane, an elaborate ornamentalism versus the anti-ornament stance so dear to both Northern modernism and Brazilian Concretism, not to mention a materiality shared by painting and pottery, rather than specific to one or the other.

Throughout the 1990s, Varejão produced azulejo-style and -themed paintings, combining or interspersing them with the topoi of blood and water, the sea and the flesh—"*entre carnes e mares*," as she recently put it. In 1995, she made a pair of "kitchen tile" paintings (*Azulejaria de cozinha com presuntos* [Kitchen Tiles with Hams] and *Azulejaria de cozinha com caças variadas* [Kitchen Tiles with Varied Game]), which transform the grid and the surface of the picture plane into a scene of carnivorous butchery, with pieces of the human body visible among the "varied game." Thus she combined the infamous Brazilian trope of cannibalistic *anthropofagia* with allusions to the eucharistic consumption of the body of Christ against the "background" of the asepsis of kitchen tiling: the utmost in carnality against the utmost in sanitization. Again, the dislogic of the baroque fragment and the visceral body contaminates the logic of the tiles' clean, cool grid.

Varejão's productions after this moment build on these explorations in surprisingly various ways. Works such as *Laparotomia exploratória III* (Exploratory Laparotomy III), 1996, for instance, dirty the cleanliness of the gridded tiles with broken azulejo pat-

Adriana Varejão, *Naufrágio da Nau da Cia. das Índias* (East Indies Company Shipwreck), 1992, oil and plaster on canvas, 63 x 51⅛".

Left: **Adriana Varejão, *Figura de convite II* (Entrance Figure II), 1998,** oil on canvas, 78¾ x 78¾".

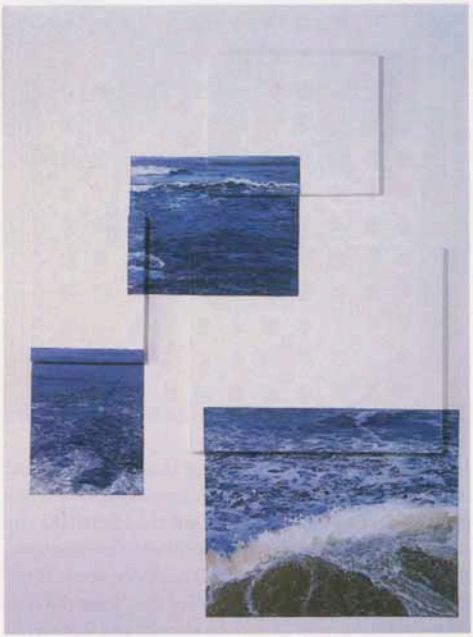
Right: **Adriana Varejão, *Azulejaria de cozinha com caças variadas* (Kitchen Tiles with Varied Game), 1995,** oil on canvas, 55⅛ x 63".

terns in the shape of internal organs, smears of red-paint blood, and misshapen, *informe* bits of the human body tattooed with delftware-like decorative designs: Here, the surface of the painting appears as a kind of fleshly skin. Other works tidy it all up—the 1998 painting *Figura de convite II* (Entrance Figure II), for example, features a life-size female figure (based on a print by the sixteenth-century Flemish artist Theodor de Bry, who made engravings of early European expeditions to South America) who stands within and against a mostly uninterrupted grid, all—except the very bottom strip, which is marbled bloodred—made of the blue and white of the azulejo, though none of it is in fact made of tile but rather of oil paint simulating painted pottery (which in turn sometimes simulates other materials). The woman is tattooed from neck to wrist to toe and holds in her right hand a severed human head. Appearing to stand on a plinth rendered in correct perspective, she re-represents at once the European standard of idealized bodies and gridded spatial representation, in which the surface of the image is imagined to be transparent; the Euro-colonial understanding of the savage, cannibalistic otherness of the South American "Indian"; and the anthropophagic swallowing up and inverting of those ideas into a contrary view of both the image and the human body, each an analogue for the other, each serving as thoroughly carnal surfaces for inscription, its/their unity fragmented into the miniaturized organs, entrails, and limbs that vie with floral and abstract ornaments as units of decoration assigned to individual "tiles." Occasionally these "tiles" interrupt the totality of the allegorical figure to demonstrate that the grid is here a measure of disordering and dispersal as much as of order. Compared with many of the artist's other works, all of this transpires coolly, cleanly, and without mess.

