



# Pleasure before politics

A survey of Brazilian art is an uplifting swirl of groovy visions but lacks historical bite

## ART

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FLYING down to Rio, to the lilting sounds of bossa nova – that was the best of the pleasures in *Century City*, the recent exhibition at Tate Modern. In the middle of that congested megalopolis of a show – nine cities representing 10 decades of art: literally thousands of works to negotiate – the Brazilian galleries transported you directly to a suave and peaceful place. João Gilberto whispered his way through 'The Girl from Ipanema'. Abstract paintings breezed from the walls like bright flags. The rooms resembled nothing so much as a purling white shore, strewn with curvilinear sculptures that seemed to echo Rio's bay-line waves.

This was the Brazil of the late Fifties, a time of optimism and peak modernisation. Everything was new – cinema novo, bossa nova, neo concretism in the visual arts. Brasília was about to be built. The President, with his five-year 'Energy and Transport' plans, was even known as Bossa Nova. The country was seeing early European abstraction for the first time, as Malevich, Mondrian, Albers and the Bauhaus school were shown at the São Paulo biennials. But what Brazilian artists made of this geometric rationalism was as sensuous as the music of Gilberto – constructions that floated like birds in the air, paintings that prefigured the dancing rhythms of Op-Art. After *Century City* one longed to see more of this work, so little shown in Britain – and to discover just what happened next.

Which is precisely what the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford promises with *Experiment Experiência*, its anthology of Brazilian art

from 1958 to the present day. This is an enormous undertaking. In Britain, it would involve sprinting from pop to minimalism, conceptualism to Britart and beyond, via abstraction, neo-expressionism, the New Sculpture and so forth, all in the space of a single exhibition. Brazilian art may not be quite as various, but it still encompasses all the usual movements and media, plus a few of its own, such as curtains of ripening Brazilian bananas. It's a teeming experience, imperishably groovy and full of scintillating visions. But what it lacks is the very thing in which *Century City* excelled – a full-on sense of historical context.

The '50ers are all present and correct. Here are Hélio Oiticica's paintings in his favourite colours of yellow, red and orange on brilliant white – the jostling squares, tilting at each other in playful homage to Malevich; the 3-D constructions suspended from the ceiling, folded like kites or origami doves. Here are Lygia Clark's geometric reliefs – *Egg* a circle with a tiny aperture in its elegant circumference – and one of the brass sculptures that made her international reputation. You are supposed to pick it up, this contraption of hinged semi-circles, so that it suddenly unfolds, reforming itself spontaneously in your hands. But perhaps it is now too valuable a collector's item, for Moma has neglected to mention these DIY instructions.

Sergio Camara studied with Lucio Fontana, and one sees it in his fabulously spacey constructions – planes pierced with pure white cylinders which choreograph light and shadow in ever-shifting patterns. Lygia Pape went further, devising full-length geometric ballets. But she also studied architecture –

and then miniaturised its idioms in pop-up paper models: baroque cutlicues, modernist Möbius strips, a Greek temple of pleated card. Best of all is *Oasis*, a solitary green cube on a sheet of fine sandpaper.

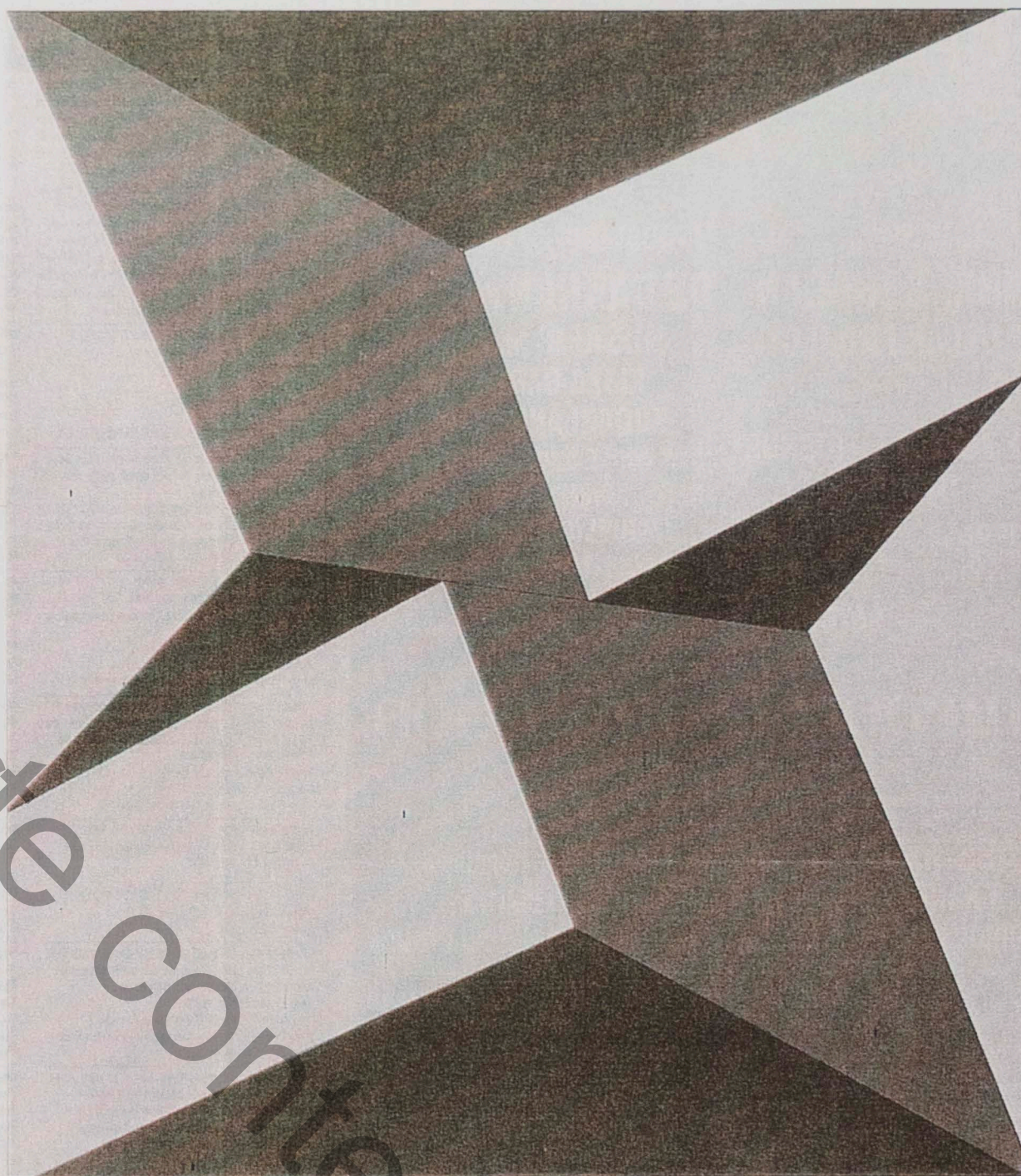
It looks like child's play – and that, in a sense, is exactly what Pape aimed for: an ideal simplicity, albeit achieved through immense sophistication. The spirit of the age was fun-loving, innocent, democratic, Utopian. Photos of these artists in the Sixties show them larking about at the seaside in their mirrored sun-specs and improvising samba costumes out of recycled plastic. Clark began to create 'therapeutic' toys – such as the giant woollen birth canal through which the public crawled. Oiticica went to New York and made fantastical happenings to a soundtrack of Hendrix and The Rolling Stones.

