

TEN BRAZILIAN ARTISTS TO MEET

Vibrant, subversive and playful are three words that come up again and again in Brazilian art. This seems as true today as it did for the Tropicalia generation of the 1960s, who made work to fool around in or dance to, in defiance of an oppressive dictatorship. From major stars such as Ernesto Neto, Beatriz Milhazes and Rivane Neuenschwander, to fresh names including Maria Nepomuceno or André Komatsu, these 10 artists are keeping their country at the centre of the cultural universe.

ANDRÉ KOMATSU

The grungy, lo-fi sculptures and delicate drawings of André Komatsu reveal cities to be unstable places. They conjure a world where walls rise up, are smashed down or left to crumble, only to be built high once more, caught in a battle between the powerful and the unruly, between progress, disorder and decay. Works including a heap of cardboard boxes haloed with barbed wire, or a breeze-block barrier under which a glossy spill of black paint slides, strike a balance between the fierce and the fragile, the prohibitive and the permeable.

Komatsu is fast becoming one of Brazil's most-fêted emerging talents. Unlike artists of the older generation, his work makes few specific references to his country's culture, preferring the global language of bricks and concrete over baroque and carnival. "I try to work with codes that can be read anywhere," he says.

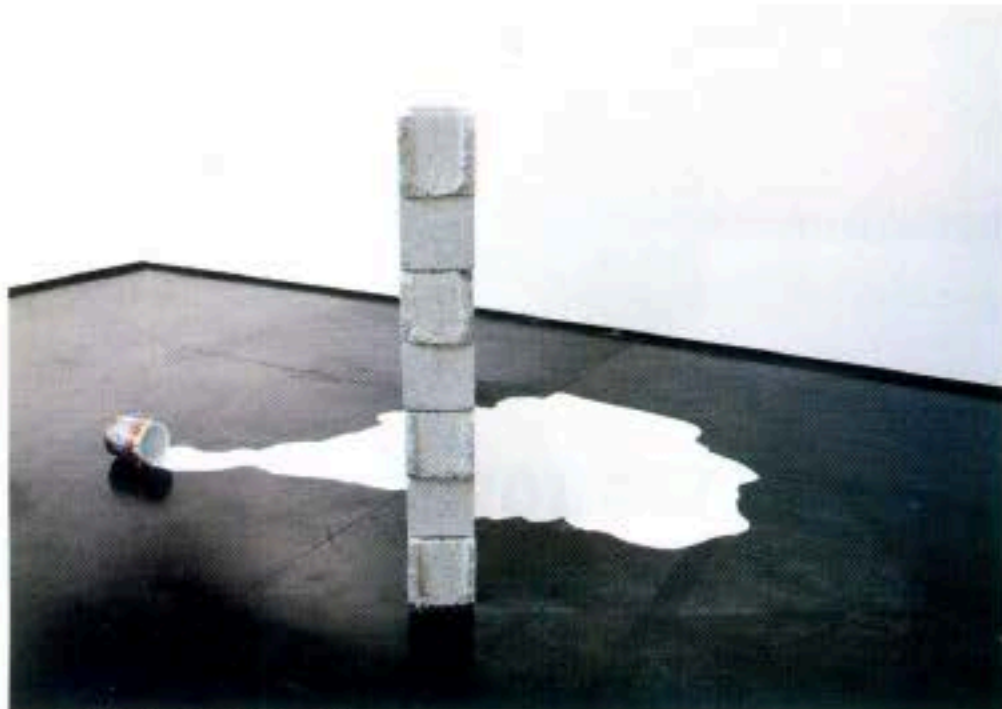
A rare exception might be *Onde o sol nunca se põe 1* (Where the Sun Never Hides 1), from 2010, where traditional coloured tiles set in concrete create a rough mosaic landscape, with brown earth below and blue sky above. "I was interested in using old tiles due to their strong symbolism, thinking about the legacy of Portuguese colonisation in Brazil and the dominion of man over nature," he says. "Building a 'natural' landscape with

the tiles, I tried to bring another reading to cast doubt on the stereotypical idea of landscape."

For Komatsu the city is a place where "our relationship with architectural and historical memory is erased and manipulated constantly", by new building schemes. It's a process made visible in *AK-47*, from 2008, a cross section of wall that resembles a slice of layer cake, striped with materials that move from the base painted white like a gallery, through plain grey concrete, red brick that becomes increasingly porous as if eaten away by acid or termites, and is finally iced with rubble.