In 1999, Varejão came as close as she ever would to addressing the meaning of the grid in a modernist, white-cube context. Her *Margem* (Edge) of that year is an installation made of eleven differently sized blue-and-white-painted rectangles, this time derived from photographs of the ocean, mismatched to the same number of canvas and wooden rectangles, so that they appear to slide off the picture support onto the wall and vice versa, announcing—and confusing—the relation between the flat superficies of the one and the other, not to mention the white ground shared by each. Blue and white, figure and ground, picture and wall: Each of these binary opposites is interlaced through the overlay of watery rectangles that refuse to stay in place. And the modernist whitewash seems to assert its own derivation in the phobias of Protestant domestic, religious, and aesthetic space: mysophobia (fear of dirt and contamination), iconophobia, chromophobia, erotophobia. Meanwhile, water takes on a mixed valence: It is what washes clean (though here it actually dirties the white wall, with a modern blue that is literally and figuratively "ultramarine"); it is what joins and separates continents; it is what changes shape and defies boundaries and confining edges; it is what pushes beyond the box, beyond the frame. At the same time, the photographic pollutes the painterly, the representational the abstract, and vice versa. What makes a critical difference, in all of this, from the self-referential strategies of both modernist and Concretist traditions is the deliberate confusion of categories (of medium but also of many other things) that it celebrates. That confusion is direct heir to the catholicism (in both senses of the word) of the Baroque.

The frame of reference of Varejão's work does not, however, confine itself to the Brazilian Baroque,

Adriana Varejão, *Laparotomia exploratória III* (Exploratory Laparotomy III), 1996, oil and epoxy paste on canvas, 76¾ x 65".



Above: **Adriana Varejão, *Margem* (Edge) (detail), 1999,** oil on canvas and wood, eleven parts, overall 7' 1⅛" x 17' 6¼".

Right: **Adriana Varejão, *Azulejaria verde em carne viva* (Green Tilework in Live Flesh), 2000,** oil on canvas and polyurethane on aluminum and wooden support, 86⅝ x 114⅛ x 27½".

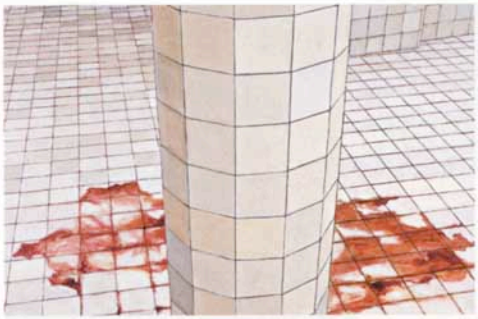
Varejão's reassertion of an expressionist materiality, even a viscerality, is close to embarrassing in its direct appeals to sensation and sensuality.

or even to quotations from the global past of art embraced by her national culture: It bases itself there, but reaches far and wide in the contemporary field as well, encompassing not only Schnabel and Greenaway and others in its lexicon but also Lucio Fontana's slits and Yves Klein's blue, among many other things. Against the grain of much contemporary Brazilian art that continues to deal with the legacy of Conceptualism and the ethos of dematerialization that goes with it, however, Varejão's work asserts a return to iconography that marks a dramatic departure from the sensual strategies of Clark or Pape (with regard to whom a theory of the baroque has, of course, also been invoked). Indeed, Varejão's own reassertion of an expressionist materiality, even a viscerality, is close to embarrassing in its direct appeals to sensation and sensuality—and more than that, to an overt sexuality that brooks no repression.

