



Regina Silveira *The Saint's Paradox* 1994, mixed media, 13 x 4 meters, Collection USP Museum of Contemporary Art

"Brazil, Pakistan, India: Contemporary Artists /Historical Contexts"

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By Susan Platt

The enormous scale of the gilded Baroque altarpiece at the center of the exhibition **Brazil: Body and Soul** at the Guggenheim Museum is almost as overwhelming in a contemporary art museum in New York as it is in its Brazilian home, the church of São Bento de Olinda. But in New York it is only a giant defrocked wooden artifact propped up by wooden struts and, coincidentally, a perfect signifier of the transformation of the Guggenheim's historic commitment to the display of modernist abstract art as a spiritual endeavor into a thirst for material expansion and cultural

power. The word on the street is that one motivation for this exhibition was to lay the groundwork for opening another Frank Gehry-designed Guggenheim in São Paulo.

Painting the Guggenheim's spiraling white ramps and atrium black and projecting flames on the ceiling, only further reinforces the literal materialism, which now reigns at the museum. At the same time, the installation creates a bizarre and inadvertent echo of the flaming destruction of that other monument to the hopes (and hubris) of modernism, the World Trade Center.

Modernism, of course, fell into disgrace quite awhile ago as a type of colonialism. Then came multiculturalism and post-colonialism. Now we have globalization, which negotiates with the local on its own terms. Corporate cultures purposefully market historical cultures that reinforce their enterprises. At the same time, transnational contemporary artists are re-defining their own cultural positions and histories as they move ever more frequently around the globe.

It is no surprise, then, that these days the hot new idea for the display of contemporary art is to pair it with historical art. In New York City, both the Guggenheim Museum and the Asia Society and Museum (newly renamed, expanded, and reopened) present contemporary art within an historical context, but the two museums completely diverge in their attitude to that relationship. At the Guggenheim it is a superficial juxtaposition, at Asia Society, it is part of a layered dialog placed within a socio-political context. While both institutions are firmly ensconced in globalism, the Guggenheim adopts an arrogant show and tell model, while Asia Society plunges deeply into the ambiguity and contradictions of the twenty-first century world.

Part I The Guggenheim's Body and Soul

Brazil: Body and Soul looks like the curator visited a Cost Plus for Brazilian art to buy wholesale supplies of ex votos, feather art, ecclesiastical hardware, mastheads, reliquaries, carved wooden saints, angels, Madonnas, crucifixes and even oil paintings. The exhibition stimulates the same claustrophobic feeling as a consumer warehouse-too many things randomly accumulated

and awaiting consumption. The ostensible point is to demonstrate that Brazilian culture has many different cultural references. Another claim is that the exhibition examines themes that are crucial to the Baroque and the twentieth century. None of these concepts are really explored in the exhibition. Contemporary art is at the “end” of the show (on the sixth level or on the periphery of the main display areas). Rather than creating a context for understanding cultural intersections in contemporary and historical art in Brazil, the exhibition mainly makes us want to find a way out to some fresh air.

Brazil: Body and Soul is divided in the exhibition and the massive, unwieldy catalog into seven unevenly sized sections – The Encounter (which includes Indigenous Art), Baroque Brazil, Afro Brazilian Culture, Modern Brazil, Contemporary Brazil, Architecture, and Cinema. Baroque dominates with a bow to Indigenous and Afro Brazilian, in the first level of the exhibition. In other words, we have the usual positioning of artists who are outside the elite art world as somehow “earlier” in an unstated evolutionary scheme, regardless of when their work was made.

A case in point is Mestre Didi. Born in 1917, he is a priest as well as an artist who is still making artwork today. His work such as *Ancestral Spirit of the Tree* (1999) made of bundled palm ribs, leather beads and cowrie shells combines traditional forms and improvisation. He is placed near the (also partially contemporary) indigenous feather art collection and some of the other Afro Brazilian artists like Geraldo Teles de Oliveira. Only two Afro Brazilian artists, Rubem Valentim and Ronaldo Rego make it into the main modernist flow several levels later. They seem to have qualified because of their seemingly cleaner abstraction, although the pioneering curator of Afro-

Brazilian art, Emanuel Araujo, explains their close connections to the artists relegated to the “lower level.”¹

The exhibition misses the boat by not further foregrounding the idea that Brazilian modernists pioneered the concept of cultural cannibalism, or the devouring of the “other” as a means of independence, in the “Manifesto antropofago” (Cannibalist manifesto) by the Brazilian writer, Oswald de Andrade. It emerges only briefly in Tarsila do Amaral’s *Anthropophagy* (1929) in which two partial figures, a voluptuous woman and an emaciated man together form an organic whole in the midst of a schematic two-dimensional jungle. The artist has devoured the ideas of Fernand Leger and Douanier Rousseau and created an entirely different expression. That model of absorption and transformation as a means of resistance was the basis for Brazil’s early twentieth century modernization, but it is also a potent principle for today’s globalized artists.

