



Brave new world

Brazil's artists aren't afraid to take on big subjects like sex, death and decay. But they do so with a boldness and playfulness that is all their own, says **Adrian Searle**

Brazilian art of the past half century has been a strange hybrid of European and American imports - from constructivism to neo-plasticism, conceptualism, minimalism and post-minimalism, to happenings, fluxus, and performance. Yet there are some considerable individual talents, and an undefinable yet palpable spirit. You might say that Brazilian art looks like modern art everywhere, a lingua franca with a local spin. But this wouldn't be quite right. Art in Brazil has done more than digest and regurgitate. If one can make generalisations about a nation's art, what one can say about Brazilian art is that it has been an art of synthesis, of transformation, transposition and generosity. And an art too, with spirit.

Amid Late Modern's recent exhibition Century City, the section devoted to Rio de Janeiro made one forget the confusions elsewhere. Apart from anything else, it looked beautiful, and delivered rather than merely explained. The Rio section focused on the art of the city between 1950 and 1964. Experiment *Experiencia*, which has just opened at Oxford's Museum of Modern Art, brings us up to date on Brazilian art, from 1958 to the present.

There is a detectable current running from the Max Bill-influenced geometric constructions of Helio Oiticica in the 1950s, right through to Tunga's agglomerations of glass laboratory-ware and iron filings, dyed sea-sponges, billiard-balls and felt; to Lygia Clark's "therapeutic" toys to the squidgy, oddball forms of Ernesto Neto's recent work. I can only describe it as a kind of openness, entertaining the possibility of a poetic, shared language, rather than the private exploration or expression of the self. If Brazilian art is multi-

formed and hybrid as much as it can be rigorous and severe, it never loses its sense of life or purpose. Geometry and the interactions of colour provide one possible solution; tactility and physical interaction another. The displacement of the familiar, optical games and mental booby traps, the poetry of ordinary things, are other ways in which artists ensnare us.

There is a man. But he is not a man, only an empty suit. He is elevated, floating. I think, briefly, of Damien Hirst's stuffed shark, cruising its chemical tank. This man is floating in the centre of an empty white diorama, beyond a plate glass window. Maybe he's dreaming, or hovering between life and death. He's in a meditative, vegetative state. I can see energies flowing through him - the invisible wiring of the earth's magnetic field, the life force - or superstrings of particles. Or it could just be New Age spaghetti, a lot of old rope coursing through his empty suit. It splays from his collar, pours from his cuffs, shoots from his trouser legs. It holds him aloft, strung out between the walls. The stuff that comes out of his arms slithers to the floor, where it coils in a spreading tangle.

This is called, portentously, *The Next Omen* (Experiment on the Visibility of a Dynamic Substance), as though that explained everything. What a bizarre, impure, peculiar thing Jose Damasceno's works. Cut

The great white form hangs on the wall like a giant pillow or a fattened white calf, oregano garlanding the bulbous shape

off from us like that, behind glass, it is more an image or a diagram than an object. The string is no more laughable than a painted halo, an aura, or vectors scrawled on a lecturer's blackboard. It illustrates the unseen. It is a bit unnerving.

Damasceno is in his early 30s. Near his work sits a grid-like arrangement of fresh apples on the floor. A couple of the rows of apples have been replaced by mounds of black hair. On the apples rests a big bunch of bananas. There's a banana dangling over it all, as if to make us think the fruit's still falling, while a couple of strings of threaded-up apples climb upward from the floor, like a fruitarian's model of Brancusi's Endless Column. Lygia Pape's *Curtain of Apples*, a remade 1996 work by a 70-year-old veteran of the Neo-Frente and Neo-Concrete groups, to which the better-known Lygia Clark and Helio Oiticica also belonged in the 1950s and 60s, is both memento mori and a kind of Eden, a cycle of fertility, plenty and decay. Hair, of course, keeps growing, even when you're dead.

It may be significant that Pape used to teach semiotics. Semiotics teases out the subtle, unfixed relationships between things and the way we describe them. Over time, as the fruit rots, our relationship to this work will change, as will our reading of it. This will also affect how we see the other works in the room, and our relationships to them.

This largest gallery at Moma is terrific, if a little overcrowded. Ernesto Neto's biomorphic white form hangs on the wall like a giant pillow, or a fattened white calf with pointy limbs, a cloth tube stuffed with oregano garlanding the bulbous shape. Nearby stands a black, conical sculpture by Carmela Gross, a cypher for a widow, a "negress" as an empty silhouette, reduced to nothing, but a



mound-like tulle veil. She's not there, like a hole in space. I think this is meant to say something about Brazil's descendants of African slavery, but it is a subtle, sorrowful work, less a complaint than a gesture touching absence.