Full of lines, fences and walls, Komatsu's art reflects a modern city where you're either inside or out. Yet it's also restless from an itch to fight the power. Take *Conquista conquistado* (2011), a wall with a sledgehammer on one side and a chisel on the other, like an invitation to smash it down. Yesterday's troubles might have been covered up, the undesirables blocked out, but the possibility of violence or even liberating anarchy feels ever present.

www.galeriavermelho.com.br



Desvio de Poder (2011) by André Komatsu. Courtesy of the artist.



Tongue with flower pattern (1998) by Adriana Varejão. Oil on canvas and polyurethane 201 x 170 x 68cm. Courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro Gallery, London @ Adriana Varejão.

TEXT SKYE SHERWIN

ADRIANA VAREJAO

The paintings and sculptures that have made Adriana Varejão a major name in Brazilian art over the past 20 years rework a dizzying array of colonial culture and art history. She has reimagined the blue and white painted *azulejo* Portuguese tiles that decorate everything in Brazil, from church fronts to train stations, as vast wall installations, created from painted plaster on canvas. So, too, the cracked surfaces of Song ceramics, resembling parched earth or skin. In some of her most visceral works, the erotic exuberance of baroque spills out as 3-D jewel-like bloody guts from painted reliefs, imitating the plain workaday tiles you get in butchers' shops or saunas. Her most recent creations strike a brighter, sensual note: giant polyurethane oval plates that riff on 19th-century Palissy ware, offering up a luscious selection of sculpted and painted sea life, including clams concealing relics foraged from Rio's streets, nude ama divers from Japan and a woman getting it on with an octopus – an homage to Hokusai's legendary erotic print.

What were the first ceramics that interested you?

"In the late 1980s I was interested in Song pottery from China – its very delicate and cracks on the surface. There's an amazing colour that goes from green to blue. I began to include cracks in my works. I've never worked directly with ceramics but have always been inspired by them."

Is your work with bloody gore pouring from behind tiled walls a direct reference to the violent history of colonialism?

"The meat doesn't necessarily mean violence. It sometimes means something voluptuous, like baroque materiality. I'm talking about a history that's printed in the body. It's more visceral and savage. It's brutal, but in a way, every cultural meeting is brutal. I don't want anybody to feel I'm talking about colonialism's victims and the dominating Portuguese. I'm talking about encounters between different cultures that are violent; even when there is an encounter between two people, man and woman, it's a little bit violent."



Deep River (2004) by Marepe. Rubber inner tubes, wood table, ceramic, glass bottle of cachaça Rio Fundo (Brazilian liquor). Dimensions variable. © Marepe. Courtesy Galeria Luisa Strina

How is the work politically engaged, then?

"It says we can change the meaning of history. That history isn't something closed. There are many versions, not only one. You can always open the past and remake it, all the time."

You've recently been inspired by Portuguese Palissy ware.

What's its appeal?

"The plates are considered a bit kitsch nowadays. They use a lot of volume, like representing a big, exaggerated lobster. As plates they're totally useless. It's all about exaggeration and sensuality."

How important is it to you to be based in Rio?

Do you still look to the city for references?

"Yes. I have never lived outside Rio in my life, even to study. I'm very provincial this way. The city has this character of being open, for instance the open bars, we call *botequim*. They're full of vulgar tiles, and I like the architecture of these places. There are no doors. People go to drink, watch the football, men are talking very loud and everybody's mixed together."

Adriana Varejão: Histórias as Margens, until Dec 16; Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, Brazil (www.mam.org.br). For more information, visit www.victoria-miro.com

MAREPE

A true homeboy, Marepe has conquered the international art world with his playful, political work that comes not from Brazil's centres of commerce and culture, Rio and São Paulo, but from his birthplace, Santo Antônio de Jesus. This small town in the northeast of Brazil, a few hours' drive from Salvador, is the wellspring for his art, which has drawn on its social landscape and customs, as well as his own memories and boyhood fantasies. In the past 15 years his oeuvre has included installations based on street stalls or the makeshift cardboard dwellings of the homeless, as well as sculptures of comic-book aliens made from what look like Christmas-tree baubles and a palm tree decked out with thousands of bags of multicoloured candyfloss.

Being based in Santo Antônio de Jesus has been hugely important for your work.

"I see a popular universe in the town, and I try to absorb and reflect that in my work."

It's an area outside Brazil's traditional art centres and it has often been remarked upon that you don't speak English, though your work, of course, has no problems communicating with an international audience. To what extent do you feel yourself to be an outsider?

"I am aware that I am inserted in the international art circuit, but I live apart from that. It allows me to distance myself a little from the great centres of the art market, but at the same time I can still think about other relevant issues, such as crossing the way I see contemporary art and popular culture."

