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 Publication EBONY, David. *The Plight of Matter*. Art in America, 02.2001

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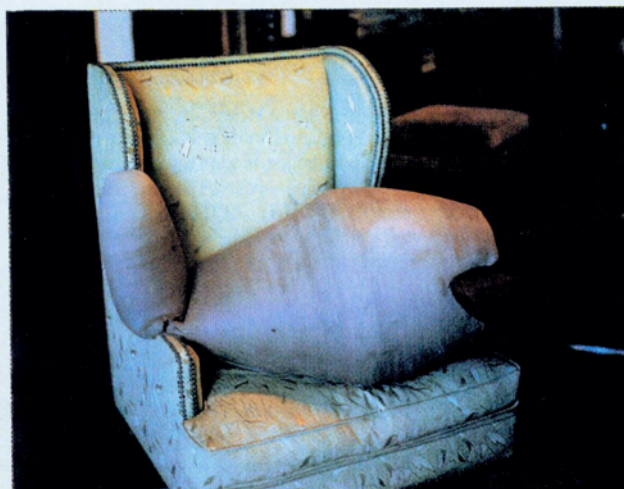
The Plight of Matter

Combining unusual materials and procedures, 40-year-old Brazilian artist Nuno Ramos has gained broad attention in his homeland for his sculptures and installations. The subject of a 15-year museum survey in Brazil, he recently showed a major installation on the West Coast.

BY DAVID EBONY

A piece of matter, as it is known empirically, is not a single existing thing, but a system of existing things. When several people simultaneously see the same table, they all see something different; therefore "the" table, which they are supposed all to see, must be either a hypothesis or a construction.

—Bertrand Russell



Nuno Ramos: chair piece from the "Fungi" series, 1998, terra-cotta and period furniture; at Museu da Chácara do Céu, Rio de Janeiro. Photo Eduardo Gianinni.

Opposite, Ruined Pot Not Broken, 1998, terra-cotta and Vaseline, approx. 4 feet high. Collection Museu de Arte Moderna, São Paulo. Photo Rômulo Fialdini. Photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Galeria Camargo Vilça, São Paulo.

It might be useful to keep in mind Bertrand Russell's relativistic definition of matter¹ when entering a room filled with works by Nuno Ramos, a 40-year-old artist from São Paulo. Ramos uses unlikely combinations of metal, wood, clay, glass, wax, resin, cloth, lanolin, salt, sand, water, oil, Vaseline, paper and paint—sometimes all in the same piece. His compositions resist clearly defined boundaries, stable centers of gravity and distinct focal points, not to mention restrictive meanings. Nevertheless, the artist conveys in each piece a consistent poetic sense. Ramos's work was recently the subject of a museum survey encompassing most of his approximately 15-year career. The show debuted last year at the Centro de Arte Hélio Oiticica, Rio de Janeiro, and traveled to the Museu de Arte Moderna, São Paulo. Currently, his work is featured in "UltraBaroque," a large touring show of new Latin American art, which debuted at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, and appears at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Feb. 4-May 6. During the run of

"UltraBaroque" in San Diego, Ramos was invited to produce a major, site-specific installation. Titled *blackandblue*, the monumental piece was on view at the downtown branch of the San Diego MCA.

A largely self-taught artist, Ramos studied philosophy at the University of São Paulo. He aspired to be a writer and produced a short monograph on Pascal, as well as a number of essays, poems and stories. Many of these early 1980s writings were collected in *Cujo*, a book published in Brazil in 1993. Finding the blank page a crueler sphinx than the blank canvas, however, he turned to art-making full time in the mid-1980s.

Ramos's first mature works were large-scale abstract oil paintings of thick impasto and dark, bold lines that recall certain German neo-expressionist works of the period, particularly those of Kiefer and Baselitz. By the mid-'80s Ramos was showing with Casa Sete or Seventh House, a loose affiliation of Paulistan artists, including Carlito Carvahlhosa, Fábio Miguez, Paolo Monteiro and Rodrigo Andrade. The group's diverse works, which ran from Minimalism to expressionist-tinged abstraction, caused a stir in a 1985 exhibition at the Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro, and at the São Paulo Bienal later that year.