In this context, the catalog essays by mostly Brazilian writers emerge as a crucial refinement to the exhibition’s clumsy accumulations. Although they are almost buried under the physical and visual weight of the individual photographs of every object in the exhibition, and made even more inaccessible by the cost of book, they provide sophisticated insights and historical perspectives that are not tainted by simplistic agendas or preconceived outsider ideas.

Anthropophagy is concisely contextualized as a part of the modernist history of Brazil by Icleia Cattani.² It is further elucidated in an elegantly theorized article on film.³

¹ Emanuel Araujo “Exhibiting Afro-Brazilian Art,” *Brazil Body and Soul*, ed by Edward Sullivan, Guggenheim Museum 2001, p.319.

² Icleia Maria Borsa Cattani “Places of Modernism in Brazil,” *Brazil Body and Soul*, pp. 384-385.

³ “While Parisian surrealists had to seek out the exoticist delights of African masks, Tarsila... had only to evoke the memory of her Afro-Brazilian nanny, thus making exoticism quotidian and familiar.” Robert Stam and Ismail Xavier, “The Baroque, the Modern, and Brazilian Cinema,” p. 580.

An irony of the Guggenheim exhibition is that it seems to have borrowed its title from **Negro de corpo e alma**, an exhibition held in Sao Paulo in 2000. That exhibition unearthed, through painstaking research, the major contribution that black and mestizo artists have made to Brazilian art. Emanuel Araujo declares that Portuguese Brazilian art really emerged in the sixteenth century when slaves began carving the monumental altarpieces.⁴ How much more exciting the Guggenheim exhibition could have been if it had pursued this theme as a central idea.

But the “fill the shopping cart” model persisted throughout the exhibition, even extending to the sampling of the works of familiar giants of Brazilian neo-Concrete art like Lygia Clark, Helio Oiticica, Lygia Pape, and Antonio Manuel, and other stars of the international scene like Vik Muniz and Regina Silveira. Clark had what amounted to a mini-retrospective tucked away at the top of the exhibition, including some vintage films from her avant-garde performance pieces made with her Sorbonne students in the 1970s.⁵ Her belief in sensuality, liberation and audience participation provided a welcome jolt of activism after all the saints and Madonnas. Antonio Manuel’s room size installation, *Phantom* (1995) demanded navigation through chunks of charcoal of various sizes suspended from the ceiling. The psychological threat of death and the need to escape refers directly to survival in a military state. The fact that his avant-gardism and that of other neo-Concrete artists came out of the midst of the military dictatorship in Brazil that lasted from 1964 to

⁴ Araujo, p. 322. Araujo is former director of the Museu de Arte da Bahia and currently director of the Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo.

⁵ Agnaldo Farias “Apollo in the Tropics: Constructivist Art in Brazil,” *Brazil Body and Soul*, p. 402. For five years she taught an experimental seminar intended to make the participant re-experience their bodies.

1985 is nowhere discussed in this exhibition. *That* historical context is carefully deleted in favor of the colonialist model.⁶

Deconstructing rather than unquestioningly celebrating colonialism is one subject of Regina Silveira's installation *The Saint's Paradox* (1994 – 98). A distorted shadow of a military hero looming behind a toy statue of a saint highlights the dark marriage of religion and conquest. That theme of the troubling relationship of religion, poverty and oppression is central to the work of Miguel Rio Branco. Muniz spins the concept the other way, by posing street children in the grand manner (after Velazquez et al).

Brazil Body and Soul actually was an oddly paired celebration of colonialism and modernism. But the fault lies entirely with the Guggenheim, not the Brazilian sponsorship. The same organization, Brasilconnects funded a simultaneous exhibition at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C. which succeeded in all the ways that the Guggenheim Museum exhibition failed.⁷

Part II Asia Society Conversations

⁶ Mari Carmen Ramirez, "Tactics for Thriving on Adversity: Conceptualism in Latin America 1960 – 1980" *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s – 1980s* Queens Museum of Art, New York 1999, pp. 60 –62.