"Contemporary art is very limited in these areas of northern Brazil. Despite being very connected to my gallery in São Paulo and the local art scene, I notice a certain distance and lack, particularly with regard to the technical production of my own works. This somehow turns out to shape and influence my work, as with materials, scale and weight."

Many of your works return to the dreams of childhood – candyfloss skies, for instance. Is seeing with a child's eyes important for making art, do you think? And how do you tap into that again as an adult?

"To me there is no difference between the look of the adult and child. Here, there is only the artist's eye."

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ERNESTO NETO

His installations are made for touching, sniffing and scampering about in barefoot. Walking through one of Ernesto Neto's environments, built from giant skins of taut stocking nylon, stretched across skeleton structures, can be like excavating dinosaur bones, or being in the belly of the whale. Great pods of pungent spices dangle here and there, resembling tropical fruit or teats; crevices invite us to chance our hands and rub our fingers through touchy-feely substances.

There's a positively primeval quality to these structures, which Neto, one of the foremost names in Brazilian art, has erected at major museums and galleries the world over. They mix up sexual pleasure, sustenance and maternal comfort, taking us right back to a time before we learned how to distinguish between all these feelings. Who wouldn't want to dive in?

What's your interest in a primeval world or primitive state?

"I have a deep interest in this time – before language, where we are discovering the world through our feeling, through the senses. Also, our height is different, so there is this relation to space that we don't have as adults. Everything is made for adults, so we have to climb up on the sofa and things like that; our body, it's much more elastic. I would love to become a two-year-old again. Also I'm very interested in some of the more primitive life forms. It's in our DNA. My structures talk to some idea of the body beyond a representation of it, to take our mind/body inside of us, beyond our skin's limit, and through it, through our skin."

Are there particular spices you always use?

"The main ones would be clove and turmeric. We use them ground to begin with and these micro grains cross the pores of the textile, dyeing it and, let's say, smelling us. The clove as a colour, it's not very exciting, dark brown. It is a bass colour, while the smell is very thin, treble. Turmeric would be the opposite, a very exciting and treble colour with a bass, low smell. I also use cumin, pepper, ginger, annatto... They would be in between these two, creating a smell landscape. Beyond it there are also the memories that the smell evokes, which is different for each one of us."



The Island Bird (2012) by Ernesto Neto. Polypropylene and polyester rope, plastic balls. Approximate overall installed dimensions: 426.7 x 960.1 x 655.3cm. Installation view Ernesto Neto: Slow is good, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, 2012. Photograph by Jean Vong. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York

"In the end what most fascinates me might be the atmospheric space that the smells create and how we move through this fragrance space. It's not a sweet space, it's more hypnotic, it fills the air and gets inside of us, feeding our fantasies and spirit."

One of the most striking things about your work is how it brings people together.

"We are together in this planet spinning around the sun; we are as a society alone. No one or any god will come from outside to take care of us or our planet – it's in our hands. For centuries there was a fear of nature, then a fantasy of controlling nature. Now our 'control' is generating another wave of fear about nature. Our society, hopefully, will change to a place where man and nature will be happy together because happiness is the essence of life. Over this drama I land my work."