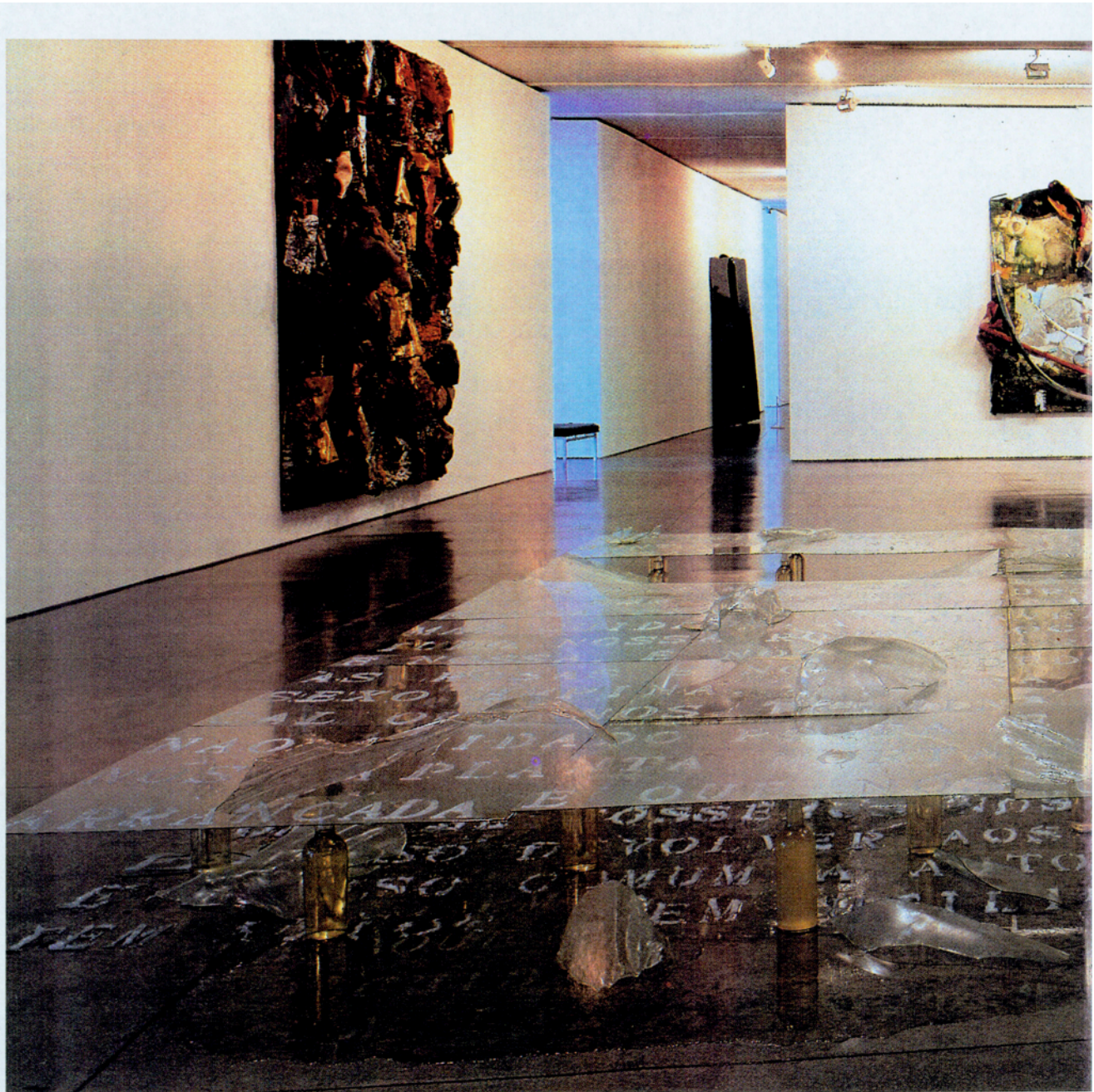
During this period, Ramos developed a complex visual vocabulary; his influences ranged from international figures such as Pollock, Beuys, Nauman, Smithson, Serra, Heizer, Stella, Kounellis and Merz to key Brazilians including Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Clark, Cildo Meireles and Tunga. As Ramos gained confidence and exposure, his painting-derived compositions grew bolder and more sculptural. Attaching scrap wood and metal, crumpled paper and rolled pieces of sheet metal to large wood panels, he produced allover compositions slathered with gobs of dark brown, black, green and red pigment.

