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Rodrigo Matheus  
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KVARAN, Gunnar B; OBRIST, Hans Ulrich; RASPAIL, Thierry. *Imagine Brazil*. Oslo:  
Astrup Fearnley Museet; Lyon: Musée d'Art Contemporain de Lyon.

Author  
Artist

Kiki Mazzucchelli  
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# RODRIGO MATHEUS

With a career spanning more than ten years, Rodrigo Matheus has produced an extremely singular body of works to date. This singularity, however, does not result from working insistently with a particular medium, but is characterised by the distinctive procedures and operations that he carries out in his ongoing investigations around the affective and symbolic qualities of architecture, environment and space.

His studies at an experimental architecture school in the 1990s before enrolling in a Fine Arts BA seem to have been key to Matheus' artistic practice: a prominent feature in his work is a keen awareness of how physical space conditions life and is in turn conditioned by cultural, economic and social constructs. In his sculptural pieces, installations, collages and videos he often brings together a series of everyday elements, which are carefully selected to create strangely engaging compositions. These can include both industrially made objects such as tripods, picture frames or pieces of furniture, and natural materials like seashells, plants, sand and stones. A similarly significant feature of his work is the displacement and reorganisation of ordinary objects. This process is at once planned and intuitive, but above all considers the inherent qualities of these objects and the social, economic or social circuits in which they are inserted.

In a series of 'collages' produced over the past two years, Matheus appropriated several documents dating from the early twentieth century recording commercial transactions between Brazil and England—where he has been based since 2010. These hung from delicate threads pinned to the wall and were juxtaposed in different compositions that included other elements such as artificial plants, postcards of idyllic tropical beaches, shells or fishing baits. By combining historical materials with others that suggest an idealised image of the tropics, Matheus creates a series of relics that refer both to transatlantic enterprises dating back

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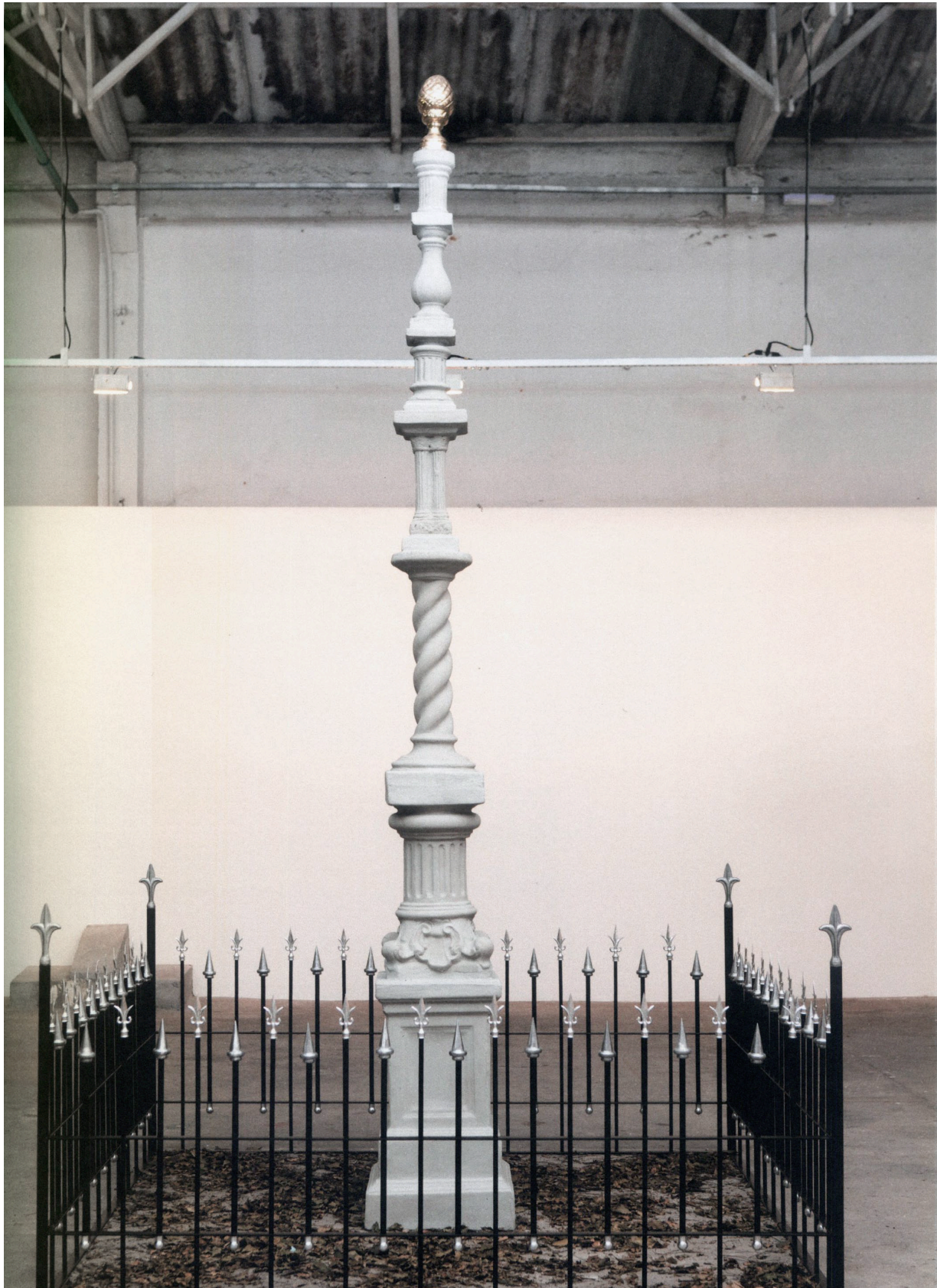


