

Terrestrial Bodies, Celestial Bodies

FOREWORD

The exhibition *Corpos Terrestres, Corpos Celestes* [Terrestrial Bodies, Celestial Bodies], a partnership between Galatea and Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, sets off a series of collaborations with other galleries at Galatea's location in Salvador. The show proposes a dialog between Miguel dos Santos (1944, Caruaru), represented by Galatea, and artists Erika Verzutti (1971, São Paulo), Gokula Stoffel (1988, Porto Alegre) and Pélagie Gbaguidi (1965, Dakar), represented by Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel. The curatorial approach explores how different artistic, cultural and social traditions and contexts can intertwine around common concerns. In addition to celebrating the singularities of each artist, the exhibition seeks to place Miguel dos Santos' oeuvre in a broader perspective, connecting it to themes that traverse contemporary art production.

A fundamental aspect of Galatea Salvador's project is to create a space for dialogue and cultural exchange between the Southeast and Northeast regions of Brazil. The gallery's collaborative initiatives in the city arise from a desire to broaden its audience and strengthen connections beyond the Southeastern context, expanding interactions with artists, curators, and intellectuals from the Northeast and other regions outside the Rio-São Paulo axis. Its purpose is to serve as a hub for fostering and converging diverse cultures, temporalities, styles, and genres—promoting dynamic interplay, blending, and fusion between the old and the new, the canonical and the non-canonical, the formal and the informal, the erudite and the popular.

Dialogue Between Bodies and Works: Erika Verzutti, Gokula Stoffel, Miguel dos Santos and Pélagie Gbaguidi

Tomás Toledo

The exhibition *Corpos terrestres, corpos celestes* [Terrestrial Bodies, Celestial Bodies] arose from a desire for a partnership between two galleries, Galatea and Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, and from the proposal of a dialog between the production of Miguel dos Santos and the artists Erika Verzutti, Gokula Stoffel and Pélagie Gbaguidi. The exhibition is therefore based on an operation of formal approximation, aesthetic affinities, rather than a cross-section of generations, themes, regions or even affiliation to a movement or a shared artistic context.

The production of Miguel dos Santos, a Pernambuco artist based in João Pessoa, Paraíba, was taken as the starting point for this dialogical dynamic structured by the formal juxtaposition between his works and those of the other artists. From this free gesture of approximation, affinities and connections not only formal, but also thematic and conceptual were revealed, arriving at the common territory of the expanded representation of the body.

Based on this shared interest, the exhibition takes the representation of the human figure (as well as an expanded notion of the body) in the work of the four artists as its guiding thread, exploring the deformations, transformations, transmutations and fusions of images of bodies. Divided into five sections—Masks, Narrative Body, Mother Venus, Totem and Celestial Body—the show covers the points of convergence and friction between the works in painting and sculpture produced between 1975 and 2024, in transterritorial and transgenerational crossings.

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Miguel dos Santos was born in 1944 in Caruaru, a city in Pernambuco, a key territory for Brazilian figurative sculpture, the home of Vitalino Pereira dos Santos, Mestre Vitalino, creator of the Brazilian tradition of small-format sculptures in fired clay depicting everyday life in the Northeastern

hinterlands. Vitalino sold his figures at the city's popular fairs, which Miguel had attended since he was a child, and became a founding reference in the artist's self-taught training.

In the 1970s, he became close to the Armorial Movement, founded by Ariano Suassuna, and the discussions on regional aesthetics in the Northeast, creating narrative paintings inspired by the popular novels of the Northeast and cordel literature¹, with its medieval archaism and fanciful tales. Over time, Miguel dos Santos added to this universe other aesthetic references from his origins, mixing the mythologies of the original peoples of the Americas and Afro-Brazilian art, especially that of Yoruba origin. This aesthetic research eventually led the artist to participate in the *Second World Festival of Black and African Arts and Culture, FESTAC '77*, held in Lagos, Nigeria, a turning point in his career. From this direct contact with traditional African art, his production, both in ceramic sculpture and painting, underwent a process of formal synthesis, resulting in a series of compositions around the mask and the totem, something that continues to this day.

These references add to the role that Aleijadinho's sculpture played in Miguel dos Santos' poetics, which can be seen in his twisted figures, in the sinuous and voluptuous forms that flirt with ornament, giving a strongly figurative character to both his sculptural and pictorial production, in contrast to the context of Brazilian artistic production at the beginning of the second half of the 20th century, marked by abstract and constructive investigations.

The *Masks* section includes a group of paintings and sculptures by Miguel dos Santos dedicated to the theme of the portrait, in which we can observe the presence of African art references, with compositions marked by both the frontality of masks and the laterality of Egyptian paintings, structured synthetically by well-defined fields of color and with a dreamlike and surreal character. The titles range from simply *Máscara* [Mask], with all the spiritual charge imbued in this type of object, to quotes from historical figures such as Ganga Zumba (the first leader of Quilombo dos Palmares) and mythological ones such as the god Hephaestus (god of fire and metallurgy in Greek mythology) to the names of friends, in a mix of the real and the fantastic and the historical and the personal.

