

Title	Indirectly Flowers	Author	Rodrigo Moura
Date	2007	Artist	Erika Verzutti
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## Indirectly Flowers

Erika Verzutti was born in São Paulo. This statement, apparently so neutral, is pregnant with implications. Generally speaking, between the year of Erika's birth, 1971, and the year of her first exhibition, 1995, São Paulo asserted itself as the main cultural and artistic center of Brazil.<sup>1</sup> If, on the one hand, such phenomenon reflected a world trend, on the other, it caused São Paulo to become one of the most dynamic international art centers. Throughout this period the emergence of new artists and of a new establishment had a decisive impact on the process of education of a younger generation.<sup>2</sup> Quite a few people whose names used to appear in the newspaper's culture section, TV programs and emergent art galleries in the late eighties and early nineties started to conduct workshops in studios and schools attended by younger artists. Even though she had studied graphic design in college, Erika mentions<sup>3</sup> several artists from whom she took lessons and who were more important than her college major in her artistic education: Ana Tavares, Carlito Carvalhosa, Sérgio Romagnolo, Leda Catunda. All of them deeply identified with São Paulo's art scene and having their work in the public eye in the early nineties. Erika points out another crucial agent of her artistic training: the circuit. Most likely, her generation was the first one in Brazil that came of age in touch with a circuit and an art market developing fast, in which art assumes the role of cultural merchandise.

Asked her opinion about this matter, Erika seems attentive to that of a tradition of art made in São Paulo: that of formalism. However, to the typical concerns of this tradition, related to the materials and to the forms, the artist associates a universe oriented towards everyday life and the ordinary experience of the work of art as something akin to ornament.

This generates within her art a position which, in disguise, is anti-conceptual, since the two systems criticize each other. Erika reached a significant formulation of her work, i.e., it relates both to objects loaded with prior meanings and to formal plastic issues. "It seems more real to me" and "at the same time it is highly deformable". These terms bring her art closer to the punk aesthetic, through the appropriation of forms used as models, such as the rock song based on just a few chords, to which she adds distortion, urgency and self-deprecation.

## 2.

Of all the definitions of *vase* I have found, the one given by the *Lello Universal* dictionary<sup>4</sup> is, I would say, the one that comes closest to Erika Verzutti's appropriation of this object-paradigm: "A recipient made of sundry materials, in several shapes and for various uses, appropriate to contain liquid or solid substances. A container, usually made of clay, to be filled with soil for the cultivation of flowers". Although her vases do not contain substances, in the physical sense of this word, they do contain colors, shapes, images, repertoires, paintings, drawings, accidents, body parts, as

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<sup>1</sup> I regard this long period of time not only as the one when new collectors came into being, but also as the starting point of a commercial circuit of art galleries, such as São Paulo, Subdistrito, Luisa Strina, Millan, Raquel Arnaud, Thomas Cohn and Triângulo, most of which are still thriving.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. LAGNADO, Lisette. "Bolsa Pampulha: o meio e a formação do artista hoje". In: MOURA, Rodrigo (org). *Bolsa Pampulha 2003-2004* (Belo Horizonte: Museu de Arte da Pampulha, 2004), p.27-34. In this essay Lagnado looks into different ways of young artists education. Republished in Ferreira, Glória, org. *Crítica de Arte no Brasil: Temáticas Contemporâneas* (Rio de Janeiro: Funarte, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Unless it is otherwise stated, every quotation of the artist is from her correspondence with the author, in July and August 2007. The studio where she attended these workshops was the Oficina Três Rios, later renamed Oswald de Andrade.

<sup>4</sup> *Lello Universal em 2 Volumes*. Porto: Lello e Irmão, n.d.

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well as parts from other corporeal vases, other objects. Indirectly, flowers. In 2002, at the Liverpool Biennial, Erika was the curator of the exhibition “poT”, in which she collected works of over thirty artists, herself included, inspired by the vase shape. And, in the introduction of the catalogue, she announced that “just as in traditional pottery, their manufacturing processes are very important”<sup>5</sup>, underlining the fact that “the artist’s attention to daily objects demonstrates a wish to maintain the artistic activity close to our habits”. Since then, in the process of making and reinventing different vases and pots, the idea has been haunting the artist. At first they were made of raw painted clay, for the artist refused to fire them, in order to turn them into ceramics: her vases are solid volumes and she would avoid creating a hollow in them. But her aims became even more evident as she switched over to bronze.

*Saramandaia* (2006) took its name from a famous soap opera of the seventies,<sup>6</sup> in which one of the characters explodes. The sculpture is a pot that, like of a many-headed animal, assembles pieces of other sculptures — an ostrich head, a naked torso, a palm, geometric segments, etc. — all of them put together in the pot, like a medusa, a reflux of leftovers from other sculptures, disposed as work tools. From the same stock is *Jaspera em Casa* [*Jaspera at home*] (2006), which casts in bronze a pineapple body surmounted by a crown made of bristly paint brushes which in turn were painted, both work and title directly alluding to Jasper Johns’ 1960 bronze with the Savarin coffee can. These works are the rich unfolding of some of Erika’s first and most eloquent exercises in modeling: the metalinguistic *Cisne com Pincel* [*Swan with brush*] (2003), the *Vulcãozinho* [*Small volcano*] (2003) erupting, the elephant foot *Bronze* (2003).

