

INTERVIEW

Catarina de Araújo interviews Jonathas de Andrade

Jonathas de Andrade is a contemporary artist working in installation, photography, and video. His work embraces elements of regional specificity while invoking universal themes associated with memory, place, and the human condition. *Jonathas de Andrade: One to One* is on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago April 13 - August 25, 2019. The following interview was conducted via e-mail and audio exchange and translated from the original Portuguese by Catarina de Araújo.

Q: Because your work is so connected to your place of birth in Northeastern Brazil, could you speak about your relationship to the region—its people, history, and landscape? More importantly, what has been the impact of these early experiences in Brazil on your work today?

I was actually born in Maceio, Alagoas, but I have been living in Recife for fifteen years. This is the place I was able to initiate my artistic career, a place that I chose to live in and have a house, a place that I love and care for. But growing up in Maceio, I think I was exposed to the complexities of Northeastern Brazilian culture: the sugar cane culture, the plantations, the elites, the poor, the class conflicts. All of these factors were conditions that I observed and felt during childhood, and that have greatly impacted me, along with all the nuances that come along with this power struggle. So, you know... as seen in projects such as *Museu do Homem do Nordeste* (Museum of the Man of the Northeast), *O Peixe* (The Fish)... the reflections of eroticism and masculinity are questions and interests that have challenged me since I was young, growing up in Maceio. [As for] Recife, I arrived in my early twenties to attend communications college after attending law school in the south, which I never finished, but I ended up immersing myself in video, cinema, and photography. All of this is a part of my journey of mixing interests with concepts and angles.

Q: This is a personal question for me because as a Recife native myself, I am wondering how you were able to distinguish yourself artistically in a city so attached to both *modismos* (trends) and tradition. How did you go beyond the visual norm of a region that, I dare to say, is still very much Modern, grounded in cubism, expressionism, and surrealism? Also, since your work falls so evidently outside that category, can you comment on your understanding of the visual arts scene in Recife, as it may very well diverge from my view?

To be honest, because I am not "Recife native," I think that I, in some ways, feed on this scene and the complexities and contrasts that the city brings. But I go beyond, crossing the line of thinking about identity and so forth because, to be honest, I am more interested in universal questions. I am interested in the subtlety of power and the perversions of power relationships that are acclimated into society, day-to-day. I am also interested in the inherent exchange present in power-relationships, of a hierarchy, but also through the role that eroticism plays and through what is unspoken. This is very common in Brazilian society, especially when we talk about the Northeast. So I think my work may have a Modern background, but my goal is to reach these other topics, to reach beyond.

Q: On a similar note, how do you think your work is accepted and viewed in the Northeast [of Brazil] as opposed to other regions nationally and internationally, especially in the United States? How do you feel about any differences?

So, I think that internationally the Brazilian Northeast is seen as an exotic place and so forth. But I also think that there is a certain comfort propagated by this initial appearance. The viewers relax and get the opportunity to wander through the work... [they] think about what is beyond and what is universal. For example, with *Ressaca Tropical* (Tropical Hangover), there is something about empathetic memory, a question about literature. There are [references to] various archives [and] historical documents, but together, they morph into fiction. This ambiguous game is interesting to me. In *O Peixe* (The Fish), [the work] uses a prominent ethnographic aesthetic, but in actuality, there lurks a discussion surrounding fiction and non-fiction, what is real and what is not, also about the taming of nature, about love and violence. All these themes are much more universal than their initial appearance of a specific story about a specific community in the Northeast of Brazil. So I think that this is when I enter a powerful exchange between what is universal among these relationships... so inherit of the human condition.

Q: My favorite video work of yours is *O Caseiro* (The Housekeeper) because I believe Brazilians urgently need to talk about Gilberto Freyre¹⁶ and race. My experience has been that Brazilians, in general, prefer to diffuse racially charged conversations, especially among international audiences. We still tend to romanticize and use elements of racial democracy in conversations, even though we are so aware of racial disparities. Why was it important for you to create this video and what were you hoping to get out of your audience?