Juxtaposed with Miguel dos Santos' work are paintings and cold ceramic masks by Gokula Stoffel. The artist, born in 1988 in Porto Alegre and based in São Paulo, has a production that blurs the boundary between painting and object, with compositions marked by materiality, incorporating fabric weaves, ordinary everyday elements, synthetic and natural materials, with themes that go through personal memories, dreamlike content and references that seem to have come from fragments of films, books and post-internet content.

Her work is marked by a strong gestural component, of a very emotional nature, with titles that lead us to constructions of narrative and theatrical images. The works presented in this section seem to "make a scene"; those portrayed are visibly shaken (see the almost smiling cry in *Chorrindo* [Crylaughing], the drama in *Fim de filme* [Movie Ending] or the taciturn figure in *Pensamento mineral* [Mineral Thought]), conveying feelings through a markedly expressive figuration, elaborated by a twisted, deformed and emotionally blurred invoice.

The juxtaposition of the two artists' figures creates an interesting relationship, sometimes of closeness, due to the color palette and the frontal gaze that faces the viewer, and sometimes of thematic distancing of these personas, since Gokula's melancholic characters don't seem to inhabit the same universe as Miguel's impassive beings.

The figurative emphasis of the show unfolds in the *Narrative Body* section which, through works by Pélágie Gbaguidi, Gokula Stoffel and Miguel dos Santos, explores the storytelling power of painting, leading us to think about how the representation of the body is an instrument for constructing narratives and also how the body is the result of the construction of historical and social narratives. The canon of Western painting is very symptomatic of these issues, having been produced by power structures—white Euro-American patriarchy—expressing their interests and worldview. Within this oppressive social context, the representation of women was mostly sexualized or devoid of agency, in subservient and domestic scenes, with their narratives always constructed by the other, the man.

The multifaceted production of Pélágie Gbaguidi, an artist with a Beninese family born in 1965 in Dakar, Senegal, now based in Brussels, Belgium, confronts these canonical narrative structures of Western art history through her work in painting, drawing and embroidery, in a kind of patchwork of

¹ [N.T.] Cordel literature is a genre of hand-printed booklets containing folk poetry and stories that became popular in Brazil's Northeast with the advent of Portuguese colonization.

stories—taking its expanded meaning in the Portuguese language, which covers everything from fiction and personal memories to official narratives. The artist considers herself a contemporary griot, a storyteller who updates the tradition of narrative orality of some West African peoples and, in the process, mixes her own memories, confronting the colonial and post-colonial legacy that runs through her existence.

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Formally, Pélágie Gbaguidi's production is made up of fragments, scraps of painted fabric, embroidery and sets of drawings which, together, create overlapping, accumulated narratives that are sinuous and elliptical, escaping the teleological straight line of the great Story. The gestures of the paintings and drawings seem to carry the emergence of speech, resulting in images that contain movement and life, that tell stories, including stories of the body, as seen in *Le jour se lève: Body Archive* [The Day Rises: Body Archive].

The fragmentary nature of Pélágie Gbaguidi's work meets Gokula Stoffel's body fragments in this section. The former poses existential questions in her pictorial scraps, reinforced by titles such as *Quel est le sens de la vie sur terre et la fabrique de la conscience* [What Is the Meaning of Life on Earth and the Making of Consciousness], a work in which we see a figure holding a book in his hands while reading. The latter elaborates a process of dismemberment of body parts, creating sculptures of fragments that seem to gain autonomy from the body as a whole, in a kind of puppet theater that invites us to create imaginary scenes suggested by its form and by titles such as *Flerte* [Flirt] and *All Yours*.

Also in this same section, two paintings by Miguel dos Santos illuminate female figures in fields where the role and performance of women are constantly eclipsed, using the representation of the body to tell stories on the margins of official narratives. In *Sertaneja*, instead of depicting a man, as is customary in the pictorial tradition of the sertanejo², a character typical of the Brazilian Northeast, he paints a woman, showing that the countryside and the work of the land are also female spaces. In *Rainha dos Palmares* [Queen of Palmares], he portrays Dandara, the historic female leader of the Quilombo dos Palmares, placing women at the center of the struggle for freedom in Brazil's colonial slave period.

Following the sequence of nuclei that organize the show, we have Mother Venus and *Totem*, related sections that explore the dialogue between works by Erika Verzutti and Miguel dos Santos.

Erika Verzutti was born in 1971 in São Paulo and lives and works between this city and Brussels, Belgium. Her work crosses the boundaries between sculpture and painting, creating pictorial situations in objects and giving corporeality to painting. She uses materials as diverse as bronze, papier-mâché, concrete, plaster, acrylic paint, oil and wax, creating compositions shaped by a formal and thematic vocabulary that dialogues and reworks references from art history, pop culture and vernacular practices.

