

Os Monstros de Babaloo

By Victor Gorgulho

A dysfunctional and grotesque family in charge of a mythical tropical paradise south of the equator. The political allegory that guides the plot of *Os Monstros de Babaloo* — the 1970 film by Rio de Janeiro filmmaker Elyseu Visconti (1939-2014, grandson of painter Eliseu Visconti) — sounds uncomfortably familiar in Brazil in 2021. A banana republic handed over to rats and monsters, abject creatures moved by uncontrollable urges of destruction and devotion – of others and of themselves.

This exhibition references and reveres the allegory of Visconti's feature film, taking it as a starting point for bringing together contemporary works from the 1960s to the present day. Censored at the time by the military regime and rarely shown in public contexts, *Babaloo* is a peculiar example of the so-called marginal Brazilian cinema, a moment of radical and singular audiovisual creation, between the end of the 1960s and the mid-1970s.

Marked by a more horizontal and collaborative method of production, the films of this period reveal, even today, some of the most fertile and ingenious allegories about Brazil — in its apparent perpetual identity crisis and in its ignoble capacity for self-digestion. "What is Brazil, what is Brazilian?" shouts Maria Gladys, in one of the sequels to "Sem esse, Aranha" (1970), by Rogerio Sganzerla. The question — contained in a monitor and shouted at the viewer — is formulated imbued with a strange rhetorical awareness. It doesn't seem to invite us to immediate (impossible?) answers. It is accompanied by a resounding silence, radiating through the exhibition space in a disconcerting way.

What brings together the works in *Babaloo* could be justified in different ways, as distinct as they are complementary, sometimes more evident, sometimes unsuspecting. From a historical perspective, we can talk about the frictions and approximations established between the marginal audiovisual production of the 60s — 70s and the generation of artists linked to the New Brazilian Figuration, which sought to account, in the field of visual arts, for the new figurative languages that emerged, given the apparent exhaustion of investigations into geometric abstraction.

It was in the second half of the 60s that artists such as Antonio Henrique Amaral, Carlos Vergara, Roberto Magalhães, Rubens Gerchman, Teresinha Soares, Wanda Pimentel, among others, began to explore possibilities that had been considered questionable, dubious, from both thematic and formal points of view, as they began to incorporate non-conventional materials and supports - such as wooden boxes, fabrics, other prosaic elements and mundane objects — in an eagerness to digest the multiple signs of mass culture that were quickly spreading. It was, therefore, an attempt to scrutinize, examine, the new subjective and socio-political conditions of society at the time.

Often gathered under the frivolous nickname of Brazilian pop, such productions carried — even if not at first glance to the art circuit of the time — a considerable political voltage, capable of questioning, for example, notions of good and bad taste, high and low culture. Dichotomies inscribed, until today, in the collective imagination of Brazilian culture. These are works and researches that approached, therefore, the aesthetic and political thoughts of the marginal audiovisual of the time. However, they are often connected by the broad umbrella of the tropicalist movement.

If the approximation between these fronts can be read by historical and generational perspectives with outlined contours, the connection of these universes with the contemporary productions carried out from the 1990s until now presented here, can be interpreted, perhaps, through more flexible paths. In its evident polyphony and visual profusion, Babaloo proposes a narrative web of frictions of different natures: semantic, visual, thematic, often blurring temporalities and narrowing temporal gaps between works.

Babaloo thus invites us to an attempt to interpret Brazil, in its complexity and contradictions, in its beauty and chaos, side A and side B. What the approximation between these apparently distinct/distant universes points out to us is precisely the need for us to continue trying to digest Brazil to, who knows, relaunch it; to rest it on new grounds — possible, egalitarian, fair. Delusion of Brazil, today, is a fundamental and urgent task. Perhaps the last possible task, given the overwhelming current scenario of dismantlement and neglect.

Babaloo's narrative web engenders an exercise in allegory, an almost scenic experience, underlining the simulacrum and farce of the idea of a tropical paradise that, we know, is somewhat far from ideal, utopian. Above the emblematic curves of Copacabana's sidewalk [Leda Catunda, "Copa Family" (2020)] a metallic sun rests [Cristiano Lenhardt, "Só" (2021)] motionless, uselessly trying to illuminate a scalloped palm tree [Rafael Alonso, "Big Stick" (2020)] and simulated on a wooden plank. We are in front of a farcical setting, surrounded by rotten and melted bananas [Rodrigo Torres, "Trilha da Antimateria" (2019)] pointing out to us the countless shadows of the endless sunny night that we are crossing.

Deconstructed — dismantled — the idyllic landscape also reveals itself bloody and on fire – SOS!, one reads, in a muffled cry [Diambe, "Av. Atlântica (from the series Devolta)" (2021); Adriana Varejão, "Landscapes II" (1997); Rubens Gerchman, "SOS", (1968)]. Rats, zombies, amorphous beings, phallic monsters, sculpted, twisted, fragmented bodies, guarded ankles, full breasts covered in silver and gold, hands and weapons at the ready [Antonio Simas Xavier, "Vermelhinho" (2020); Rodrigo Matheus, "Ratos" (2010); Rodolpho Parigi, "Volumen 9" (2021); Victor Arruda, "Cena dating" (2017); Aleta Valente, "Domestic Economy" (2019); Jac Leirner, "rrrrrr (primitit ti)" (2021)]. A paradise in the opposite direction: between joy and violence, beauty and horror, project and impossibility.

A great vortex engulfing the living room [Rodrigo Hernández, "Espiral Hoje" (2021); Rafael Bqueer]. Astonished, hungry, desperate mouths. Crude and abundant forms — right here, concrete is also beautiful, sensual sensual [Ivens Machado, Untitled (1987)]. Exuberance, farce, debauchery! Carved tears flowing down the manhole [Tiago Mestre, "Drama" (2021)], refuge for rats [Wanda Pimentel, "Untitled, from the Manhole series" (1970)], home of the monsters that took power. Pastiche and frustration. Abducted green, yellow and blue, transformed into paste, pill and powder, thrown at random on the scorched earth. The brief silence of the night, a muffled scream. The vile cyclical experience of the historical narrative.

Yesterday, today, Babaloo, Brazil, here, now.