

ArtNexus
June 2005
No. 57 Volume 3
Pp. 104-105

Adriana Varejão
Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art
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The Parisian public had not had a chance to see the work of Brazilian artist Adriana Varejão (Rio, 1964) since her first show at Ghislaine Hussenot gallery, back in 1997. With "Chamber of Echoes" (a large selection of paintings, installations, and photographs,) the Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art¹ opens its spaces to an artist who was faced with a double challenge: to respond to the transparent architecture (glass façade) designed by Jean Nouvel in 1994, establishing a dialog on the basis of her own constructions / destructions, and to invite her viewers to follow a path through the twenty-some pieces on exhibit, three of them created specifically for this site. The show's museography hinged on two complementary concepts: the concept of history and anthropology, through the "Ruins" that, according to Varejão, "serve as a metaphor for an unfinished time (...) and represent the imminent time of the decomposition of flesh"; and the concept behind her "Saunas," paintings of empty spaces, "secret chambers" where both the limited interiority of architecture and the meaning of painting are explored.

Observing from outside that impressive white and blue "wall of water", shaken by waves, volutes, and arabesques, a kind of theatricalized tsunami, one is confronted with the artist's first ambiguity: that of the illusion generated by oppositions or contrasts, and fueled by the influence of the baroque art with which the artist maintains an almost fleshly relationship. Her *Celacanto provoca maremoto* is a natural mural "landscape" evoking both the circumvolutions and sensuality of the Baroque as in the furious waves of Hokusai. The work has a peculiar crackle-glaze texture, achieved by the disintegration and uprising of matter.

Across from it, at a distance of some meters, another compact and three-dimensional wall formed by false painted tiles (*Linda do Rosario*, 2004), stages a ruin that reveals its purple and scarlet entrails, mixed blood, viscera, and bone. With these two works, which establish an antagonistic but masterfully dialectic dialog, we enter without preamble into the foundations of memory in Adriana Varejão's art. It is a memory of art and of the history of the past, but also a memory of everyday life, from the destruction of old buildings in Rio to the butcher shop window displays in Caruaru (Pernambuco). With

Swimming Pool, we enter into a subtle interplay of transparencies and iridescent effects; water, an inconstant element, is the axis of her artistic universe and constitutes the illusory essence of that dialog of opposites that is so dear to her, a veritable metaphor for intemporality: inside/out; smooth/in relief; construction/ deconstruction; fragment/ totality; geometry/curve..., all of them oppositions that support the issue of permanence and disappearance, present throughout Varejão's oeuvre and at bottom is nothing less than the issue of life and death in reference to Brazilian culture, to the history of Latin America or to contemporary Brazil.

Also on the ground floor, three canvases and one relief *Linda da Lapa* comprised of three unified sections, continues with the anthropophagous discourse initiated at the show's entrance. Her *azulejos* (painted tiles) transport and drive *mestizo* images taken from a variety of histories, aesthetic sources, and places: reproductions of the "courtesy figures" that adorn the panels of *azulejos* in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Portuguese palaces, convents, and gardens, which here are not invitations to enter the Garden of Eden but to discover the dark, dramatic, bloody side of the conquest of the Americas. They incorporate images of cannibalism and decapitation, reproduced following Théodore de Bry's engravings in his book *América*, as well as drawings, of body fragments, limbs, torsos, organs, viscera, and like on the *azulejos*, alternating with the floral decorations of traditional Portuguese tiles *Figura de convite*, 1997 and *Figura de convite III*. In *Propuesta para una catequesis*, 1993, a scene of cannibalism and dismemberment sits next to the image of an Indian Christ being apprehended by other indigenous characters, a scene that constitutes, for Adriana Varejão, an "inverted catechism." The artist confronts the times and restitutes, in their lacerations and torn parts, History's still-fresh stigmas and wounds. Some fragments have been freshly glued, as if the wall, its life having run its course, preserved the memory of past atrocities and offered testimony of their permanence.

Contingente, 1999-2000, is a photograph depicting an open hand as a cut is inflicted on it, a thin red filament that traverses the space from side to side. With *Mapa de Lopo Homen II*, a section of the globe - from an old Portuguese cartography- is covered with scars and "wounded" by a central cut resembling a woman's open sexual organs, sewn after the excision. The Earth appears partially splattered with blood, due to the presence of small red stains.

A group of seven large-format pieces presents the section of more "abstract" works. In her interview², Adriana Varejão explains: "In the 'Saunas' series, my painting leaves the conceptual field formed by historical iconographic references and moves to the field of the sensible. These environments are intemporal (...) [The pieces] work on subjects that are inherent to painting, such as color, composition, perspective, etc". Facing Varejão's

trptych *Pared con incisiones en la Fontana* is a piece titled *Azulejería blanca en carne viva* - property of the Cartier Foundation- , which features a huge visceral crack against a white tile background, a lacerated and violent opening that is almost overwhelming. In this hail, next to the triptych and this large-format piece where the artist channels both Soutine and Fontana, Bacon, and Rembrandt, a more serene group induces a certain meditative state; we can then penetrate those "chambers of echoes," abandoned sites that are open and closed at the same time, where the outside space resonates inside (or the other way around,) where the confrontation of emptiness and fullness takes place. In her oil-on-canvas pieces *Green sauna*, 2003, *Lo obsceno*, 2004, *Lo obsesivo*, 2004, and *Lo seductor*, 2004, the gaze infiltrates what seems a series of aseptic labyrinths inspired on the *hammams* (Turkish bath establishments,) pools, hospitals, or abattoirs. Not far from these walls of smooth, uniform tiles, where humanity is absent, there is also the live flesh and running blood, as we are reminded by that that small white canvas where, at the foot of a pillar, blood bursts forth, soiling that purity, leaving a permanent and indelible stain on history, on the builders of churches and their defenders (*The Guest*, 2004).

Margem (1999), a series of paintings on canvas and wood, opens a new field of vision towards infinity, embracing the rhythm of the sea and the movements of a wave as it clashes on rocks or kisses the coast, continuity amidst discontinuity, a universe where borders are lost (the image moves from wood to canvas as support,) where even pictorial fragments are nothing more than echoes of an ephemeral moment. In the garden, a photographic print on cloth, *Contienda de guerreros desnudos - Redux* (2005) recovers the image of an old engraving with flowers and foliage, and reproduces it in two superimposed prints, a light, shining and luminous one under a dark one, mixing human silhouettes and bodies.

Adriana Varejão's exhibition is marked by a great cohesiveness. Her unique, loaded work gives a variety of meanings to art and history, with conceptual and aesthetic conviction. Amidst the drama and the pleasure of the senses, Varejão's work inhabits that impersonal space, where one could hear children yelling and laughing. The artist's assistant directs an *azulejo* workshop for children. The dialog of present and past crystallizes in that meeting of generations, of origins, of ages, in a dialog of times and techniques that perpetuates, above all else, a "cannibalism" that is beneficial to ideas, cultures, and images.

NOTES

1. As part of the official event "Brazil, Brazils," organized in France for the France-Brazil year.
2. Catalog, Adriana Varejão, Chamber of Echoes, Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art, Actes Sud Editions, Cartier Foundation, Paris, 2005.

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