Unfortunately, the only record of these works here is a reel of antique films. Several other galleries – but not Moma – have reconstructed *Eden*, Oiticica's most famous installation in which visitors were invited to walk barefoot through a paradise of sea and sand, complete with its poignant *favela* of rudimentary tents. Nor, indeed, would one realise from this exhibition that Brazil had suffered 20 years of military dictatorship, ruinous inflation, extreme poverty and human-rights abuse.

There is nothing, for example, by Arthur Barrio, whose *trouxas* – 'bundles of clothes' – were made during the worst years of repression, memorialising the cadavers abandoned on the streets. There is no mention of Cildo Meireles's habit of stamping anti-government slogans on banknotes before returning them to circulation, or of his punning money stacks: *Title: 100 one-cruzeiro notes; Price: 2,000 cruzeiros* – what price either art or cash?

This is not just a side-stepping of political history, it is a distortion of the very nar-

Clockwise from right: Planes on modulated surface No. 5 by Lygia Clark (1957). Courtesy Collection of Adolpho Leirner, São Paulo; Photograph by Fernando Chaves; Part of Lygia Pape's *Book of Architecture* (12 pieces) 1959/60 Collection of the artist/ Photograph by Paula Pape; *The Negress* by Carmela Gross (1998).



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rative of Brazilian art. Very little of the work here was made between 1970 and 1985 – hardly a small gap. Moreover, when we come back in again with Jac Leirner's accordion pleat of banknotes from 1987, the allusion to Meireles, not to mention economic history, is altogether lost.

Still, most of the contemporary art can speak for itself. One does not need to know much about Brazil's slave-trading past to perceive the elegiac sorrow in

Carmela Gross's work. A vast figure, not literally present, but represented by a towering dress of black veils, has been dragged into the museum on castors. A *Negra*, she is called, this invisible woman, paraded on her trolley and blacked out beneath her own funereal shroud.

José Damasceno's empty black suit floats horizontally in its glass vitrine. Fine white fibres stream from the collar, cuffs and ankles like currents of electricity or rays of light. Perhaps he is a man

of straw, silently exploding; or the ghost of his former self, hovering midway between earth and the afterlife. The title gives little away – *The Next Omen* (*Experiment on the visibility of dynamic substance*). But it does evoke something of Damasceno's spectacular vision of energy regenerating even as it dies.

There is something uplifting, too, in Nuno Ramos's block of white marble apparently melting into pools on the floor – glittering liquid

out of obdurate stone. And in Lygia Pape's new curtain of fruit, some of it rotting and falling, some of it ripening and rising: edible emblems of nature's continuous cycle of renewal.

That sense of continuity runs right through this show, in the perennial give and take between Brazilian artists. Damasceno was born in 1968 but clearly connects with Lygia Pape, now in her seventies. Leirner looks back to Meireles; Ernesto Neto's soft muslin forms, heavy with spices, recall Lygia Clark's sensuous, therapeutic sculptures from four decades back. So strong is this impression of artistic community, of generosity with ideas, one feels Hélio Oiticica would be proud to see the work of Iole de Freitas, made 20 years after his premature death. De Freitas was a dancer; now she makes geometric sculptures, vast arcs of steel and glass that curve through the air in sinuous flight. How lightly she expands and reprises Oiticica's little birds, sending them skywards – the new wings of the dove.