

Artigo

Evento: Exposição Adriana Varejão

Media: Revista

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Data: Abril de 2014

Seção: Private views

Página: 87 - 89

Veículo: Porter Magazine

private views

A unique take on the world's cultural talking points

Adriana Varejão
outside her studio
in the Zona Sul
area of Rio de
Janeiro. Dress by
Osklen, £378

The girl from Ipanema

Brazilian artist Adriana Varejão is turning heads. *Mario Testino* explains how he became captivated, while *PORTER* calls in at her tropical studio in Rio

Photographs by Tinko Czetwzynski

"I first met Adriana Varejão at her amazing studio in Rio a few years ago. My friend, the Brazilian curator Adriano Pedrosa, introduced us, and we've kept up our friendship thanks to my frequent visits to Brazil. I instantly liked her work the first time I saw it, as it makes me see life from a different perspective. (I have one of her tile pieces.) Adriana's ability to provoke emotions through her paintings is what has impressed me most. She will sometimes transform something grotesque into something beautiful in a way that one hadn't anticipated. I've been obsessed by Brazil for years, and I am so thrilled to see it



This spring, two solo exhibitions in New York and São Paulo will present Adriana Varejão's new series of self-portraits entitled *Polvo*, which means 'octopus' in Portuguese. The series explores skin tone, a sensitive issue in multiracial Brazil, and the title hints at the fact that the same chemical, melanin, determines the color of both octopus ink and human skin. First shown at her London gallery, Victoria Miro, in November last year, the paintings look similar at first, but in each painting, Varejão has altered the color of her skin – sometimes subtly, sometimes dramatically.

Varejão, one of the most strikingly idiosyncratic voices in the ultra-fashionable world of Latin American art, lives with her film-producer husband and two children in a stunning modern apartment in Rio's hip Ipanema neighborhood. She works from an equally stunning studio near the city's botanical garden. For her *Polvo* series, she explains how she worked with a paint factory – “I asked them to make pigments that were related to the colors of Brazilian skin.” In the official Brazilian census, she continues, the population is categorized into five groups according to skin tone. But when a 1976 survey by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics asked residents what color they considered themselves, the responses listed over 135 variations. They ranged from the broadly descriptive – *burguesinha escura* (dark native) or *parda morena* (brown mix) – to the poetic – *fogoio* (fox-on-fire red), *morena bem chegada* (brown welcomes black), *cor de cuia* (the color of a gourd) or *sapecada* (flirting with freckles). These evocatively named colors are the ones Varejão asked an oil-pigment factory to create.

The resulting images, however stiffly traditional in appearance, subvert the establishment mores to which they allude. “I want these works to make people think about racism,” she says. It is endemic



London's Victoria Miro gallery where Varejão's *Polvo* series was first shown. Right: at her studio

“We used to have a saying here: ‘When people get richer they get white’”



Shirt by NK, £280; pants by Gucci, £620; sandals by Gloria Coelho, £1,948

you cannot classify people.”

Varejão, 49, gave up a degree in engineering in the '80s to become an art student after being inspired by the film *The Sandpiper*, in which Elizabeth Taylor stars as a free-spirited single mother and artist. “It was work, work, work,” she remembers of that time. She first garnered international acclaim in the '90s with her ceramic pieces,



bell-Johnston. Fashion editor Oskar Metsavah. Varejão at Capa Management. All artworks courtesy Victoria Miro gallery. Photographs: Stephen White.

private views

closely at their decorative surfaces, images of orgies, amputations and violence. From the cracks oozed what looked like raw meat – cool, rational colonial structures barely containing the bleeding innards of a more brutal truth.

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Her appearance, insouciantly stylish and twinkly-eyed, may be at odds with such grisly work, but challenging perceptions is her game. “I don’t think art can be only beautiful or decorative,” she says. “I think that it should always have a point, that it should propose questions... though not give answers.”

Varejão has no idea what her own background is. “I probably had Portuguese ancestors, but I can’t trace the connection,” she says. “When I ask my parents and grandparents, they just call themselves Brazilian.” What is indubitable, however, is that she has found success, even while maintaining a sensitivity to the social inequalities around her. It is the daily contrast between sprawling favelas and luxury apartment blocks that influence her, she says. It finds its expression in the striking work that has made her one of her nation’s foremost artists.

Adriana Varejão Polvo is on at Galeria Fortes Vilaça, São Paulo, from April 7 to May 9, fortesvilaca.com.br; and Lehmann Maupin gallery, New York, from April 25 to June 21, lehmannmaupin.com