Some of the enormous wall reliefs of recent years bear outsized appendages that probe far into the exhibition space. On view in São Paulo were several examples, including an untitled 1999 work whose theatrical scale (10 by 16 by 9 feet) intensified the kind of personalized abstract drama taking place on the surface. The work features billowing swags of colorful cloth set against a silver and gold foil background splashed with red and brown oil paint, and thin copper tubing traversing the width of the entire field. Narrow cardboard or metal tubes covered in red cloth counterpoint a bright green cloth-covered bent tube on the left that juts out into the room like a long arm.

Over the course of the past 15 years, Ramos has turned increasingly to freestanding sculptures and installations. Despite the rigid geometry that is an attribute of many of his 3-D works, Ramos often strives for a kind of fluidity that lacks easily classifiable shapes or a single focal point. His labor-intensive efforts sometimes result in what might be termed anti-composition or formlessness. According to critic Yve-Alain Bois, "formless" works are those that "brush modernism against the grain," perform operations "countering modernism's formal certainties . . . insulting the very opposition of form and content."²

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The unifying element among Ramos's disparate sculptures and installations is a feeling of intense energy achieved not only by the fusion of unconventional and seemingly incompatible materials but by the artist's interventions, which range from gentle manipulation in some pieces to violent attacks in others. Among the earliest works in the São Paulo survey was an untitled minimalist object of 1987, about 6 feet high, made of 3-foot-long four-by-fours stained white, stacked like Lincoln Logs to form a boxlike column. After methodically arranging the wood pieces, Ramos filled the spaces between them with caked limestone, some of which spilled through the crevices onto the floor, surrounding the piece with small mounds of white dust.

By contrast, the installation *Ruined Pot Not Broken*, 1998, implies a hostile act. It looks like a group of large ceramic storage jars that have been wrecked by vandals. Now in the São Paulo museum's permanent collection, the work is composed of three unadorned, tall (about 4 feet high), variously shaped terra-cotta pots filled with Vaseline. Each of the vessels, which resemble archaic Mediterranean jars for oil or olives, was cracked at the top and sides by several whacks of a sledgehammer or ax. From the cracks and fissures, globs of Vaseline ooze onto the floor. The piece suggests a scene of pillage. In this and in a number of other works, the artist seems to capture a sense of the violence of history.

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Ramos first drew national attention in Brazil for a work that deals with violence and death in that nation's prisons. Titled *III*, this politically charged 1992 installation, shown in Porto Alegre and later in São Paulo, was inspired by a prison uprising that year at the São Paulo penitentiary, in which 111 prisoners were killed. Ramos covered 111 medium-sized cement blocks with asphalt and resin. Placed on the floor, each piece bears a lead plaque etched with a victim's name and a photocopied newspaper clipping about the massacre. In a kind of private ritual conducted in his studio, he burned a page from the Bible for each victim and sprinkled the ashes and charred bits of paper over the sculptures. The blocks, when installed in a gallery, are accompanied by photo enlargements of aerial views of São

Untitled (foreground), 1992, Vaseline, paraffin, oil, glass, bottles, 2 1/4 by 23 by 13 feet. Untitled (left), 1998, Vaseline, paraffin, pigment, tissue, metal, gold leaf, 11 1/4 by 10 1/4 feet. Untitled (center rear), 1998, mirror, fabric, plastics, metal, paint on wood, 8 1/4 by 19 by 8 1/4 feet. Untitled marble-and-Vaseline sculpture (right), 1998, approx. 6 by 9 1/2 by 3 1/2 feet; all works at the Museu de Arte Moderna. Photo Eduardo Gianinni.

Paulo that encompass the prison vicinity, as well as fragments of the artist's poems, stenciled on the wall in large block letters made of Vaseline. The translucent, yellowish text is barely visible against the white wall.