One of her most iconic series is dedicated to the theme of Venus and its primordial representation in the history of art, the *Venus of Willendorf* (25,000–20,000 BC), with sculptural reworkings of the theme, adding other meanings, contents, forms, symbols and names to this classic typology. Verzutti's Venuses preserve the silhouette of the primordial statues, with the small head, the torso and the wide hips (symbol of fertility), and the final legs, but abstracts the human corporeality, bringing a vegetal becoming, with titles that expand the interpretation, such as *Venus Yogi*, *Venus #Freethenipple* and *Vênus em chamas* [Venus on fire].

Venus Doll and *Venus (Blue)*, both by Verzutti, are sculptures of a similar size (around 45 cm), both with allegorical elements from the plant world. A pumpkin sometimes plays the role of a torso, sometimes of a leg, while the heads are crowned with sugar apples, a feature that evokes the

² Person who lives in the Brazilian hinterland.

reticulated texture of the head of Willendorf's Venus. The two works are juxtaposed in this section with two glazed ceramic sculptures by Miguel dos Santos titled *Mãe* [Mother]. Despite the completely different aesthetic and compositional strategies, the formal relationship between them is immediate and can be seen in the color palette, silhouette and even the reticulated hair, revealing the influence of the Venus symbolism of fertility, sexuality and motherhood.

In the small nucleus Totem, we are also dealing with a typology that harks back to the beginnings of humanity. Totems are present in the visual culture of various native peoples and are connected to spiritual meanings and social belonging. *O mestre* [The Master], by Miguel dos Santos, is part of the artist's long tradition of totemic compositions made by vertically superimposing glazed ceramic pieces, with elements that refer to spiritual entities, historical figures and themes from popular culture in the Northeast. The work leads us to an image of fatherhood and reverence for the ancestry of knowledge. For her part, Erika Verzutti creates a totem that seems to be less connected to the masculine and the phallic energy present in totems in general. Her *Siete granadas* [Seven Pomegranates] appears like a stack of pomegranates, but affiliated with Brancusi's infinite column and more feminine, like the fruit's vulval orifices.

Finally, the *Celestial Body* section expands the notion of the body beyond the human, leaving the context of the Earth and moving on to the sky and its objects, which populate the solar system, such as planets, stars, satellites, comets and asteroids. The patterns formed in the sky by celestial bodies have always accompanied the history of mankind, provoking fear of the unknown, but also offering answers to existential and practical questions, as well as causing fascination for their spiritual mystery.

A formal dialectic is established between the works of Erika Verzutti and Miguel dos Santos in this section, with compositions that seem to create cosmic graphics and spiritual symbologies, something that can be seen in *Small God*, a bronze by Verzutti, with a design that resembles the infinity symbol plus an eye at the top. Alongside this work, the painting *Um neto do Aleijadinho* [A Grandson Of Aleijadinho], by dos Santos, presents a sinuous composition, featuring a being that is almost just an eye, spreading the gaze of *Small God*.

Still in the same section, but turning to the human body, Pélagie Gbaguidi's painting *The Witness*, from the series *Quel est le sens de la vie sur terre et la fabrique de la conscience* [What is the meaning of life on earth and the making of consciousness], shows two hands surrounded by small eyes, suggesting a situation of palm reading, with destiny and its witnesses, as if the future traced by the stars that make up the signs of the Zodiac could be mirrored in the paths drawn on our hands.

The flirtation with the surreal, the spiritual and the dreamlike runs through all the works in the show and sets the tone for the category of representation explored by the pieces, with their diverse depictions of bodies. However, this connection to the surreal does not align with Surrealism as a European avant-garde movement of the early 20th century. Instead, it emerges from a distinct perspective, rooted in a non-European epistemology, navigating realms of dreams, imagination, metamorphosis, and magic, reinterpreting reality and materiality in the process.

Ariano Suassuna, in a text about Miguel dos Santos, addresses the issue of Surrealism as follows:

What characterizes and distinguishes us the most is the connection with the magical realism of the Northeastern popular music and literature. Magical realism—Brazilian, Northeastern and with popular roots—and not Surrealism. You can see that there is a very marked difference between Surrealist painters or those linked to the precursors of Surrealism and a painter like Miguel dos Santos.³

Although it is a reflection on the poetics of dos Santos, I believe Suassuna's perspective can serve as a key framework for understanding the other artists in the exhibition as well. Each of them seeks their own unique language, assimilating elements of Western art history through non-hegemonic practices of thought and artistic creation.

³ SUASSUNA, Ariano. *Miguel dos Santos: pinturas e cerâmicas*. Brochure for Miguel dos Santos' solo exhibition at MASP—Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand, November 1974.