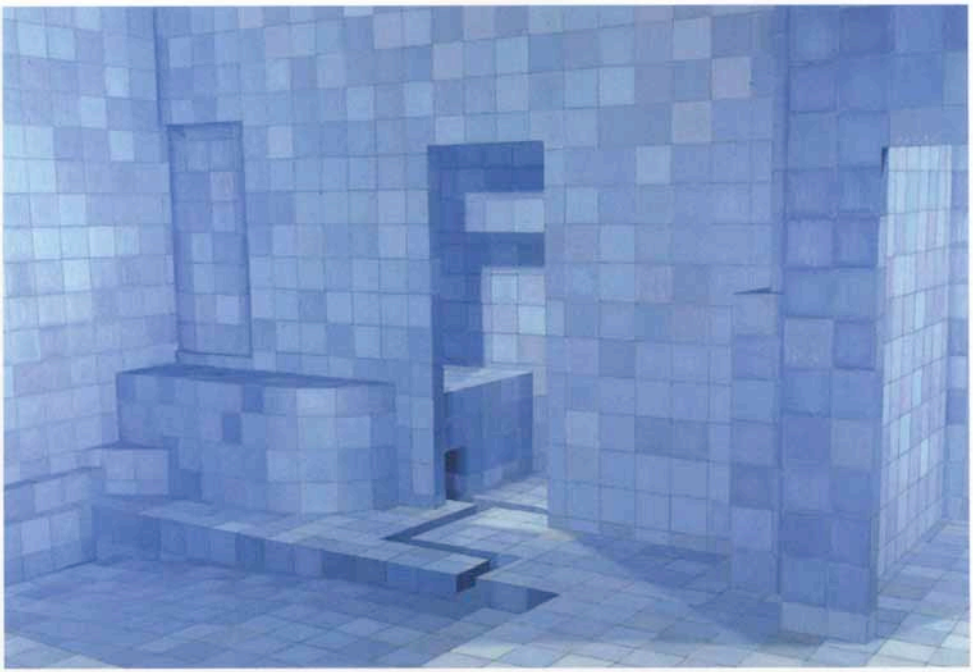
Yet again it is the Baroque that comes to mind when one considers how Varejão's work tends to continually trade places, self-dividing into opposite directions, which themselves never remain binary. From 1999 on, she has made a series of painted gridded-kitchen-tile "*Azulejões*," with or without patterning, that appear to open up and out and spill their guts, thus also literalizing the concept of painting being bodily in a truly carnal sense. In these wall- and floor-mounted works, which provoke a kind of fascinated horror in me (and in several other critics who have written about them), the offal that usually lies *on* the tiled surfaces of butcher shops and slaughterhouses spills forth from inside and behind them, inverting the hard/soft layering of the human body, the depth/surface logic of painting, and the container/contained relations of the butcher's or the food preparer's workspace. But this apparent literalism, by means of which painting becomes sculptural, and vice versa, is in fact a three-dimensional trompe l'oeil whereby hardened coils and swirls of painted polyurethane foam and scabbed-over masses of oil paint *imitate* entrails, as if the special-effects tradition of the historical Baroque were now subject to a kind of polymer logic. (When applied thickly enough, the paint dries into a skin over a soft and still-liquid pigment interior.) The literal and the figurative here constantly analogize each other in a play of factural and iconographic metaphors that keep trading places and multiplying. Amid all of this, there is a troubling beauty in the marbleized reds that erupt out of these deliberately torn, elaborately sculpted paintings, such that I end up wondering whether Varejão means to be critical or celebratory or even both at once. Certainly, I myself feel a sort of shocked revulsion, not only at the unleashing of the abject but also at what appears to be a spectacular sensationalizing of the blood and guts, the sheer violence, that phenomena such as colonization, the actions of cleansing and transcending, and maybe also the sphere of the aesthetic all hide beneath their surfaces. But perhaps I am simply too Protestant a person to give myself up

Above: **View of Rodrigo Cerviño Lopez's Galeria Adriana Varejão, Inhotim, Brumadinho, Brazil, 2008.** Photo: Eduardo Eckenfels.

Below: **Adriana Varejão, *Celacanto provoca maremoto* (Coelacanth Provokes Seaquake), 2004–2008,** oil and plaster on canvas, 184 parts. Installation view, Inhotim, Brumadinho, Brazil, 2008. Photo: Eduardo Eckenfels.