The artist used similar procedures in a number of works from the period. A large untitled floor piece from 1992, for example, features 60 abutting clear glass panels, each about 2 feet square. Raised about a foot from the

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Milky Way, 1995, cast aluminum, glass, water, lime, Vaseline, paraffin, dimensions variable; at Museu de Arte Moderna.
 Photo Eduardo Gianinni.

Ramos's San Diego installation grouped dense, gritty, tomblike constructions of overwhelming physicality that also referred to issues outside the art context.

floor on a horizontal plane, the glass plates are supported by clear glass soda or beer bottles, most of which are partially filled with clear or yellow liquid (water and oil). Some of the liquids spilled out onto the gallery floor in small puddles and rivulets. Several wavy sheets of thin, handmade glass, resembling crumpled pieces of paper, are placed atop the plate-glass surface and on the floor. Adding to the shimmering translucency of the piece, blocky letters made of Vaseline, stenciled on top of the glass sheets, form passages from *Cujo*. Ramos's book, portions of which were translated into English in a 1997 monograph on his work, contains stream-of-consciousness musings that shed light on the artist's working methods and choice of materials. Lines such as "Water in the eyes, in the mouth, in the urethra. Smoke in the lungs. Wax in the ears. Vaseline in the asshole. Oil in the liver. Stones in the kidneys," reveal much about the equations the artist makes between his preferred sculptural materials and the body.³

Certain aspects of Ramos's project recall Joseph Beuys's endeavor to find a connection between substance and spirit. Following Beuys, Ramos seeks the spiritual in art through a kind of politicized autobiographical approach. Like Beuys, Ramos manages to imbue his humble materials with metaphorical or symbolic significance. Life processes of birth, metamorphosis and decay are explored in works such as *Milky Way* (1995), an elaborate installation on view in São Paulo, which had been previously shown, in 1995, at Brooke Alexander Gallery—the only major work Ramos has presented in New York to date. The installation features numerous small, irregular, clear blown-glass globes suspended a few inches off the floor and walls by means of serpentine cast-aluminum supporting rods. Like a giant cocoon that has just lost its butterfly, each of these podlike formations contains varying amounts of milky fluid made of a lime and water

mixture, some of which has splashed onto the floor and dried in chalky pools. Dozens of small, translucent, pale yellow hemispheres made of Vaseline and paraffin are stuck to the walls; they could be the eggs of some giant insect. The work may be seen as a kind of organic counterpart to Tunga's contemporaneous installations where enormous, industrial-looking receptacles of iron and bronze are arranged on the floor alongside long ropes of braided copper wire and glass vessels filled with iron filings [see *A.Z.A.*, June '98]. Ramos's frequent use of mucilaginous substances that resemble various bodily fluids lends his work a lifelike quality.

The artist's sense of humor is evident in "Fungi," a 1998 series of large, biomorphic, terra-cotta pieces that he integrates with household furniture. In one of these works, which recalls certain Charles Long sculptures, a bulbous, unadorned ceramic object, like a brown pillow, sits in an elegantly upholstered armchair. One end of the blob seems to have engulfed the edge of an adjacent mahogany table, ingesting it like a ravenous slug.

Perhaps the most striking and eloquent works are a series of spare monuments. Two related sculptures, *White Manórá* (1997) and *Black Manórá* (1999), convey a funereal tone. These severe, 6-foot-tall, narrow boxlike shapes, one in white marble and the other in black granite, stand upright like enormous tombstones. Each features a deep groove several feet long, carved lengthwise along the top, into which is inserted a long, thin, rectangular panel of stone, approximately 2 feet high. The artist poured along the top of each piece a large amount of liquid Vaseline, which drips down the sides of the sculptures, forming a sticky puddle at the base. A tarlike viscosity of the liquid covering *Black Manórá* was created by adding ash to the Vaseline.

The recent San Diego installation, *blackandblue*, is similarly elegiac and monumental. For the work, Ramos and a team of 12 assistants built three plywood boxes: one 6-foot cube and two oblong structures, up to 7 feet wide and 16 feet long, which filled the large gallery space. The team covered the structures with more than 18 tons of clay-reinforced black sand, piled on in layers 6 to 8 inches thick. In one of the largest blocks, a long, narrow, clear glass tube with one bulbous end filled with motor oil

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and black pigment, rested in a groove several feet deep, cut lengthwise along the top center. A similar tube hung down the side of the other long block, while a smaller glass vessel filled with an oil and Vaseline mixture lay atop the cube. A massive yet fragile installation, the sand covering eventually crumbled, and the piece was completely destroyed in January, after the San Diego run of the show. It will not appear at the other venues for "UltraBaroque."