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Monumento ao Estilo, 2010



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- > to the sixteenth century and the current renewed international interest in Brazil as a commercial partner.

The allusion to landscape is also a recurring theme in many works, although in each case it is evoked in relation to a precise set of circumstances and specific materials. It appears, for instance, as the dry mountainous horizon suggested by the lines that support a series of juxtaposed empty picture frames strategically arranged on the wall in *Structure for Landscape* (2012). This stern-looking, albeit playful piece is a kind of semiotic game: the display structure (frame) that would normally hold an image representing a landscape is used in this work as the material through which this representation is achieved.

In another series of works, concrete-cast neoclassical architectural elements commonly found in garden centres or home-decoration shops are partly covered with intricately painted seascapes. These were produced for Matheus's solo exhibition *Hollywood* (2010) in Rio de Janeiro, inspired by the many historical buildings erected in the city by the Portuguese Crown in colonial times that display similar architectural features. Referring both to the civilising role played by colonial architecture against a backdrop of the indomitable force of tropical nature, and the kitsch quality of these contemporary fake elements that appeal to the petit-bourgeois taste of local elites, the works underline the artificial character of this particular city/landscape.

The series *The Future, the Flux and the Helping Hand* (2013), in collaboration with artist Ana Cvorovic, proposes yet another take on the idea of landscape. This large floor installation combines a range of industrial and natural materials in complex sculptural arrangements that create moments of geometric rigour interspersed with seemingly organic spontaneity. A constructivist assemblage of metal trestles and mirrors merges into a trail of white pebbles that extend along the floor into a shape reminiscent of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, which in turn spills into another trail of sand that reaches an upturned wooden table, where a curled birch branch sprouts from one of its legs. This intricate installation evokes at once the image of architectural models, art-historical references and other more obscure, indecipherable micro-narratives that play with the symbolic and formal properties of everyday materials.

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Another significant aspect of Matheus's production in recent years has been an interest in exploring what can be broadly defined as the 'back-stage' of art exhibitions: namely the logistical or technical apparatuses pertaining to the exhibition-making process. His solo show *Handle with Care* at the Fortes Vilaça warehouse in 2010 was a landmark in this direction. Here the artist created a monumental and labyrinthine installation in the vast gallery space using dozens of artwork crates that are stored in this building. As visitors moved through this imposing environmental installation, they encountered a series of niches inhabited by quirky elements: a large pyramidal crate, a video captured from Google Earth showing a view of the Parthenon projected inside a large crate, a seascape painting discreetly positioned between two mirrors in the bottom shelf of the large storage rack, creating an infinite horizon. Although these particular elements exist as individual works, the installation as a whole dissipated after the exhibition was over, as the crates were returned to their original place and reinserted in the circuit of storage and shipping.

This idea of the impermanence of the artwork was taken even further in Matheus's project for the Panorama da Arte Brasileira (2011), a biennial exhibition of Brazilian art organised by the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art. In this case, he constructed a series of temporary sculptural works with materials related to installation, logistics and exhibition-design processes. A tall pile of crates with theatrical lighting was transformed into an enigmatic monument. Other works were much more inconspicuous, and might not even have been noticed by less attentive visitors: a spotlight projected on a blank wall, combined with an empty picture frame taken from the museum storage and the line projected by a laser level; bubble-wrap covering windows, or a piece of kraft paper left by the technicians after the installation. As the artist explains, he wanted to 'expend as little energy as possible by appropriating the energy directed at the process of installing an exhibition and interrupting the flux of materials used in the installation for the period of the exhibition and then putting them back in circulation.'<sup>1</sup> Again, the materials were returned to their original contexts and functions, but this time there was absolutely nothing left.

<sup>1</sup> In conversation with the author, April 2013.