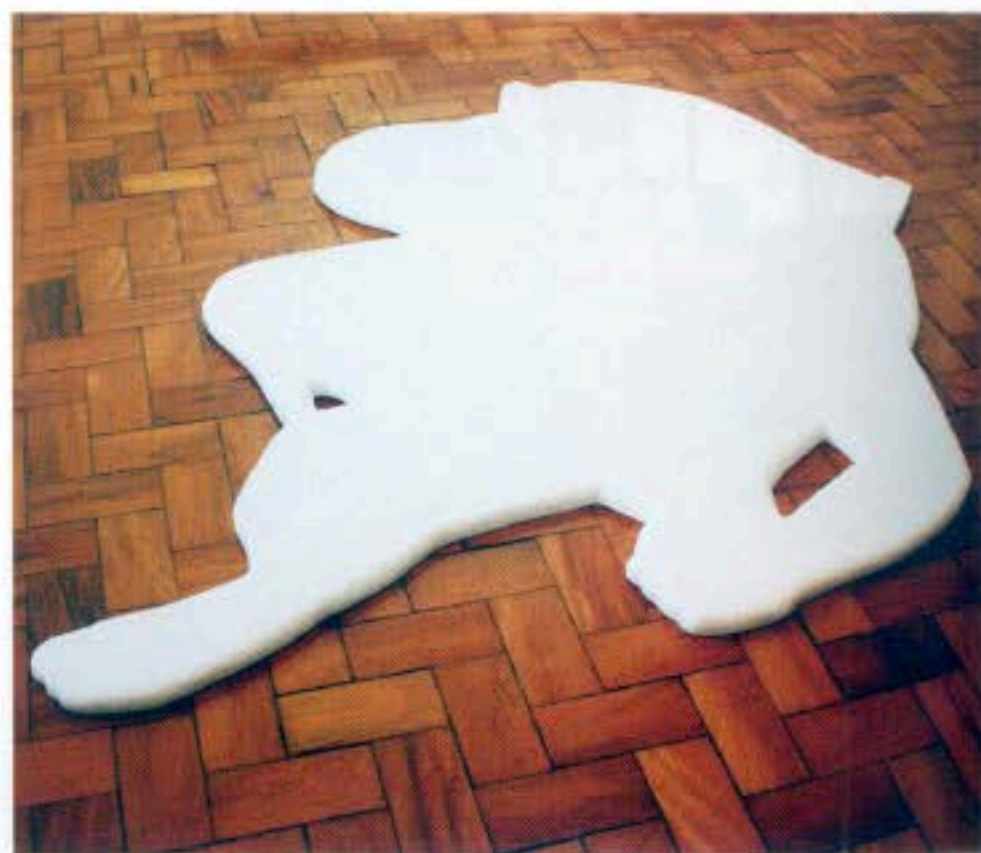
www.tanyabonakdargallery.com

FABIANO GONPER

The suited, faceless men crowding Fabiano Gonper's drawings, sculptures and animations resemble the kind of simple line drawings of figures you get in instruction manuals. "They're like figures in a user's guide," he agrees. "Their hollowness and the repetition and patterns reflect the confusion and uncertainties of the world we all live in."

Depicted en masse, they conjure a bleak parallel universe overrun by hollow men whose only purpose seems to be fulfil their everyday functions. "In many cases, my work is closely related to thinking of the contemporary world as dystopian, or else, it points towards a future dystopia in a world that is increasingly lacking in dreams, beliefs and Utopias that motivate the desire for change," he reflects.

The gestures his figures make – an authoritative arm raised or an impatient hand pointing to a watch – are a hectic taxonomy of the body language of a white-collar world of business, politics and art. Power relations are apparently what count in this anonymous dystopia. "The drawings that I made between 2008 and 2010 were based on images of politicians and corporate employees, representing manipulation and power," he explains. "The connection between powers came up – the power of politics, the power of art, the power of capital."



Escultura Plana #01 (2009) by Fabiano Gonper. Courtesy of the artist

It's a quintessentially urban vision, hardwired to the relentless rat race, teeming around the gleaming towers or white cubes where capital flows. Indeed, Gonper's sculpture series *A casa* (The House), from 2003, in which rough hunks of concrete punctured by metal rods appear to have been ripped from the streets, uses the actual flesh and bones of the city. "It's a symbolic work made with debris from a demolished modernist house in my home town," explains Gonper, who originally trained as a civil engineer. "I needed to work with parts of my home town, pieces of a house and elements from construction plants to settle accounts with my past training and my history."

As Gonper points out, his *Identikit* figures from the corridors of power have obvious import for anyone, anywhere: "To a certain extent, some of my works came from issues raised by the political reality in Brazil. Nevertheless, what radically moves me and pervades my work is the subjective experience of the individual in this world."

www.barogaleria.com

LAURA BELEM

Things are often on the verge in Laura Belém's work, like the wooden boat that might be rising from or sinking into the golden sand of her installation *Evading-Place* (2009), or the cloud of purple and blue kites she installed, just out of reach, beyond a glass ceiling for *Beneath the Sky* (2012). There's a poignancy, even a melancholy, that she suggests is part and parcel of where she comes from: "In Brazilian culture there's an ambiguity in everything, from our music, food, folk traditions and language to literature. Tom Jobim and Vinicius de Moraes's famous samba, *A Felicidade* [Happiness], tells about the close relationship and intrinsic temporality of happiness and sadness. Samba's lively, but it often addresses the transience of things."