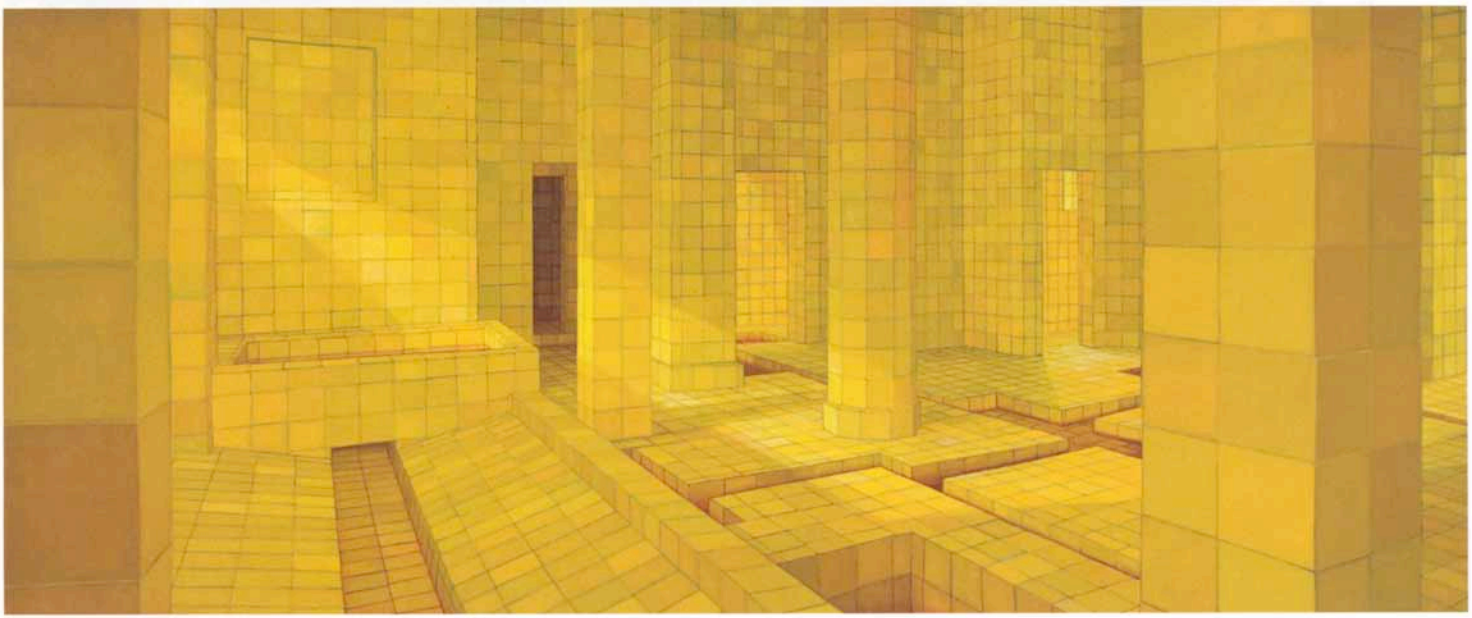
Above: **Adriana Varejão, *O Convidado* (The Guest), 2009,** oil on canvas, 17 ¾ x 27 ½".



Right: **Adriana Varejão, *Blue Sauna*, 2003,** oil on canvas, 76 ¾ x 114 ¼".

Like the Baroque, Varejão's work tends to keep self-dividing in opposite directions, which themselves never remain binary.

Adriana Varejão, *O Iluminado* (The Shining), 2009, oil on canvas, 7' 6 ½" x 18' 4 ½".



to this kind of violent baroquism in uncomplicated pleasure. (It seems worth noting in this context that Varejão's work has great resonance internationally: She has major galleries representing her around the world and may be Brazil's most commercially successful living artist.)