⁷ *Virgin Territory: Women, Gender and History in Contemporary Brazilian Art* had four themes the concept "virgin", mapping, Catholicism, and the mixing of races. Seventy five artists engaged history through the lenses of these themes. The valuable catalog has a wealth of useful, and straightforward interpretive material. Four artists appear in both exhibitions: Lygia Pape Regina Silveira, Adriana Varejao and Miguel Rio Branco.



Nilima Sheikh Detail of Banner commissioned for Asia Society “Conversations with Traditions”, 2001.

In stark contrast to the shopping mall colonialism at the Guggenheim, the Asia Society embraces subtlety, transparency and nuance as it explores the relationship of historical and contemporary art as a series of layered relationships. The Asia Society is above all an intellectual institution. Art is seen as only one part of an educational endeavor that invites as speakers such

prominent people as Richard Holbrook, the former United States Ambassador to the UN. Art joins a global context, just by virtue of its location.

In addition to this political context, the new design of the museum with its glass staircases and carefully scaled galleries invites us to think about the opening up of new relationships with tradition, the airing out of old ideas about Asia. Vishakha N. Desai, currently known as Senior Vice President of Asia Society, has been a pioneer in building the contemporary art program at Asia Society for over ten years. In honor of the newly expanded interior, she commissioned site-specific installations from nine Asian or Asian- American contemporary artists, organized three exhibitions that each have a different relationship to the contemporary world, and included a symposium with the artists in the opening day celebration.

Perhaps her most radical decision was to feature contemporary artists who negotiate with the highly specific techniques of Indian miniature painting. Miniature painting is not a popular reference point among contemporary artists in either Pakistan or India partly because it is seen as medieval and decadent, the antithesis of modernity. Modernist or “urban” painters traditionally have preferred to explore rural folk traditions rather than those of the court. Miniature painting also corresponds to what the West deems exotic Orientalism.

Conversations with Traditions: Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander presents two artists, one from India, one from Pakistan who transform ancient miniature traditions. For Shahzia Sikander, a Pakistani artist now living in New York, Mughal miniatures, the art of a Muslim court, was a centerpiece of her training in Lahore. It was considered the primary artistic heritage of the arbitrarily created Muslim country. By the 1980s it also became a new variant of anti-colonialism; Shahzia Sikander adopted it as a form of resistance to globalized modernism. In addition, her training and life in the United States, also comes into her work, adding another layer to her work.

Nilima Sheikh works in India as a direct heir to the early modernist Bengal school. The Bengal school adopted variants of miniature painting as a form of cultural resistance to the academic traditions of British colonialism at the turn of the century. Sheikh's warm color fields are both modernist and Indian. Within them she adopts formal devices, compartments and borders, as well as the centrality of women from Rajput miniature painting, the miniatures of the Hindu court. But these women are now contemporary women trapped in contemporary pressures. For example, the 1984 *Champa* series addresses an incident of accidental wife burning. This group is an odd choice to include at Asia Society, though, since it reinforces the West's obsession with this reactionary practice. Sheikh's new works like *Question of Martyrdom 2* (2001) present only an outlined image of women trapped in small spaces, spaces that are floating in a sea of color. She highlights the painful contradiction of the beauty of the image and the painful subject.

In a lyrical partnership that offers an alternative model to the political friction that exists between Pakistan and India, Sheikh and Sikander's banners hang side-by-side down three floors behind the transparent staircase of the museum. Sheikh's banner *River: Carrying Across, Leaving Behind*, (2001) is based on the India Pakistan partition of 1947, and the population exchange between Muslims and Hindus. The intimacy and emotion of the figures derive from her own family's history with Partition. Sheikh's Hindi family were based in Lahore and forced to leave everything behind in order to move to India after Independence. The paintings also speak to the condition of present refugees in the current wars in Central Asia.

Shahzia Sikander's banner *Midgets to Monsters* (2001) combines detailed traditional watercolor technique and computer manipulated digital imagery. Sikander alters the traditional spaces and linear narratives of both Hindu and Muslim miniatures to create new mythological goddesses, dancers, and monsters. They exist in an undefined in-between world between then and now, consciously baffling our efforts to decipher them.

These artists represent the new global art world in different ways, Sheikh, working in India, responds to historic and contemporary political pressures, Sikander, displaced from her own culture, contends with fragmentation and disorientation.