The ghosts of the past certainly feel very close in Belém's best-known work in Britain, *The Temple of a Thousand Bells*, installed in Liverpool Cathedral's Oratory for the city's 2010 biennial. Above the statue of a trumpet-wielding angel and white fluted columns, 1,000 fragile glass bells glimmered from the ceiling like suspended drops of water. Meanwhile, haunting chimes echoed around the space – a soundtrack created with Fernando Rocha, a composer from Belém's hometown of Belo Horizonte, in central Brazil – as the myth of the temple was narrated: built on an island that sank beneath the waves, the temple enthralled a sailor who sought the music of its beautiful bells, apparently still ringing from the depths. "I was interested in how the story uses presence and absence, and also how



A Grande Onda/The Big Wave (2011) by Laura Belém.
Foam board, nylon string and lighting, 80 x 220 x 280cm.
Photograph by Edouard Fraipont; work view at Galeria Luísa Strina, São Paulo

there are different versions around the world, in Japan, India and northwestern France, and it doesn't belong to a particular culture," she explains.

Yet her work can be as witty as it is poignant. In her early Pampulha project from 2002, she draped the phallic modernist columns in Belo Horizonte's Museu de Arte da Pampulha in sexy red fabric and had 1940s songs and gamblers' memories emanating from roulette wheels. Looking back to the building's original use as a casino, designed by Brazil's most famous architect Oscar Niemeyer, Belém's scarlet-clad concrete recalled its glamorous former occupants while upending the classically macho modernist architecture with a bit of cross-dressing. For Belém, "The subversion lies in trying to replace qualities like weight, mass and volume from modern architecture with lightness, delicacy and ephemerality."

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BEATRIZ MILHAZES

A riot of dancing shapes in hot colours fills Beatriz Milhazes' paintings. Flowers, squiggles, stripes, voluptuous circles and spirals. They plunge you into a world of carnival, baroque decor, hand-painted street signs, loud 1960s fabric prints and Matisse's vivacious collages. The surfaces aren't perfect. Created by painting onto plastic and then printing and overlaying images, they look weathered, fading to reveal the shapes beneath shapes. In their lacy palimpsests you can see each painting's creation over time and get the sense that it's still ageing.

The past two decades have seen Milhazes emerge as one of Brazil's leading artists. And with work this bold and brilliant, it's no surprise she is an increasingly coveted collaborator for the fashion pack, too, lauded by the likes of Christian Lacroix and Cartier.



Mundy (2011) by Beatriz Milhazes. Collage dimension: 150 x 100cm.
Private collection. © Manuel_Aguas_&_Pepe_Schettino, RJ

You've used fabrics in your early work and are friends with Christian Lacroix, while your paintings have inspired Jason Wu. Does fashion interest you and what is it about Lacroix's approach that is appealing? Do you think designers relate to something in particular in the work that's different from what you see yourself?

"In part, I could say that design has always interested me as a reference for my work, and Christian Lacroix has been a strong one. Also a great meeting. He is part of fashion history and what he does always interests me. Fashion designers in general like my work and sometimes use it as a reference. It works like that – I look at fashion design, and fashion designers look at my work."

You've recently collaborated with Cartier to create artworks from gems. What was the appeal of working with jewellery? Was this a bit like entering Aladdin's cave?

"More or less like that. It was an amazing and unique experience. To develop a mobile 'aquarium' from a maquette I did in my studio in Rio to the actual piece with gold and diamonds gave me a huge experience of learning and discovery."

While you've absorbed many different influences and inspirations, from Frank Stella to Mexican soap opera, you've said that ever since you became a painter, you've wanted to work with elements of your own culture.

"It comes from my interest in the Brazilian modernism. My mother is an art historian and I grew up listening to all the concepts of our art history. Tarsila do Amaral has been my strongest influence from the Brazilian modernism. Matisse on the European side."

