

Medium
Date/Issue
Categorie

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Publication
Section
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Oliver Basciano

ArtReview

Barrão



What's art for: pleasure, protest or profit?

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Barrão

by Oliver Basciano



From ceramic mashups to work with sound- and music-orientated collective Chelipa Ferro, the Brazilian artist has made dissonance a central feature of his explorations of thingness

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The head of a sea lion pokes out the top of a vase. The moustachioed mammalian face wears what is best described as a plaintive look. Look closer though and it seems more the case that the sea lion's head morphs into a vase. Zoom back out and you'll find that vase is glued on top of another vase, which in turn is attached to several more. Take a step back and you'll find that this is just one of four branches of a floor sculpture created by Brazilian artist Barrão, *Nós Somos Assim* (*We Are Like This*, 2013), assembled from large broken fragments of shop-bought, mass-produced porcelain *objets d'art*. Each branch ends in a different animal – the others being an owl, a duck and a cockerel. There's something monstrous about it – the artist's very own Hydra – and an air of doleful resignation is evident on the ornamental animals' painted faces.

Barrão, born Jorge Velloso Borges Leão Teixeira but known for as long as anyone can remember by his nickname, likes to quote a sentence by the poet Mário Quintana, the so-called 'poet of simple things', when talking about works such as *Nós Somos Assim*. 'Because scrap actually – whatever it once was – is a mere transitory state, there's nothing tragic about it.' 'Scrap', Quintana writes, 'is material on vacation.' It is this sense of transition that is abundant in Barrão's sculpture. The Rio de Janeiro-based artist has, since the early 1980s, taken prosaic items, often symbols of bourgeois life, and given them a new verve by mixing elements of one object with those of another into fantastical new arrangements. Besides the gaudy mass-produced ceramics that have been a recurring presence in his work since 2000, the artist has also employed all manner of other consumer items in the service of this goal – from telephones and fridges, to bar tables and Wellington boots.

Beyond his work as a solo artist, Barrão has been a participant in various artist collectives, most notably Six Hands (throughout the 1980s, with Ricardo Basbaum and Alexandre Dacosta) and Chelpe Ferro (formed with Sergio Mekler and Luiz Zerbin in 1995; the three continue to meet on a weekly basis in Mekler's studio), and there is a strong crossover between his own art and both collectives' preoccupation with sound, music-making and audiovisual installations. *TV Cara* (*Face TV*, 1984) is typical of the artist's early habit of covering working televisions in paint, for example. The boxy analogue set has a man's face and shoulders (the traditionally framed shot of the news anchor, perhaps) cartoonishly applied to the screen. Similar faces, this time with speech bubbles issuing from their mouths, are painted on the front of two further sets exhibited in the 1984 group show *Como Vai Você, Geração 80?* (*How Are You Doing, 80s Generation?*) at the art school in Rio's Parque Lage. Mounted on stools, each is installed to suggest that the figures on the boxes are in conversation with each other. These and other such works were exhibited switched on and tuned to a local channel, causing a playful dissonance between sound and imagery. It is this sense of discord or visual confusion that has been an abiding provocation in the artist's work. One can see it markedly in the 1989 sculpture *Telefunk* too. Another television set, the casing painted in blue car-paint, has had its screen all but masked by a mesh of spectacle lenses, each offering a different degree of magnification. Here the transmitted images of newscasts and soaps – whatever happened to be

How much can something mutate or evolve yet maintain its original state of 'objecthood'?

at the time – come out as a headache-inducing blur. This interest in distortion, and discord more generally, perhaps stems from Barrão's roots in experimental music. As much as Chelpe Ferro make kinetic sound installations for gallery settings, they also play live gigs, frequently employing DIY instruments or misusing conventional ones. In their installations they often include junk or waste materials combined with hijacked motors or elements of audiovisual equipment – be it a room of plastic bags attached to motors taken from kitchen blenders that rustle as they spin (*Jungle Jam*, 2010) or their commission for Brazil's participation in the 2005 Venice Biennale, *Acqua Falsa*, in which a giant amp emitting abstract noise was strung

across the water-flooded pavilion. The live gigs are typically atonal walls of sounds combining instruments and digital software, compositions that sit somewhere between

digital hardcore and postrock. Barrão's personal involvement in the Rio de Janeiro rock scene is further evidenced in the collaged sleeve-art he's made over the years for albums by myriad musician friends and their various bands (including Fausto Fawcett's 1987 funk-punk hybrid LP *Fausto Fawcett e os Robôs Efêmeros*).

There are two artworks from this early period that point to Barrão's transition from audiovisual to ceramic sculptures. *Elefantes de Circo* (*Circus Elephants*, 1986), consisting of four turntables, upon which are identical clay elephants, marks the artist's first use of animal ornaments. Synchronised, the animals turn in silence. Perhaps more striking in terms of how Barrão's art was to develop formally, however, introducing his interest in the breaking of everyday objects and the collaging of their parts, is *Mulher Coca-Cola* (*Coca-Cola Woman*, 1987). In the sculpture the torn-off head and arms of a doll are placed on the neck of a full mixer-bottle of Coca-Cola. The Coke bottle has a rich lineage in art, most obviously with its repeated appearance in Warhol's screenprints, but also Cildo Meireles's *Coca-Cola Project*, one of the two *Insertions into Ideological Circuits* the artist enacted in 1970, adding political slogans to the bottles before returning them to the shop and putting them back into circulation. Barrão's work is less outwardly political – there's none of the direct commentary on American imperialism of Meireles's project, for example – a testament to the younger artist's interest in testing out forms against each other through aesthetic play: the Coke bottle, of course, was designed after the female form.