I would dare to say that this is changing. I think that recently, in later years, there is an empowerment movement among Brazilians of Afro-descent and mixed backgrounds. I think that now, there is an organized movement that has advanced discussion, in a sense. There is a discussion surrounding the legitimization of discourses - who can say what about what. This is very prominent in Brazil right now, but at the same time, racism has not gone away. In fact, it is much more pervasive and explicit, right? Institutionalized racism manifested by police brutality, we see it frequently. Marielle Franco for example. [Brazilian politician of Afro-descent and outspoken critic of police brutality, Franco was shot multiple times and killed in Rio de Janeiro. Two former police officers were arrested and charged with her murder earlier this year.] This very week, a family inside a car was shot eighty times, and the police said it was a mistake. It is very sad, but as I said, I think that people are talking and advancing the debate. About the video *O Caseiro* (The Housekeeper), it juxtaposes a film about a presumed housekeeper in the house of Gilberto Freyre, with a historical film about Freyre himself. We can see the complexity of this character that initiated a dialog and constructed ideologies of classes and race, but that himself carried aristocratic attributes – and he is portrayed like that. There are all these dynamics happening with his image and his identity in the film. It is very interesting, for example, to see that he had workers; that there is an element of servitude there. And there is also a temporal element because... I think that, during that time...[Freyre's] introducing the house servants by name, perhaps signaling proximity, was maybe even an avant-garde gesture. Today, this would not be okay. Can you imagine yourself as a writer and an intellectual being videotaped with a servant in your house? It is interesting to me, as well, to see how expectations change over time. What is accepted and what is not. So there is a protagonist game. If Gilberto was the protagonist, after he dies, in the house, it is as if the housekeeper now becomes the protagonist. This raises, I think, interesting questions.

Q: Now turning to your exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, could you talk about *Suar a Camisa* (Working Up a Sweat) and another theme often present in your work: that of

¹⁶ Gilberto de Mello Freyre (1900–1987) was a sociologist specializing in the socioeconomic development of the multicultural and multiracial society of the Brazilian northeast.

the common man and the common worker? Also, what other works should your Chicago audiences expect to see as part of the exhibition?

Now talking about the MCA. Yes, the exhibition consists of four projects, basically. A previous one, *Suar a Camisa* (Working Up a Sweat) and three other new ones. About the *Suar a Camisa*, you asked about the recurrence of the common man in my art or the common worker. I think this theme emerges from the very beginning, when I started to use the name of the *Museu do Homem do Nordeste* (Museum of the Man of the Northeast). Which is a museum that exists, in fact, created by Gilberto Freyre – but I started using [it] strictly like it is the museum of masculinity. I use the title, that is sexist and problematic and attach this thematic... I dive in, like a study about the identity of the Northeastern man – in proximity to the stereotype of this man that is rudimentary, a worker, a brute strong man, that works with force, with his arms and hands. That is very much inherent of the "macho" culture of the Northeast. But at the same time, I approach through the lens of eroticism, vanity, and sensuality and there is something disconcerting about this approximation. At the same time that you display and bend the stereotype, you also come close to it and reproduce this stereotype, in order to deconstruct. And this process involved a series of fiery procedures. So the work itself, *Suar a Camisa*, is a collection of sweaty shirts that were negotiated, bought, and exchanged with workers on the streets. Workers going to work or returning home from work. Through this negotiation, there is the presence of the body across these t-shirts, the presence of sweat, but also the absence of the workers and the absence of their identities there.

Also featured in the exhibit will be a video commissioned by the MCA, *Jogos Dirigidos* (Directed Games), which was filmed in a deaf community in the interior of Piauí; a real, large scale drawing, *Um para Um* (One to One) which provides the title to the exhibit; and a project called *Fome de Resistência - Fundamento Kayapo Menkragnoti da série Infundável Mapa da Fome* (Hunger of Resistance - Kayapo Menkragnoti Foundations from the series Endless Hunger Map), which is composed of forty-two maps taken from the Brazilian army and marked by the hands of women from the Caiapó indigenous community.



Jonathas de Andrade, *Suar a Camisa*, MCA Chicago, 2019. Image courtesy of the artist.

Originally from Recife, **Catarina de Araújo** holds a B.A. in Journalism (2006) and an M.Ed from DePaul University in Chicago (2011). After spending nearly ten years working as a visual arts educator, she is now pursuing an M.A. in Art History at Oklahoma State University. Her research focuses on Modern Brazilian photography and printmaking.