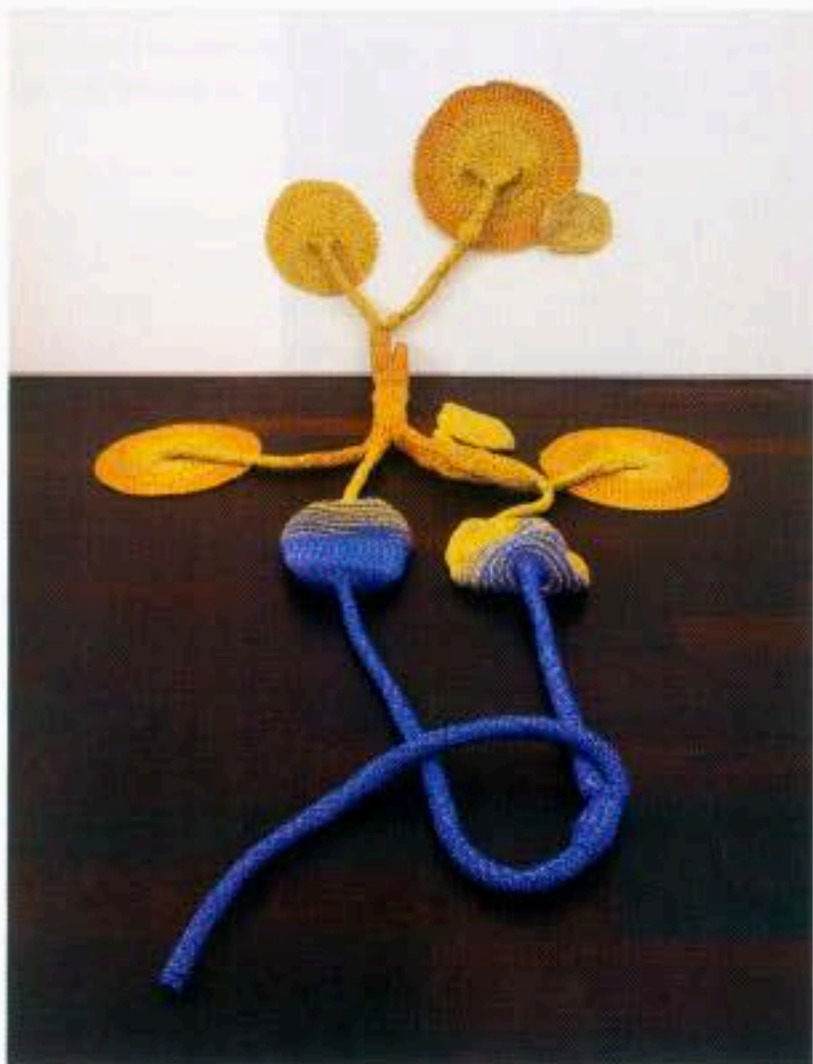
What has been inspiring you in Rio lately?

"To choose three things, the strong presence of nature, the carnival parade, the beach. Rio is a city that you just need to be there and enjoy."

What is your favourite place to escape to?

"If I want a very different kind of nature, it's the desert. More recently I realised that I love deserts."

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Untitled (2010) by Maria Nepomuceno. Braided straw, ropes and beads; 440 x 400 x 350cm, 173.36 x 157.6 x 137.9in. Courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro Gallery London @ Maria Nepomuceno

MARIA NEPOMUCENO

From the kind of ropes and beads ordinarily used for straw sunhats, hammocks or baskets Maria Nepomuceno weaves dazzling sculptures. In her hands, things that have been part of Brazil's indigenous culture since time immemorial mutate into something akin to the snaking stems, petals and cocoons of its ancient landscape.

As she says, "The work can throw us into an infinite field of associations, principally with nature – plants, flowers, fruits, animals, tentacles, human beings, the circulatory system, mouths, eyeballs, limbs, landscapes, volcanoes, lakes, rivers, planets, the cosmos."

Fat straw ropes lie entangled like tentacles or intestines, erupting into round discs of brilliant reds, yellows and blues, like lily leaves of suction pads. Woven containers that are more like the mouths of volcanoes than baskets contain coloured beads resembling berries or pearls. You could be walking in the jungle or exploring inner space. Hammocks, which are among her favourite forms, hang from ceilings, like pods for incubating a whole new alien world.

"The hammock is the most important object in indigenous culture," she explains. "For me it symbolises a great ancestral womb where many Latin Americans, including myself, were originally generated. Indians sleep and give birth in hammocks, carry them with them as temporary homes when they travel, and when they die, they are buried wrapped in these same hammocks."

Nepomuceno is part of a younger generation of Brazilian artists who were first brought to attention by the established artist trio Marcio Botner, Laura Lima and Ernesto Neto, via A Gentil Carioca, their downtown Rio de Janeiro gallery. Rio, she says, is key to her work, and not just for its collision of nature and culture, matched by her woven flora and fauna. "In Rio, forests, beaches and mountains are located in the middle of the city," she explains. "Street carnival is also an influence, starting from the material used in the sculptures, principally the necklace beads that I buy at stores selling carnival materials. It's a big party that celebrates life, the power of transformation and the flux of energy."

Maria Nepomuceno: Tempo para Respirar, until Mar 17; Turner Contemporary, Margate (www.turnercontemporary.org). For more information, visit www.victoria-miro.com

RIVANE NEUENSCHWANDER

It's easy to see why Rivane Neuenschwander is one of Brazil's leading younger artists. Her work is full of games and surprises, delighting with the humblest means. In a twist on the street parade, she has set ants marching off with sugar-coated confetti and got fish to rewrite love stories in ever-changing combinations by dragging banners bearing words behind them.

