

# THE ARTS & THE INFORMATION DAILY

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A new exhibition in Oxford celebrates the vibrant, arresting best of Brazilian contemporary art. Jay Merrick saw the show in its native São Paulo

## Experiments in modern living

Oxford has many ghosts, but none like *A Negra*, who is poised in all her dark potency to hold court among those sandstone hinges of erudition. She has no face and therefore symbolises the largely invisible crucible of modern Brazilian art, which, in the next year, is the subject of four major exhibitions in Britain.

*A Negra* is an affront to her cultural status and when she was first wheeled into São Paulo's most densely corporate street, the Avenida Paulista, she invoked a shade from the centuries-old soul cages of the Bahian slave coast.

Created by Carmela Gross, *A Negra* is physically one of the simplest art forms on display in the Experiment *Experiencia* exhibition at Oxford's Museum of Modern Art, which, for the first time, presents an outbreak of considerable Brazilian talents in Britain. Like *La Negra*, most of the works have roots that lie in a mulch of Sixties polemic directed against the joint dictatorships of past governments and academic art-appreciation.

The irony is that the supporting discourse, notably by Helio Oiticica, remains impenetrable to the poor and to non-intellectuals, the very people for whom he developed "experiments with experiments" and "penetrable art" – terms that might be more familiar to those who live in the luxurious gated *edificios* of São Paulo's Jardins and Morumbi enclaves.

Art and culture in Brazil remain pregnant issues. In São Paulo, for example, two of the three main art galleries are in places that discourage visits by the less informed and well-to-do. And last year's ambitious celebration of Brazil's cultural history, the brilliantly mounted Brazil 4500 Rediscovery exhibition, and its Brazil Connects offshoot, has had relatively little government support; the ready, \$20m in cash, came from industry.

The artworks at Moma – whoever they're for, or against – are often brilliant sallies to the limits of logical perception. Yet they can be comprehended in either a naive or an informed way. Typically, one is looking at relatively simple arrangements of sculpture or objects. But any consideration of them triggers an immediate fracturing of planes and spaces, or bizarrely comic re-recognitions of simple objects; the mock of the new.

Of all the artists on show, the late Sergio Camargo's work is probably the best-known outside Brazil – no doubt

because his perfectly sculpted forms have an obvious and seductive beauty. To touch them is to experience refined pleasure, and regret: the fingertip craves the subtle movements in the stone, the clefts and angles with their utterly smooth surfaces, and is loath to part from them. The eye roams over them with equal hunger, trying to clarify the ambiguities and inferences of their trajectories.

Camargo's ambiguities – like those of Lucio Fontana, with whom he studied – are physical and depend on light and shadow. Some of his sculptures, *No 413* for example, invoke architectural forms: the fractured facade of a block of flats for common folk by Le Corbusier via Daniel Libeskind. His wall-hung pieces might almost be petrified bacilli, crystalline whirlpools, outbreaks of snow-white pyrites or repeated patterns that recall Escher. But they are all, he said, "peculiar entities, with their pertinence belonging to them only". Plato lives, and he's got shares in Carrara marble.

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Camargo's sole offering at Oxford is *No 299*, a large sculpture in which two solid tubes of marble pierce a flat plane that stands well clear of the wall, a high-impact piece whose clarity might have benefited from the contrast of, say, one of his exquisitely grooved, torsional sculptures in black Belgian stone.

Helio Oiticica – who died in 1980 – may have been besotted with Rio Carnival's Mangueira Samba Club and the permanent shanty-town expediency of the *favela*, but there is nothing febrile about his work. His piece at Moma is approachable on all sides, a linked series of triangular planes whose apparent precision offers no sense of narrative or typology.

And this "vivencia" – the removal of any sense of the artist, in favour of unremarkable objects and the accidental encounter – is at the heart of Oiticica's production, some of which appeared at the Whitechapel Experience exhibition in 1969, organised by Guy Brett, a champion

of the Brazilian avant-garde. His work is part of an anthropological aesthetic that developed in response to the repressive horrors of Brazil's *Medici* government in the late Sixties; art, he said, should reflect the conditions of its experience; it must involve the spectator's physical subjectivity and the interaction with social space. Traditional conditions of encounter had to be reinvented.

In a Brazil condemned to modernity, as the commentator Mario Pedrosa puts it, Oiticica's idea was to erase art that induced controlled contemplation. His own path to a condition of "concrete delirium" involved closely argued polemic and sensual dissolution through drugs, archaic rituals and Zen. The question about the strange mobile-like object on display at Moma is this: though partly born of the sodden *cabana* of the *favela*, are its geometries universally provocative?

Not everything on show asks this question so gravely. Waltercio Caldas' installation, for example, is a bit of a scream. Picture a table tennis table set vertically on its long edge. A pace or two closer to the spectator and hanging in space, the net, horizontal across the face of the raised table; then comes the ball, a bit further back, the bat; and finally, a pair of jet-black dark glasses. Caldas' conceit is simple and effective: here is an artwork that allows the eye to move in one direction only – forward, through the bits and bobs; not much point in the return journey. And the title of the piece? *Ping-Ping*, of course.

Iole de Freitas' large, milky opaque curved piece is only one component of her stunning installation at the Centro de Arte Helio Oiticica in Rio last year. In Britain, only the multi-faceted designer Thomas Heatherwick might have dreamed of this sinuously elegant flight of continuous form in, out and through the various walls and floors of the building. At Oxford, space permits only a fragment of this wonderful three-dimensional work, which so gracefully ruptured assumptions about time and place.

That sense of rupture is common to the work of all 18 artists on show in Oxford. They include pieces by Oiticica's crucial co-conspirator Lygia Clark, Tunga, Ernesto Neto and José Damasceno. The palette of expression, like the extraordinary individual range of Carmela Gross, carries no general hallmark; the vibe is anything from baroque to minimalist.

Or both. *A Negra*'s spooky chiffon



'A Negra' (1998) by Carmela Gross, one of the 18 Brazilian artists featured at Moma. Beatriz Albuquerque

awaits, an eerie doppelgänger of one of Brazil's seminal pieces of shock-tactic modernism, Tarsila do Amaral's 1923 *A negra*. As does the ghost of an artist whose work will not, alas, be on show. The objects created by Artur Bispo de Rosario, a mental patient who died more than a

decade ago, are dazzling in concept and detail. His minutely detailed capes, shrouds and framed collections of random objects reflected an impatience for Heaven. It was the work of a brilliantly touched Tut who wanted to take everything with him in tapestries of detritus.

In Brazil, to pursue art is indeed to court a creative form of paranoia. The results, though, are quite gripping.

*Experiment Experiencia: Art in Brazil 1958-2000, at the Oxford Moma from Sunday to 21 October*