



Maria Nepomuceno: *Expiro*

Expiro marks the fifth exhibition by the Brazilian artist Maria Nepomuceno at Victoria Miro and is her first in the gallery's space in Venice. The title of the exhibition is derived from a work by the artist of the same name: *Expiro*, a Portuguese word that Nepomuceno chose for its similarity, both homophonic and in meaning, to the Italian word *espiro*, which in English translates as 'breathe out'.

In various cultures, breath symbolises the essence of life: the Greek *Pneuma*, the Hebrew *Ruah*, and the Spirit of God that hovers over the primordial waters in the *Book of Genesis*. It signifies the act of creation itself, where life is breathed into an inanimate body, giving it form and vitality.

The title *Expiro* holds a significant thematic connection to the artist's poetics, suggesting the organic, fluid and ever-evolving nature of her work.

Since the early 2000s, Maria Nepomuceno (born 1976 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where she currently lives and works) has developed a unique artistic practice incorporating different stimuli in works that blur the boundaries between sculpture, installation and textiles. Her aesthetic strategy blends the tradition of Brazilian Modernism, as evident in her use of geometric forms and intricate construction techniques, along with traditional craftsmanship and her own way of sewing coils of coloured rope into spirals, combining traditional techniques of rope weaving and straw braiding.

The artist creates three-dimensional shapes using various assembled materials to develop vibrant sculptures presented as environmental installations with different elements. Her vivid, colourful palette evokes the lushness and mystery of tropical landscapes and the magical nature of organic forms. These colours act as points and lines, which become the essence of the volumetric construction of her work, immersing the viewer in a world of vibrant hues.

For her Venetian premiere, Nepomuceno has conceived a new body of works. It incorporates handcrafted components such as weavings (including woven carnauba palm straw), carved wood, dynamic ceramic forms, as well as synthetic and industrial elements, such as coloured beads of various shapes and, for the first time in her repertoire, glass sculptures specially made in Murano, Venice, for this occasion.

Collaborating with the Venetian glass master Giancarlo Signoretto during her two-month residency in Venice, Nepomuceno integrated traditional glassblowing techniques into her practice, crafting various glass elements of different shapes and sizes designed to hold small objects and fragments that the artist collected in Venice. These glass elements serve as a visual record of her time in the lagoon city, preserving the memory of her residency and transforming everyday objects into lasting artistic expressions.

This fusion of heterogeneous elements creates a complex narrative that combines the tradition of Brazilian craftsmanship, such as braided straw, with time-honoured techniques from other cultures, including the art of glassblowing. In this way, Nepomuceno generates a tension in her work, which becomes both rooted in her own culture and connected to a cultural syncretism.

The references the artist draws from different geographies echo in Venice, building bridges between apparently distinct cultures. This openness, this desire for interaction and dialogue, goes beyond the opposition between identity and universality, and is central to her work, fed by the multiple imaginative sources of Brazil, where she grew up at the interface between South American, indigenous, and European cultures.

Nepomuceno's lively and boldly coloured artworks evoke images of creatures, flora, human bodies and landscapes, ranging from intricate details to vast expanses. She emphasises the connection between the human body and nature, infusing her work with vivacious energy and dynamism. She portrays rope as both line and umbilical cord, with each bead symbolising a potential beginning that carries the duplication of potentially endless multiplication.

The artist explored myriad permutations, designed to interact with and adapt to the specific characteristics of the exhibition space. A striking aspect of Nepomuceno's practice is its site-specific nature.

Each time she displays a piece, she tailors it to the environment, producing a different version or arrangement, a new configuration, offering her work another possibility of existence.

The new pieces oscillate between figuration and abstraction. Many of them feature the spiral as a central theme, an element that is almost a signature in the artist's plastic vocabulary. It is a visual element with functional and spiritual significance. The spiral form suggests the infinite movement of time and the vital energy of the spirit as it originates from a central point and expands outward.

The artist says, 'I have been obsessed with spirals since I was a child. I made my first spiral when I was ten years old. I learned to do the braid of crochet, and then I decided to sew it in a spiral. It is the DNA of my work and is also connected to the Murano glass technique. The spiral is a very Venetian pattern in the way artisans turn the glass to shape this characteristic form. A spiral is an open structure that turns inside towards the nucleus and also opens to the outside. It represents a centrifugal idea and movement of expansion, which is integral to my work and relates to my experience in Venice.'

Expiro represents an enchanted garden of fluid forms that whimsically articulate the space. It is an organic installation, the tactile nature of which encourages viewers to engage with the works on various levels, visually, intellectually and emotionally enhancing a deeper connection. Animal, mineral

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and biomorphic forms come together, giving these pieces a sense of uncanny corporeality embedded with subtly erotic connotations. 'In my works, I evoke an ancestral feminine force – archetypically as Pachamama, the fertility goddess. Increasingly,' the artist explains, 'I have been searching for this idea of the feminine and masculine combined in each work, such as nature as a whole.'

An interactive aspect of Nepomuceno's work is represented by the two-metre-diameter 'love-ball' of *Expiro*, also the title of a piece created by the artist during the 2006 Carnival in Rio. In this filmed performance, the beads of Nepomuceno's work are magnified as a giant pink beach ball with the word *Amor* (Love) written on it. The artist releases the ball in various crowded places to observe and record the reactions. It passes over heads, being touched, and rolls through multiple locations, including a beach in Rio de Janeiro and the samba parade. Sunbathers play with the ball at the beach, until a person in the street punctures it with a knife, causing it to deflate and shrivel slowly. 'But,' Nepomuceno says, 'the ball always revives and love is reborn.'

The exhibition *Expiro* delves into themes of connection and transformation, and its organic forms suggest a magical dimension that echoes supernatural elements. The act of *expiro* (breathing) makes the work fluid and gives it an open quality and sense of transmutation. It becomes part of a

never-ending process in constant development. As the artist explains, '*Expiro* epitomises this organic process of making and developing the pieces, and it also alludes to the Venetian glassblowing technique.'

Ultimately, *Expiro* offers a captivating journey through Nepomuceno's different forms, materials and themes. It is an encounter with long-developed and evolving symbols that the artist has depicted in their many diverse forms. This exhibition reflects her intention to create a project that is not just a static display but is alive and continually moving, aiming to engage and captivate the viewer. She invites us to expand our focus and see this exhibition as a space of constant evolution.

Eugenio Viola
Artistic Director, Bogotá Museum of Modern Art | MAMBO

Quotes by Maria Nepomuceno are taken from conversations between the artist and author in August 2024.

The artist thanks Elia Biagini, Giancarlo Signoretto, Agnese Tegon, Nadja Romain, Eugenio Viola and everyone at Victoria Miro.

We extend our condolences to the family of Giovanni Nicola and the glassmaking community in Murano on his passing on 19 July 2024.