It's not just animals that participate in her slippery tales either. Gallery goers might be invited to write wishes on ribbons, or find themselves stuck to adhesive wallpaper or working with a forensics sketch artist to re-create the face of their first love. As with her maps nibbled by ants or left out in the rain to be spattered and scored, there is always a tension between human order and nature's chaos, pitting the systems we use to categorise the world against life's unpredictable crash, bang and wallop.

Why do animals and nature make good collaborators?

"Words carried by fish and ants, or punctuation marks eaten by a parrot, seem to show a contradiction between man and nature, but the absurdity of a word within the realm of animals rather draws our attention to life's different structures. Working with the wind, ants or snails, I search for a certain confrontation or collaboration of chance and control. In the end, it is the fish that write a love letter with the movement of their bodies, through the expression of their looks and the indifference in regards to our language, not even mentioning the unintentional crossing of the words they carry on their tails."

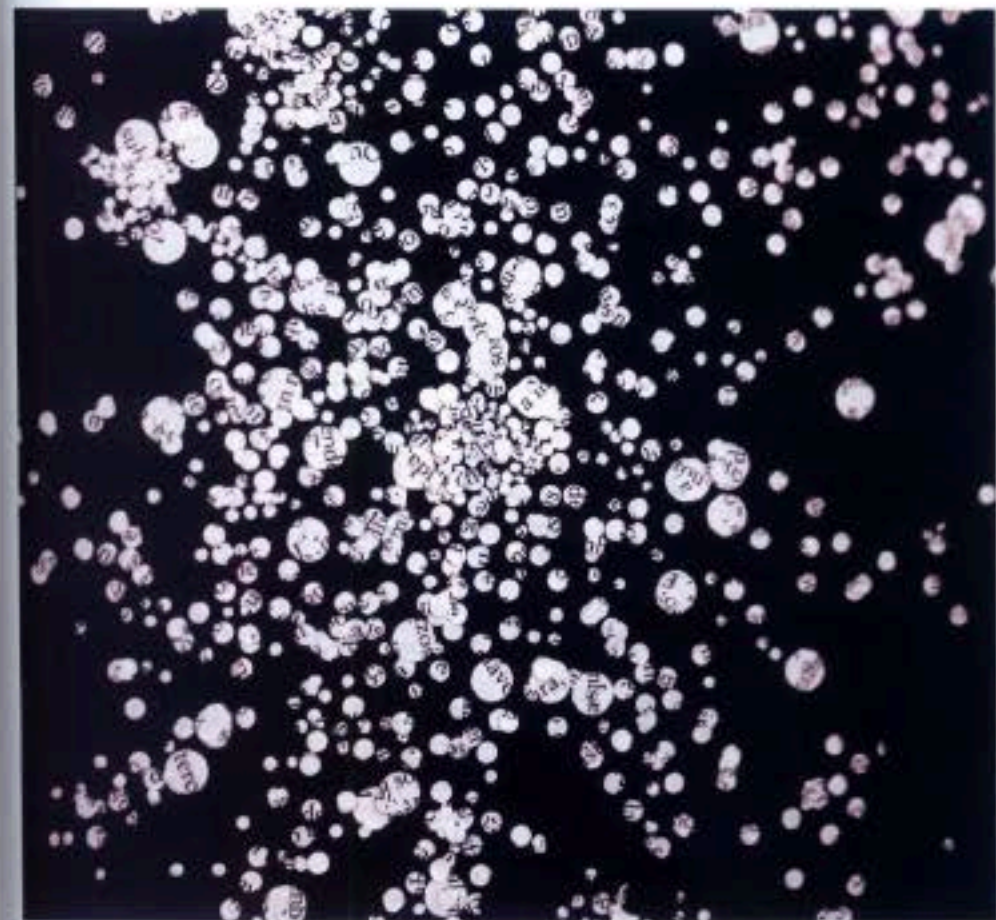
Your earlier works were specifically focused on Brazilian culture – *I Wish Your Wish* (2003), for instance. Was this because you particularly wanted to engage with your country's culture and history?

"I spent most of my life in Brazil, and it is part of my person and consequently my work. Some of my works reference it directly. I'm interested in the popular means of communication through painted banners in the street, Brazilian vernacular furniture and in folk traditions, such as the ribbons of the Bonfim church in Salvador, votive paintings or simply carnival. Then there are the works that feed off the experience of daily life in Brazil, off my memories and affection, like the fear of walking in the street at night or the euphoria provoked by the howling gales before a tropical rainstorm, or feeling vulnerable in the light of social violence."