Can an elephant be an elephant without its trunk (or ears or eyes)?

Initially Barrão just went at the ceramic ornaments – which he collects over a period of time and stores taxonomically in his studio – with a hammer, intuitively working out how the resulting broken fragments could be glued back together. Later he made use of an industrial ceramic-cutter, giving him greater control over the dismemberment of the original ornaments and resulting sculptural recompositions. In divining a feel for how colour and form might coalesce in each work, he is in effect developing an alternative taxonomy, each sculptural amalgam operating as a proposition for a new way of cataloguing the various collected objects from which it is formed. *Rastro* (*Trace*, 2013) features a cat ornament, the kind of kitschy thing that was the mainstay of working- and middle-class homes during the 1950s. To the rear end of the cat Barrão has added a funnellike section of china (its origin unclear) that attaches in turn

facing page *Bicho de Sorte* (*Lucky Animal*), 2006, plastic, wood and epoxy resin, 29 × 19 × 38 cm.
Photo: Julio Callado

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above *Nós Somos Assim (We Are Like This)*, 2013, porcelain and epoxy resin, 111 × 65 × 75 cm. Photo: Eduardo Ortega
preceding pages *Rastro (Trace)*, 2013, pottery and epoxy resin, 54 × 114 × 35 cm. Photo: Julio Callado

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Boca do Mato (Forest Entrance), 2009, pottery and epoxy resin, 177 × 72 × 68 cm. Photo: Julio Callado

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to a bulky array of different patterned, coloured and broken porcelain vessels that have presumably been chosen for the slight curves evident in each of them. The result has a distinctly bodily feel to it – with the parts delineated by the epoxy lines gluing them together, it resembles one of those diagrams that details the different cuts of a farm animal. The cat, in turn, looks over its shoulder as if surprised to see the porcelain beast it has seemingly farted out.

Other works from this era are equally nightmarish (though not without their humour), reminiscent of Hieronymus Bosch's tortured creatures or the poor etched animal hybrids in Goya's *Los Caprichos* (1797–8). In *Bicho de Sorte* (*Lucky Animal*, 2006), for example, a plastic Godzilla with a fierce snarl is made to look Frankensteinian, with its new cumbersome prosthetic limb, a wood-carved hand, fist clenched. Yet perhaps what we are seeing is less gruesome than one might first suppose. Take Barrão's *Multi Elephas* (2009), in which a herd of stately elephant figurines are piled on top of each other. Each of the original animals has a similar pose (though they vary greatly in colour and, to an extent, size). As a viewer we can recognise the species despite Barrão's dismembering and remixing of their parts, a fact that perhaps allows us to think on ideas such as the 'one and the many' and of how much something can mutate or evolve yet maintain its original state of 'objecthood' throughout, whether that be the ageing of the human body or an ornament that has succumbed to Barrão's splicing.

Think of (and pity too) the Nellie in *Boca do Mato* (*Forest Entrance*, 2009), whose head has been replaced by a cumbersome mountain of green and yellow chinaware, while a small Buddha rides its neck. There are further existential questions at stake here. Can an elephant be an elephant without its trunk (or ears or eyes)? Even without this fundamental body part, we recognise this partial form as belonging to Elephantidae. Indeed, the question of the existence of essential objecthood is most obviously raised by those sculptures in which quotidian items have been deployed, for their deployment makes redundant any use-value they may once have had. Works such as the *Morretão* (2014) series, towers made up of several coloured cylindrical porcelain blocks, which are in fact the

stands for bathroom sinks, and which, without the basins that rest atop – and 'complete' – them, are without purpose. Yet the blocks remain unchanged in substance. Likewise *Com Que Roupa Eu Vou?* (*What Clothes Am I Going to Wear?*, 2007) is recognisable as a mashed-up gold-and-white tea service, but one that will never again be used to serve tea.

These sculptures also owe a debt to the artist's experience as a musician and the gradual mass layering of sound that characterises Chelpe Ferro's live performances as a band. One of the group might play the trumpet, or a guitar riff, and this will be initially recognisable as such by the audience. These noises are then typically fed through software to remix, loop and layer them on top of each other to such an extent that gradually the individual instrument is all but lost within a cacophonous wall of sound. Something similar happens to the familiar objects used in the sculptures – be they elephants or items of bathroom furniture – as the elements are broken down and rebuilt into strange new arrangements that nonetheless retain their original DNA.

This fundamental objecthood of 'things' – of how we recognise their inherent qualities – is further addressed in Barrão's most recent work, in which he casts everyday items in epoxy resin, assembling them in various combinations and juxtapositions. As the resulting sculptures are then painted white with enamel, they resemble archetypes of familiar forms. *Vainosmal* (2015–16) features an owl and a human skull, both motifs stripped down to the barest details needed to recognise them as 'an owl', 'a skull'. The three identical drills in *3 em 1* (2016), attached one on top of each other, are like diagrammatic line drawings of drills in their nonspecificity of make and model, with many of their distinguishing details removed: the Platonic ideal of a drill. The three books piled architecturally in *I, II e III* (2015), devoid of title, author and other such information, become symbolic of *all* books. When exhibited en masse, floor-, wall- and pedestal-mounted, the details and individuality erased by the uniform white, they come across not as a gallery of 'things' but as something that exists in a moment prior to that thingness: a gallery of ur-things. ar

TV Cara (*Face TV*), 1984, television set and latex paint.
Photo: Rafael Adorján

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3 em 1, 2016, epoxy resin and synthetic enamel, 47×25×19 cm. Photo: Eduardo Ortega
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