### 3.

Her two-dimensional works are vases too: dresses and skirts in a conic shape. Contrarily to the idea of creating objects to be dressed and thus activated by the public, what is made here are static decoupages of wood and paper suggesting the shape of the clothes. When it comes to Erika’s paintings, it is impossible not to surrender to the temptation of inventorying their elements, following the trail blazed by the artist herself: “buttocks, songbirds, mountains, suns, seas, flowers, breasts, penises, bear, *I love you*, a bunch of grapes”, Hello Kitty, a pineapple, a clown, a painted vase, eyes, mouths and noses, Mickey Mouse, an eggplant, beach scenes, a swallow, a church, shrubbery and climbing vines, geometric patterns, a she-wolf, the moon, an owl. We could keep going. But, in this overdose of motives, sometimes isolated in sober compositions (*Gata* [*Pussycat*], 2005, a dress with a cat’s tail), sometimes carnivalized in strange allegories (*Ursa Maior* [*Ursa Major*], 2005), there seems to be something beyond the idea of making (again) a painting automatic, or kitsch, or psychedelic, or childish. In this case, re-mixing figures, repertoires, rhetorics and ways of painting serves a program. One would say that, as if they were operated by a structuralist graphic, the works magnify and reduce the intensities between high and low repertoires, references and qualities of representation, hits and misses, direct and figurative meanings, languages and bodies. What matters, here, is not so much to invariably stay on the same side of the fence, but to stretch all the boundaries to a point where one doesn’t know anymore what is inside and what is outside, what is above and what is below, what is ahead and what is behind.

<sup>5</sup> “poT”. Catalogue of the eponymous exhibition. Liverpool: The Liverpool Biennial – The Independent, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> *Saramandaia* was broadcast in 1976 by Rede Globo [Globo Network] and presented to the audience in the fantastic universe of its author, Dias Gomes.

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Another collection, of paintings on paper, was created having buttocks as its theme. Bottoms covered by thongs, which contained other drawings and adornments; and little chain belts that remind one of Rio de Janeiro's funk universe. In terms of high and low culture, the buttocks are below and behind. They are the reverse of what, in paintings, has no front, but *is* the front. And, when hanging against a wall, the painting is at the eye level, never at buttocks level.

#### 4.

There is a secret history of paper as yet untold. Among the art materials, paper is the most obscure, by reason of its light hierarchical weight with regard to painting and sculpture; notwithstanding, it has its fervent enthusiasts. But as a result of its being used for jotting notes, it is a crucial element, highly identified with the creative process and its detritus. Erika Verzutti's first vases were made of paper, and meant precisely this. These vases, narrowly related to their plinths, can be associated with the accumulation of ideas, with the compulsion to make lists, with the reluctance to straighten things up, with the previous circulation of these papers around the world and their connections with other contexts.<sup>7</sup> They can be associated with that very moment when the fragment, until then disconnected, finally acquires a form and a meaning. (For the historical precedents, see Mel Bocher, *Working Drawings and Other Visible Things on Paper Not Necessarily Meant to Be Viewed as Art*, 1966). In other works on paper closer to the traditional model of the observation drawing, Erika portrays her cat in a style on the edge of automatism, in which the pencil strokes are the equivalent of the animal's fur. It would be lovely to imagine that the drawings were made on the artist's lap, where we usually put our cats, but the papers stay on the floor, where the cats usually remain.

If a vase is an open form that contains a micro-universe, when its mouth is up, then, when it is upside down its inverted form becomes an umbrella or parasol and creates a boundary between the inside and the outside. It appears in Erika's thinking, in the way mentioned by Deleuze and Guattari in *O que é a filosofia?* [*What is Philosophy?*]: "a kind of 'parasol' that protects us from chaos" in order to form an opinion. "We would say that the struggle *against chaos* implies affinities with the enemy, because another struggle unfolds, and acquires greater importance, *against the opinion* that, nevertheless, tried to protect us from that very chaos." Now then, "the artist opens a slit in the parasol, rips it to the firmament, so that a bit of the free and tempestuous chaos may pass through it and some sudden light may be framed".<sup>8</sup> That is why the accident, a kind of domestic and casual quality, the signal of the gesture, the matter crisped by the touch of the hand or in the reference to objects naturally bristly (such as the brushes in *Jaspera at home*), and the spatter of painting in well calculated drippings are so conspicuous in Erika's works; that is why the handwork stands out and denies any *a priori* opinion, something excessively conceptual. It is to this propensity that the artist ascribes her affective way of connecting herself to the São Paulo tradition of formalism, without giving up some informality of her own.

#### 5.

The closeness to everyday life's objects appears as a recurrent strategy of contemporary sculpture, taking the forms of observation, appropriation and transformation. In Erika's recent sculptures, the supermarket's vegetable stand

<sup>7</sup> These reflections stem from the correspondence with Alexandre da Cunha (August 13, 2007), to whom I am grateful.

<sup>8</sup> DELEUZE, Gilles; GUATTARI, Félix. *O que é a filosofia?* Translated by Bento Prado Jr. and Alberto Alonso Muñoz.

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becomes this field of observation and processing of forms, in which nature and culture, physical and moral qualities, autonomy and allusion are joined. Starting from found vegetables, abstraction and representation intermingle. In the casting process carried out through the use of the very vegetables, volumes both grotesque and graceful, organic and geometric, are created. There is a rabbit of whose head, cast in bronze from a cabbage, sprouts leaves similar to ears; a pineapple turns into a turtle shell sustained by colorful columns made of modeling clay; ginger root combined with a sweet potato form an elk's head. In *Bicho de 7 Cabeças* [*Seven headed monster*] (2007), the shape of a mythological animal appears, containing several references, from Carmen Miranda's pre-Tropicalist turban to Arcimboldo's compositions. Even though they approach the fantastic pretty often, what predominates in this gesture is the idea of approximating the contemplation of common objects, like vegetables, and the distinction and elegance of modernist sculpture. No matter how much we try to imagine the original state that inspired these forms, they seem to ask us to be contemplated through the nobility of modernist eye glasses, in terms of elegance, harmony and, why not, of beauty. There is a deeply affective intention towards what is recognizable and, again, for that very reason, highly deformable.