And here is the Vaseline, creeping over the floor. A veined, white marble slab stands in the puddle,

which has overflowed a trough running along the top of Nuno Ramos's sculpture and run down the sides. The goo is still spreading. Is this simply a conjunction between two states of matter, or is there something more furtive in the relationship between the cold marmoreal block and the slithery Vaseline? I'm enjoying myself, without a doubt, even if all this

stuff is about sex, death, decay and ethereal forces. Standing beneath Iole de Freitas's curving translucent canopies, which are and torque across the end of the room. No coincidence: the artist trained as a dancer.

I could go and play an imaginary game of solitary ping-pong with Waltercio Caldas's phenomenological table-tennis game, or get down on a

bed of straw and hitch up the black curtain behind my head in Antonio Manuel's 1969 "I'm crazy for you" silhouette of the South American continent. In the same space are two films from the period, devoted to Lygia Clark and Lygia Pape, playing on different TV monitors. Their sounds collide. There's some hippie-ish music



Local spirit... clockwise from far left, works by Jose Damasceno, Antonio Manuel, Carmela Gross and Tunga

on the Pape film, and Clark is playing with a plastic bag full of air and a stone. She smiles inscrutably as she moves her hands. Clark described herself as a therapist rather than an artist, and in the movie she's willing me into her world. Both artists had a great feel for materials and objects. One of Pape's little models made from paper and small objects is a piece of rust-coloured sandpaper with a small, green wooden cube set on it. Its called Oasis, and it is a perfect little gesture.

Sometimes it is enough to know that an artist's cosmology of fantasies, fictions and symbols exists. At a certain point, you have to go your own way with it. Oiticica, Pape and Clark all involved themselves at a certain point in small acts, to keep the imagination and a sense of intimacy between the maker and the audience alive. In a way, their later work seemed to replace one kind of utopian dream - that of rationality, purity and a belief in a kind of mass international modernism - for another, something much more local, shared and communal. Only the arts are capable of keeping such ideals alive, without them turning into a kind of fanaticism. This singular relationship, of speaking one-to-one, is a bulwark, among several other things, against mediocrity. It is an affecting, direct but deceptive tone of voice.

These artists never forgot the importance of the singular relationship the spectator has with the art work (like the reader's relationship with the poem or novel, the listener's with the piece of music). This attention to the singular and the intimate strikes me as important, and something we can be apt to forget. There's a difference between magic and spectacle, something the artists here seem to have remembered, or never to have lost.

Experiment *Experiencia* is at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, until October 21. Details: 01865 727233 or www.moma.org.uk

Show me the monkey

John Patterson checks out *Planet of the Apes* in his weekly look at US films

Tim Burton's likably preposterous new movie made \$69.6m this weekend, and broke a bunch of those boring box-office records that so excite the studio execs. The result will probably be the greenlighting of even more remakes, since it seems to prove once and for all - or at least till next week's takings are counted - that monkeying around with the classics will drive huge audiences ape.

Planet of the Apes is the kind of retreat whose makers, during pre-production, solicit the opinions of diehard fans ("classic Apes" fans are a less common, less virulent strain than "classic Trek" aficionados) lest the makers go too far and betray the allegedly high intentions of the original. The result of the screenwriters' geeky piety in the face of the 1967 Charlton Heston original is a mildly calculating movie that strays far enough from the first version to attract new ticket-buyers, yet remains close enough to it to appease the more rabid Ape-ists.

The problem is that, after the original, four sequels and two TV movies, we're already overly familiar with the upside-down universe of Pierre Boulle's novel *Monkey Planet* and Rod Serling's script. To shake things up, Burton has given us a new surprise ending, and he's brought his undoubted talent for production design to bear on the material: it's extremely doubtful that 21st-century moviegoers would sit still for the rickety sets and silly monkey suits of the original, no matter how many intriguing ideas were lodged in the script. Burton's prosthetics are a good deal more expressive - we get opposable foot-thumbs and everything - as are his performers. Mark Wahlberg is a more subtle actor than Heston (but then, so's Roberto Benigni).

As usual with Burton, the script rather unwieldy, so one takes pleasure in the smaller details: monk having "bad hair days", wearing fa teeth and wigs and using deodorant or teenage apes in leather jack drinking beer. The problem is that the director seems miscast, just David Lynch was on Dune, and trademark virtues are subdued by facts and logistics. Though Burton swings smartly enough from tree to tree, you may find yourself wishing he'd just made his own version of *Curious George* instead.



Great ape... Helena Bonham Carter