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It is a rare opportunity in Europe to see such a comprehensive selection of works by Adriana Varejão (born 1964, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil). As disturbing as they are fascinating, they cover almost her entire career to date and include key works as well as material from her vast archive. To be confronted with Varejão's hybrid works of painting and sculpture is to be exposed to extremes: simultaneously abstract and explicit, analytical and irrational, and in their virtuoso play with the nature of surfaces and the interlocking of inner and outer spaces, both attractive and repulsive. They evoke an immediate, emotional response and, at the same time, can be read as a vehicle for a thorough examination of Brazilian identity and the country's colonial history.

Even in her early works, such as *Map of Lopo Homem*, 1992 and 2004, *Equinoctial Line*, 1993, and *Entrance Figure III*, 2005, the artist's continued central themes are evident: her critical look at Brazil's colonial past, which forms the founding narrative of the nation, the global trade routes between China, Portugal and Brazil, and the expansive capitalism behind them. Parallel to this is her ongoing concern with utilising the range of possibilities offered by painting and to expand them as a performative and transformative practice. The artist's work is fundamentally shaped by her study of art, historical, literary and philosophical references. This is not only meant with regards to content, but also in terms of form and aesthetics, as Varejão has based her artistic practice largely on visual quotation, collage and commentary in relation to historical books, her own visual archive, and cultural-historical objects.

Map of Lopo Homem (original from 1992 destroyed, reproduced in 2004) is often cited as the beginning of Varejão's artistic career. The horizontal oval shows a painted copy of a map by the Portuguese cartographer Lopo Homem, which suggests a connection between Asia and South America, with a gaping wound in the middle. This use of a historical reference, which goes beyond mere quotation, is typical of the artist. By manipulating images through parody, she succeeds in questioning them and the world views on which they are based. While, formally, the expansion of the painted pictorial space into a sculptural object, the actual act of cutting into the picture plane, the partial stitching, and the craquelure

can be interpreted within art-historical discourse, Varejão literally puts her finger in the wound of Brazilian post-colonial discourse and viscerally demonstrates just how thin the scab is that has formed around this injury: 'My wounds help to desecrate history as told by the victors which has been accorded the status of truth in order to reveal a history that takes into account other narratives, those of the vanquished, beneath the surface and on the margins of official history.'

Varejão's themes are deeply rooted in the sensibility of the Baroque, which is characterised by its unsettling tension of contrasts, illusionistic effects and theatrical rhetoric, and which plays a prominent role in the context of Brazil's cultural history. She repeatedly references as an important influence Neo-Baroque Latin American literature, regarded as subversive and counter-hegemonic, and cites in particular the Cuban author, critic and artist Severo Sarduy. In *Escrito sobre un cuerpo (Written on a Body)*, 1969, an essay collection on art and literature grounded in psychoanalytic theory, Sarduy succeeds in bringing together seemingly disparate concepts such as animal mimicry, tattooing, transvestism, anamorphosis and *trompe l'oeil*. With her pictorial practice, Varejão places herself in the middle of a transgressive, transcultural discourse in which the Christian iconography of the Baroque is transformed into a subversive form, secularised, and expanded upon by Indigenous and Black peoples. Central to this is the motif of incorporation and reversal, which presents itself as a carnivalesque play of mirrors reflecting upon the Self and the Other. As an emancipatory moment, this provides the key to Brazilian cultural identity and was famously described by Oswald de Andrade within the metaphor of cannibalism in his *Anthropophagic Manifesto*, 1928. Unlike a historian, however, Varejão takes the liberty of recombining different literary and artistic references, placing them in deceptively similar visual registers, thus creating new contexts of meaning. In *Entrance Figure III*, 2005, for example, she interweaves the allegorical figure of America, quoted from an engraving by Theodor de Bry who never set foot in Brazil, with the tradition of welcome figures, which in the form of tile panels separated the public and private areas of Portuguese palaces in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. While

these welcome figures typically represent courtly men, the artist replaces the figure with the female body of America, connoted as 'wild' and 'foreign', presenting a decapitated head, a self-portrait of the artist herself, rather than the original arrows. While the viewer is initially taken in by the decorative ornamentation of the various surfaces, recognising the often-reproduced interwoven painted pattern on a markedly two-dimensional surface, the subversive invitation to engage with a foreign space is emphasised.

Kitchen Tiles with a Variety of Game, 1995, follows in the genre tradition of butchery paintings, from Rembrandt's *Slaughtered Ox* to Francis Bacon's *Figure with Meat*, and thus refers not only to the transience of life but also to the similarity of humans and animals in death. Regularly in Varejão's paintings, the structure of the square tile establishes the image's logic. Inspired by the often carelessly restored churches in Brazil, the hanging hybrid creatures are reminiscent of fragmentary artefacts, or a picture produced using the exquisite corpse method. *Exploratory Laparotomy I*, 1996, on the other hand, works primarily through the different contrasting surfaces. Blood-smearred white tiles form the background for three human skins, the surfaces of which are emphasised by *irezumi*, elaborate Japanese tattoos. The entrails oozing from the bodies is depicted in a Baconesque and drastically expressionistic opulence of colour and texture, while the surfaces of the scattered organs are decorated with the ornamental patterns of *azulejos*, Portuguese tiles. In the visual fusion of a medical dissection with the age of so-called 'discovery' and its appropriation, not least through the process of mapping, the artist finds a physically tangible aesthetic form to make the transgenerational traumas of her country visible. Her multifaceted painting resembles a psychological search into the past with which she uncovers the atrocities of colonialism layer by layer and anchors decolonisation as a continuous process in the bodies of the present. Varejão sometimes transfers her painting entirely into sculpture and, as in *Ruin 22*, 2022, works with the architectural motif of the ruin from which the bodily innards emerge. This enables her to reflect on the connection between the human body, labour, cultural achievement, and its failures.

Throughout Varejão's multifaceted work, inspired by Baroque architecture, the ceramic tile runs as a constant. Tiles function as a grid that holds together the enormous contradictory forces in her work. With her *Azulejos* series, since 1988, the artist focuses in an increasingly abstract manner on the materiality of surfaces, initially on the blue decorative arabesques, the floral or wave motifs of the original glazes or in reference to the outstanding ceramics of the Song dynasty in China exclusively on the craquelure. The works are large and square, and are sometimes arranged as an immersive environment, thus engaging with the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, also anchored in the Baroque. It therefore seems as if Varejão is steadily moving away from her strategy of collaging different levels of imagery and concentrating on one layer of image and meaning. The continuous focus and zoom-in on surface marks, which allude as well to human skin, might also reflect a shift away from a predominantly post-colonial interpretation and allows for a reading of the feminine and gendered aspects of her work in relation to the highly sexualised contemporary body culture in Brazil.

In its shift to a more abstract yet highly sensory articulation, Varejão's work can be read along the lines of Brazilian Neo-Concretism, a movement that reinterpreted for a Brazilian context the ideas of Concrete Art and Constructivism in the European avant-gardes of the early twentieth century. This re-evaluation created the conditions for elevating haptic and sensory aesthetic experience to the central starting point of artistic practice, for which the later works of the Brazilian icons Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica are known, and with whose overwhelming emotional and corporeal effect Varejão also works.

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