In addition to the two banners by Sheikh and Sikander, Asia Society invited seven other artists to create installations. These artists have a dizzying array of connections to Asia, ranging from being born in the United States (Sarah Sze) to still living in the Asian city where they were born (Xu Guodong, Navin Rawanchaikul). Likewise the commissioned installations vary in their relationships with various Asian cultures. For Sarah Sze it is a purely formal device, *Hidden Relief* invokes Japanese open space in a corner relief composed of inexpensive detritus like sliced up Styrofoam cups; at the other extreme is Xu Guodong's formidable *Garden Viewing Rock*, part of a long tradition of Chinese "stonelandscape" artists. His work, placed in the café of the museum allows us to experience a different type of time, based on meditation on the traditional values of *wen* (grain), *li* (texture), *qi* (energy), *shi* (momentum), and *tai* (form).

Between these two extremes, the other artists each negotiate in a different way between the local and the global, Asian culture and American culture. *Tuk Tuk Scope* by Navin Rawanchaikul from Thailand is a motorless (and luxurious) variant of the traditional tuk tuk a three-wheeled group taxi used in cities and villages in Northern Thailand. Indonesian Heri Dono's unique vocabulary includes 'Wayang Kulit', the art of the traditional Indonesian shadow play. *Flying in a Cocoon* has a powerful psychological effect in its combination of the imaginative and the technical: angels encased in cocoons uselessly flap their mechanized wings. On a long mirror wall outside the auditorium, Yong Soon Min, who was born in Korea, and grew up in the United States, plays with ideas of stereotypes, reality, reflections, opacity, and temporality. *Movement* consists of 150 round plastic mechanical clocks made with vinyl arms extending from old LP

covers for Asian and Asian American music groups. And, of course, because of the mirror, we also become part of the production of meaning.

Xu Bing, the mainland Chinese artist from Beijing now living in New York, again explores the meaning of language and communication. Small computer screens morph between English and his now trademark Chinese characters that form English words. Vong Phaophanit, who lived in Laos until he was eleven, then moved to Berlin, and is currently a star in London, created a red/orange neon wall piece, *Plantae lucum* (2001), for the new Garden Court. Also addressing the difficulties of language and communication, the piece is simply an elegant decorative sculpture, unless you have an explanation, and that is the point.⁸ The varied identities and vocabularies of these artists is practically a catalog of the variations on trans global cultural transactions currently possible.

Finally, Asia Society invited twenty-five contemporary artists to select works from the Rockefeller Collection of Asian Art to display in *The Creative Eye*. The artists range widely over the world; each chose several works and explained what the figure meant to them (with specific knowledge of the iconography) in a brief statement. The works come alive through the words of such contemporary artists as Bill T. Jones, Laurie Anderson, Chandralekha (dancer), Cheng Shi-Zheng (opera director), Ping Chong (theater director), Tan Dun (composer) Beth Forer (ceramic artist), Milton Glaser (designer), David Hwang (playwright), Pico Iyer (writer) etc.

Even the entirely historical exhibition at Asia Society is relevant to contemporary life, although more as a metaphor than as a direct relationship. **Monks and Merchants Silk Road Treasures from Northwest China, Gansu and Ningxia Provinces 4th to 7th Century**, alters our

⁸ Laotian words spell out the Latin word for Asian plants. Written by his children, the words are softened and rendered even more illegible by dipping the neon in beeswax. A forthcoming catalog will explain all of these works in detail. This piece, in particular, has further meanings, including the fact that most of the plants in Central Park came from Asia and that the artist adopts plant references as metaphors for human migration.

understanding of a little known area and era of Chinese art history. One of its significant insights is that the absence of a dynastic center led to the intermixing of cultures, an intriguing comparison to today's cultural environment. Today, the new globalized economy is the new dynastic "center" and it is rapidly generating an entirely new type of multi-national culture that makes an intriguing comparison to the intersections of cultures along the silk road between Xian, China and Venice, Italy.

Thus at every opportunity, Asia Society acknowledges the constantly changing temporal and global intersections of art and culture and places those relationships in the context of a larger political and social environment. It succeeds in disrupting our former ways of thinking in order to create new and unexpected conversations. In contrast, the Guggenheim exhibition relied on a traditional model of history and materialism that freezes the artists and the art in a one dimensional perspective, a perspective mitigated only by some of the essays in the catalog.

Thus, in the end, we have a formerly antiquarian Society that is now embracing the subtleties of the contemporary world, and a formerly contemporary art museum that fails to grasp the nuances of either history or the contemporary world. The Guggenheim's failure is a product of its inability to move beyond its own agenda in order to actually try to understand another country. The Guggenheim Museum is certainly not the only American institution that suffers from that problem.

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