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Artist Lucia Laguna: 'This is the place I want to paint'

At 81, the Brazilian is still finding ways to reimagine the Rio neighbourhood she calls home



Lucia Laguna in front of one of her canvases © Eduardo Ortega

Maya Jaggi

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In a new painting by the Brazilian artist Lucia Laguna, the bright object suspended in lush foliage is not a parrot but a pair of discarded trainers, dangling from electricity wires. These overhead cables, together with a hurricane lamp and a deconstructed bicycle, frame a collage of shacks on a sugar-loaf hill.

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Even before pandemic lockdowns, the open windows in Laguna's Rio de Janeiro studio were an inexhaustible inspiration for the 81-year-old artist, who has been influential among younger Brazilian artists since her first solo show in Rio in 1998. She lives in Rocha, in Rio's North Zone — a historically working-class area worlds away from the tourist zone of Copacabana and Ipanema.

"In my studio I have three big windows looking out at the vast landscape of the northern suburbs and Mangueira Hill," she says when we meet in London's Mayfair. Her vistas include the seaport, the railway, disused factories and the hill's famous samba school — an "important cultural hub for the poorest people". Its lime-green and pink facade recurs in her paintings, but the hanging shoes dangling from electric wiring hint at darker realities. "Kids throw trainers almost like a sport," she says. "It's very dangerous because we don't have underground cables. Drug traffickers cut the copper wires to sell. Sometimes the cables fall."



The view from the studio... © Fran Parente



...makes its way into Lucia Laguna's work, here 'Paisagem no 130' (2022) © Lucia Laguna. Courtesy of the artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London

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Laguna, who taught Portuguese in high schools before being reborn as an artist in her fifties, is in London for her first UK solo exhibition, *Life is Only Possible Reinvented*, at Sadie Coles HQ. She will also have a presence at Art Basel Miami Beach through the Brazilian gallery Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel. "Life, for me, is to paint," Laguna says, speaking in Portuguese. "And I feel I can only do that by reinventing. I know very little about traditional art, so I created my own way of painting within my own landscape." Her compositions combine geometric abstraction and a subtle tropical palette with intriguing figurative details. Architectural lines, railings or chicken wire often structure compositions. Covid confinement made her canvases even more densely layered. "I lived an excess of the landscape because I didn't go out," she says.

The three-storey house where she has lived for 40 years (for a long time with her husband, who died 12 years ago) has a top-floor studio and a strip of front garden whose detritus, from broken crockery to discarded shoes, finds its way into paintings. She divides completed works into three series: *Landscape*, *Garden* and *Studio*. Her daughter Laura, a flamenco dancer, is the studio manager. Laguna collaborates with young artists studying at Rio's free Federal University to create her paintings. Using "triggers" that range from Japanese prints to engineering catalogues, she talks to them about painting and they make images, which she deconstructs and partially erases.

Although her only medium now is acrylic paint, Laguna describes her practice as pictorial collage, isolating areas with masking tape, and "bringing in other elements I can see". Some enlarged details (leaves, insects, tiles) appear encircled, as though under a magnifying glass. "I subvert the scale," she says. "Objects that should be small because of the distance become prominent. This displacement, to give movement to a landscape that is normally static, leads your eyes and your thoughts to question why."

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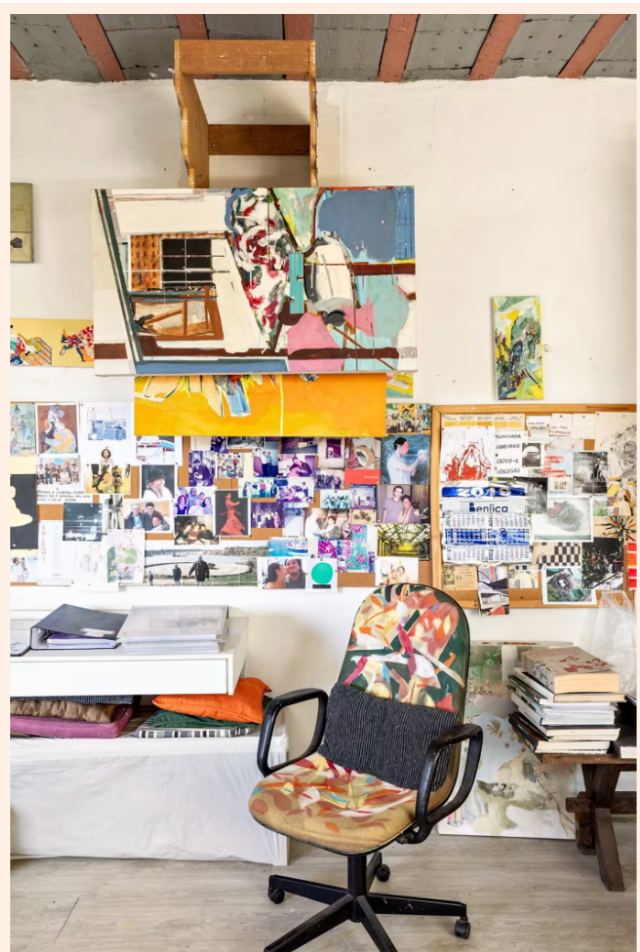
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Acrylic paints