The impact of the dense, gritty, tomblike constructions had most to do with *blackandblue*'s overwhelming physicality. But Ramos has stated that the poetic aim of the installation was to lend the solid, architectonic mass of the reductive forms an incongruous feeling of vulnerability. The fine sand conveyed mutability, while the liquid-filled vessels suggested that "the boxes are dripping, pouring out their internal nature."⁴ On another level, the work perhaps touched upon issues outside an art context. The combinations of materials, for instance, and the process of erosion that was an integral part of the piece, hinted at environmental concerns pertinent to California. The work evokes the fragility of the area's geographic features, including its eroding coastline. It also suggested the instability of the earth's crust, where precarious fault lines are a constant threat. The dark liquids have similarly ominous implications, as if to underscore the dangers of offshore oil drilling and the devastation wrought by oil spills.

Conversely, Ramos's procedures and materials can often result in a certain voluptuousness. The erotic overtones of his use of Vaseline, for instance, recall Matthew Barney's early sculptures made of the squishy lubricant. Some of Ramos's recent experiments seem to relate to Barney sculptures such as the refrigerated Vaseline gym bench of 1991. Among the Brazilian's most sensuous works is a series of large marble slabs where bul-

bous glass vessels, partly filled with liquid Vaseline, rest in smooth hollows in the stone. In one untitled 1998 work, a wedge of white marble is gently indented on one side to form a shallow basin. Placed inside this cavity is a glass vessel whose long stem snakes across the surface in a graceful curve.

This work and numerous other pieces by Ramos seem to be part of a struggle to transform inert materials into living things. He shares his metamorphic vision in *Cujo*, where he writes, "Today I saw a lizard. Not a lizard, a leaf resembling a lizard. Not a leaf, a stone resembling a leaf."⁵ Ramos approaches each of his endeavors with a similarly poetic strategy. Examining the relationship between order and chaos, he attempts in the work to illuminate, if not assuage, the anarchic impulses of matter. □

1. Bertrand Russell, *Dictionary of Mind, Matter and Morals*, Lester E. Denonn, ed., New York, Citadel, 1952, p. 144.

2. See Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide*, New York, Zone Books, 1997, p. 16. This volume was published in conjunction with the 1996 exhibition "L'Informe: Mode d'emploi," co-curated by the authors for the Pompidou Center; the show included works by Fontana, Manzoni, Burri, Fautrier, Beuys, Twombly and others.

3. Excerpts from *Cujo* in Brazilian-Portuguese and English were published in *Nuno Ramos*, São Paulo, Editora Atica, 1997, pp. 215-218.

4. Quotes are taken from the author's recent e-mail correspondence with the artist.

5. Ramos, excerpt from *Cujo* in *Nuno Ramos*, p. 215.

"Nuno Ramos," curated by Alberto Tassinari and Rodrigo Naves, debuted at the Centro de Arte Hélio Oiticica, Rio de Janeiro [Oct. 15-Nov. 27, 1999], and appeared at the Museu de Arte Moderna, São Paulo [Jan. 18-Mar. 19, 2000]. The installation *blackandblue* appeared at the downtown facility of the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, to coincide with "UltraBaroque," at the museum's La Jolla venue, a group show of Latin American artists, including Ramos. Curated by Elizabeth Armstrong and Victor Zamudio-Taylor, the exhibition opened at the MCA, San Diego [Sept. 24, 2000-Jan. 7, 2001]. It is now on view at the Modern Art Museum, Fort Worth [Feb. 4-May 6, 2001], and will travel to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art [Aug. 18, 2001-Jan. 2, 2002], the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto [Jan. 30-Apr. 28, 2002], the Miami Art Museum [June 20-Aug. 24, 2002] and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis [Oct. 13, 2002-Jan. 5, 2003].