What has been inspiring or interesting you lately in Brazil?

"In general, I have been thinking about barriers, the definition of boundaries, borders and distance. In the city, I have been researching public barriers, installed unofficially to fence off construction sites or property. They're usually very creative and not necessarily functional. In rural areas, I follow the annual dry-season fires, which go beyond any control and ignore all physical obstacles. I am currently also studying indigenous astronomy, looking at the constellations that are absolutely integrated into nature and founded on the cultural and spiritual values of the various Brazilian-Indian tribes."

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One Thousand and One Possible Nights (2011) by Rivane Neuenschwander. Collage on paper, 67 pieces. Framed, each 50.5 x 39.4cm (19 7/8 x 15 5/8 in). Whole 1,158.6 x 264.5cm (456 1/4 x 97 in). Image detail. © Rivane Neuenschwander. Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery (London)

TONICO LEMOS AUAD

The work of Tónico Lemos Auad rarely stays around for very long. Over the past decade, it has included delicate drawings, scratched into the plump yellow exteriors of bananas, which are soon absorbed into black freckles that gradually take over the skins as the fruit ripens and then decays. He has sculpted bunnies and foxes from carpet fluff, ephemeral creatures that would literally blow away if you breathed on them. In one sculpture, what looks like a gilded designer vase turns out to be made from glitter and grapes.

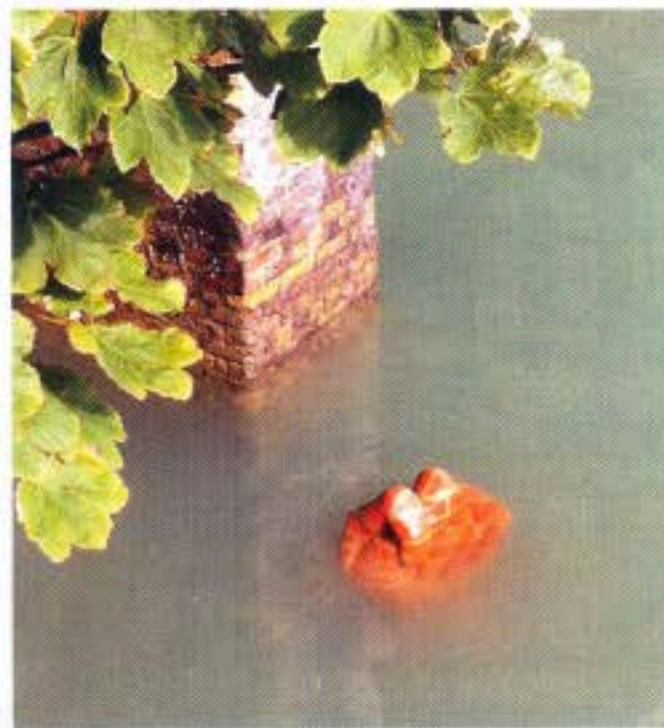
All the playful materials have a more serious edge. As Auad says, "In some works, death is more imminent. Their physicality is not meant to last in the original shape and form. The transformation into something else might be more important." One of his most recent works, *Reflected Archaeology* (2011), is a kind of giant scratch card: a wall of silver that gallery goers are invited to scratch away, revealing what's underneath. It's a process fraught with the "excitement and disappointment" that goes with the leap of faith made playing the lottery.

For those excavating the wall with coins and keys, however, the buried treasure is hardly a letdown: a huge image of the Cirio de Nazaré procession of pilgrims that takes place in the artist's hometown, Belém. "Thousands of pilgrims gather in the streets and rivers of the city, following an image of a saint, Nossa Senhora de Nazaré," he explains. "A gigantic rope guides the crowd, who eagerly try to get hold of it. In the end it's cut into pieces, which serve as a strong symbol of faith."

Though based in London for many years, the Brazilian-born artist often references his country's religious rituals and folklore. At the last Folkestone Triennial, he set a white chalk Madonna sculpture in the harbour, her material soon eroding, like the cliffs nearby, and a clasped-hand lucky charm rendered in red brick. "I'm intrigued by the encounter between symbols of religious faith and pagan beliefs," he says of the culture he grew up with. "People will be heavily attached to Catholic beliefs together with Candomblé, originally from Africa, plus all sorts of wellbeing rituals and various superstitions."

Such magic talismans have intriguing parallels with art, of course: objects that have meanings as fragile and changeable as Auad's materials. ■

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Figa (2011) by Tónico Lemos Auad. Brick installation. Image from Folkestone Triennial 2011. © The artist. Courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery (London). Photograph by Thierry Bal