Laguna's desk in her studio © Fran Parente (2)

Laguna views her northern suburbs as the opposite of Rio's picture-postcard (and largely white) Zona Sul. "The fact that the rich live near the beach and the poor build their shacks on surrounding hills is already a representation of the city," she says. Her stylised favelas are in dialogue with other artists, such as the Italian-born modernist Alfredo Volpi, whose Klee-like flag-and-facade paintings hang in MASP in São Paulo, where Laguna had an exhibition in 2018. "Volpi is much more geometric and static," she says. "It's precisely in the movement and displacement I add that I'm bringing a new perspective."

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This perspective owes much to living within the community, rather than observing from a distance, as most of the prominent artists who had previously depicted the area had done. Laguna was born in 1941 in Campos dos Goytacazes, a small industrial city inland, where her parents worked in a sugar factory. Sent to a school run by Salesian nuns that taught women to be teachers, she became a nun at 18, but quit after nine years. “It wasn’t what I wanted; it was what was possible to me,” she says. “I left with little money and no place to stay.”



Laguna's studio in the northern suburbs of Rio © Fran Parente

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Laguna's 'Paisagem no. 134' (2022) © Lucia Laguna. Courtesy of the artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London

Teaching in Rio public schools during the military dictatorship of 1964-85, she became involved with the resistance when her housemate's son was arrested and tortured. "Everyone was ready to fight, not only for a cause, but for our children disappearing in police stations." Hélio Oiticica's 1967 installation of a shack gave its name to the 1960s countercultural Tropicália movement. But for Laguna, its musicians were paramount, including Gilberto Gil — later culture minister under Lula da Silva's first administration — who helped bring black consciousness to Brazil (where slavery was abolished only in 1888). "We used to sing and drum, and I gave their lyrics to my pupils to analyse. It was a way to transform what was going on."

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Laguna fell in love with and later married a celibate priest from Spain, a liberation theologian named Severiano who was defrocked for his activism. He built a church in a poor neighbourhood that became a hub of resistance and it was there that she made her first artworks. The couple opened an educational-toy workshop at home, salvaging wood from the fruit market. Ecstatic at painting toys, she enrolled in the Parque Lage Visual Arts School, where she credits the Scottish-born artist Charles Watson as the “teacher who made me an artist”. He led trips abroad before she ever set foot in galleries in Brazil. An encounter with Manet’s fragmented canvas, “The Execution of Emperor Maximilian”, at the National Gallery in London left a deep impression. Those intensive years of study sparked an expanding list of artists she claims as her “family”, from Uccello to Cézanne.



‘Entre a Linha Vermelha e a Linha Amarela no 38’
(2004)



‘Entre a Linha Vermelha e a Linha Amarela no 39’
(2004) © Eduardo Ortega (2)

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The abstract series she deems her first real artwork, *Between the Red Line and the Yellow Line* (2001-06), alludes to highways connecting Rio's north and south zones. "My neighbourhood is framed by the two expressways," she says. "So the first thing I did was to place myself in that space. This is the place I want to paint. I can feel and talk about it because it's what I see; the place I know." Laguna recentres the world from her vantage point, situating the viewer in her landscape and surprising them with its beauty and darkness.

She still paints every day. "My place is a landscape to constantly repeat; I'm always looking at it differently," she says. In her art, "nothing is realistic — it's what I see."