On the other hand, the clean blue-and-white of water emerges more strongly in other work from about 2000 onward, washing the square tile/canvas free of its meat and filth: in Varejão's giant azulejo panels in the form of Hiroshige-like waves, grouped in large installations, such as *Celacanto provoca maremoto* (Coelacanth Provokes Seaquake), 2004–2008—installed in the pavilion dedicated to Varejão at the art-garden estate of Inhotim in Brumadinho—which is like a huge puzzle with all its pieces out of order. These gorgeous swells of blue-and-white sometimes alternate with completely white or off-white panels. Made of oil and plaster on canvas left to dry so as to produce outsize cracks—again the craquelure effect confuses the generative act of creation with that of degeneration, destruction, and entropy—these works unashamedly celebrate the function of decoration. And they are the most vigorously forthright of all of Varejão's works in their playing of the anachronic Baroque *informe* against the modernist/Minimalist formalism of the grid: cracks, waves, curlicues, organic irregularity and curvilinearity playing against the straight-up-and-down arrangement of one square after the other. Their siting in a remarkable pavilion by Rodrigo Cerviño Lopez no doubt inflects the reception of her work as a kind of big-budget baroque expressionism. But at the same time, these azulejo panels seem to respond to the festive delight in organic curvilinearity that marks the garden at Inhotim, in which there is also little trace of what one might call the decorophobia familiar from the modernist tradition.

Working sometimes with and sometimes against these giant waves of blue is the series "*Saunas e banhos*" (Saunas and Baths), 2001–, comprising pencil and watercolor drawings and oil paintings that depict spookily empty tiled bathhouse spaces whose grids waver and whirlpool, or multiply and vanish into impossible perspectival systems on the basis of digitally manipulated images. With the exception of a painting in which red paint stains the floor, masquerading as blood, and the drawings in which outsize strands of hair appear to be marring a slide or a scanned image, these works all fall on the side of sanitization, at least apparently. The oil or watercolor that wavers the grid and transforms the straight line into the curve, the swirl, and the spiral appears serene. But the titles of these images introduce narrative unease into spaces that can on prolonged viewing become increasingly queasy in their perspectival effects: *O Anfitrião* (The Host), *O Convidado* (The Guest), and *O Iluminado* (The Shining), all 2009—the last of which describes an unusually yellow rather than blue or white space and suggests the more contemporary, filmic aspect of Varejão's eclectic lexicon of reference points as well. In hinting at violence that has occurred offscreen or earlier in time, or in foreshadowing violence to come, it is the vanishing points of these scenes—where disappearance, the unseen, and the invisible literally run up against the regime of the image—that induce dismay. They are thus the inverse of the sculptural spilling-forward into the physical space of the viewer in the "*Azulejões*," and rather than suggesting the carnal run amok, they imply that the systems for cleansing and containing, ordering and depicting, have themselves gone mad. Here the baroque is the madness of structure itself, structure that morphs into its other, rather than simply standing as its opposite. And the viewer is situated as the complicit voyeur, both inside and outside the image—this is explicit in the title of one other such painting, *O Voyeur* (The Voyeur), 2009, which hints as well at Sadean and Pasoliniesque theaters of cruelty.

View of "Adriana Varejão," 2011. Victoria Miro Gallery, London. Foreground: *Plate with Clams*, 2011.

Varejão's most recent works suggest yet further expeditions into new territory. In 2010 she made an erotic video titled *Pisinoe*, after a siren of the sea, which combines all her themes in a neo-Surrealist fashion. The work is a good example of a woman owning her sexuality in her art, rather than obligingly submitting herself to the phallogocentric Lacanian-Freudian regime. And most recently she has departed from the realm of the azulejo and the rich array of permutations it has permitted her thus far. In a show in September at Victoria Miro Gallery in London she showed giant, bowl-shaped sculpture-paintings (made of oil on fiberglass and resin) out of whose painted concavities erupt—in an exaggeration of the nineteenth-century mannerist ceramics known as palissy ware—clams and other seafood, figs and other fruit, while painted sea nymphs and deities such as Ondine and Yemanja sport in the water and open their bodies to deliver themselves of infants. The violence of carnality is here converted into the generativity of the elements, of the body, of nature, and of culture, and, like *Pisinoe*, seems overtly feminine/feminist in its thematics. There is a lot I like about this way of asserting sexual difference while celebrating the oceanic leveling of global culture, but at the same time, the artist's new works are so exhibitionist and so unfettered in their burgeoning and scrambling of references that I cannot help asking: Are they *too* baroque? It is a question I cannot dispel when thinking about Varejão's oeuvre. But I will have to let the reader and the viewer decide. I myself cannot. □

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