

Adriana Varejão *Carnivorous*

Victoria Miro Mayfair, London 6 June – 2 August

Cracked erupting landscapes, some in pairs, some in triptychs, one alone. Bloody, pinky and orangey-red hues stain the whitish or light-greenish paint that covers these terrains, with naive images echoing the bodily or biological systems. This display of six paintings (all works 2012, aside from one, *Vermelho Carnívoro*, 2014) by Brazilian artist Adriana Varejão is titled *Carnivorous* in recognition of the range of carnivorous plants that inspired them. Each work is titled after a singular plant found by the artist in a botany dictionary. Five of these works (titled *Drosera (Triptych)*; *Drosera Aliciae, Filiformis e Sarracenia Purpurea*; *Nepenthes (Triptych)*; *Darlingtonia 'Misteriosa'*; and *Utricularia Reniformis*) were originally created for Varejão's 2012 retrospective exhibition *Histories at the Margins* at Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo.

These fractured contours were formed from layers of plaster applied to the already painted canvas in different tones of red. When dry, the flatness of the wet plaster is transformed into a sculptural plane – a map of exploding, craggy outcrops, onto which the artist then paints –

beginning with a slick layer of oil paint in one tone (most light sickly green, one in deep magenta) covering the plaster on the canvas. This shiny, almost glazelike effect could relate back to Varejão's interest in, and previous work about the *azulejos* – Portuguese tiles covered in elaborate paintings found all over Brazil – yet in these works it seems as if the tile beneath has burst, or been broken by some interior force. This urge to create a broken, cracked or erupting, surface – shifting two-dimensional painting into three-dimensional sculpture – was explored brilliantly in the exhibition *Destroy the Picture: Painting the Void, 1949–1962* at MOCA, Los Angeles, in 2012, whose curator, Paul Schimmel, described the process as a 'literal assault' on the picture plane motivated by political desires. Early work by Shozo Shimamoto, who first began experimenting with painting, performance, surface and sculpture with the Gutai group in 1950s Japan, particularly resonates with Varejão's work in this exhibition – Shimamoto created a body of violent yet fragile works with oil paint on newspaper, which cracked, broke and erupted in places. The Victoria Miro press release also

suggests that these works 'resonate' with Chinese Song Dynasty ceramics – some of which, yes, are made with purposefully cracked surfaces – but this reference to these 'polite' vessels is not true of the bodily, abject encounter I had with Varejão's paintings.

Images of these works fail to convey how fragile and weird they are. The dried-out yet shiny plaster surfaces look as if they might burst, or fall off the canvas – unlike more traditional painting where the canvas is the surface, not the support. I was desperate to push one of the more precarious pieces of plaster, to see if it would come free, as it appeared to be defying gravity. Each light green surface had a plantlike form painted across the cracks; on some, pubic tendrils sprout from vaginaesque mounds and lips, alongside womblike, ovarian or foetuslike shapes in varying shades of red. They are deeply psychological, and mordantly visceral, as if some interior force is trying to escape through the plaster, from a flat plane of canvas. And they are also paradoxically intense; repulsive or grotesque in the forms they display, yet seductively fascinating. *Kathy Noble*



Vermelho Carnívoro, 2014,
oil and plaster on canvas, 99 × 99 cm. Courtesy Victoria Miro, London