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Wanda Pimentel
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Wanda Pimentel

Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP), São Paulo, Brazil



In 1968, when Brazilian artist Wanda Pimentel was in Rio de Janeiro working on her iconic series 'Envolvimento' (Involvement, 1968-84), architect Lina Bo Bardi was on São Paulo's Avenida Paulista, cutting the ribbon on her largest project, the new headquarters of the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP) – which is hosting an exhibition of Pimentel's paintings almost 50 years later. That same year, Artur Costa e Silva's military regime introduced the infamous Institutional Act #5 (AI5), which abolished the national legislature and prohibited all political protest. Winds of cultural and political change blew far beyond Brazil, from feminist protests against the Miss America Contest in Atlantic City, to the events of May '68 in France.

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Wanda Pimentel, 'Série Envolvimento', 1968, Courtesy: Coleção Marisa e Arthur Peixoto, Rio de Janeiro and Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP), São Paulo; photograph: Marco Terranova

Pimentel's 'Envolvimento' paintings, 27 of which are currently displayed on the mezzanine of MASP's lower floor, are particularly captivating when seen against this backdrop of political and cultural agitation, which ran parallel to international artistic movements like pop and nouveau réalisme. Using strong colours and surgical precision, Pimentel paints female bodies in fragmented, domestic environments. There is no sign of comfort in her interiors; instead, her unsettlingly refined figuration seems to echo trouble in the outside world. For instance, above the criss-crossing staircases and sharp

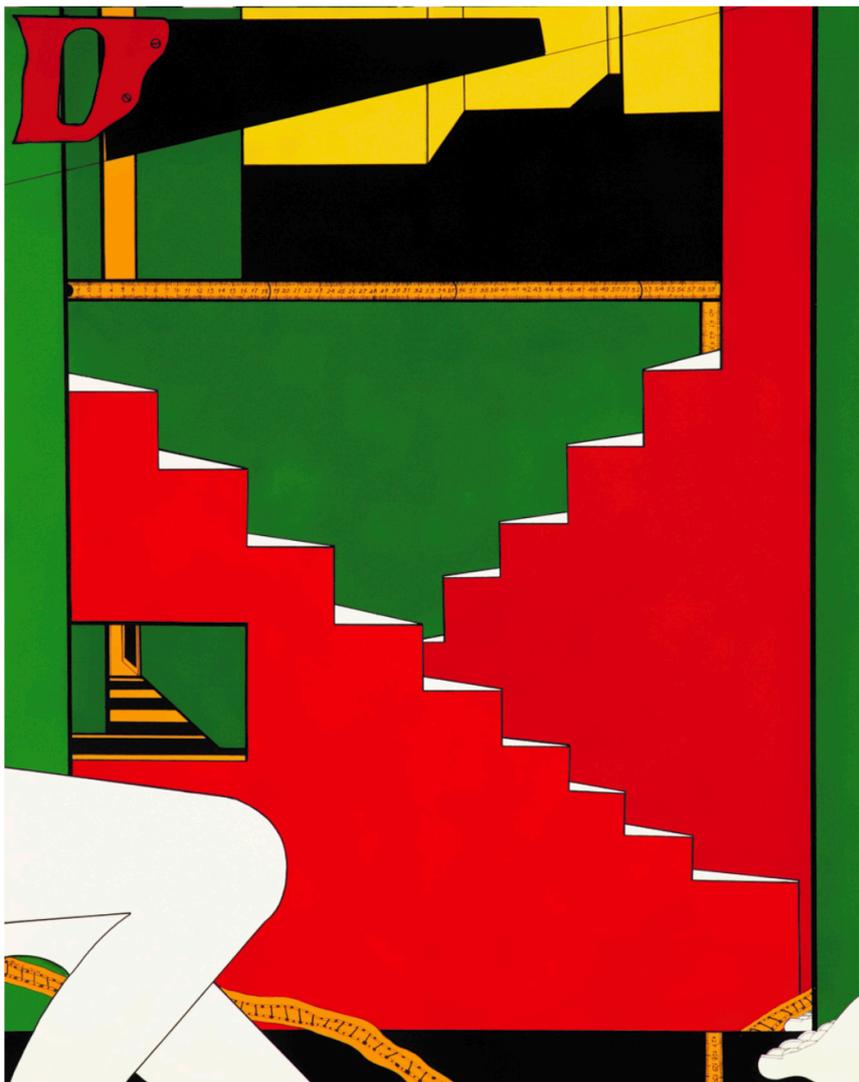
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corners in one striking painting (*Untitled*, 1968), a handsaw and measuring tape hover ominously where there ought to be a window. The objects merge with the highly geometricized architecture as if ready to tear everything apart, from the legs and feet in the painting's lower register to my own attempts at interpretation: if at first the steady measuring tape seems to refer to Pimentel's strict, hard-edged style, the loose tape at the bottom of the painting literally and figuratively unravels this reading, its sinuous form adding a seductive ambience to the fictive interior. As in all of Pimentel's 'Envolvimento' series, this room is filled with a sense of imminent danger or intrusion – from which there seems to be no escape.



Wanda Pimentel, 'Série Envolvimento', 1968, Courtesy: Coleção Marisa e Arthur Peixoto, Rio de Janeiro and Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP), São Paulo; photograph: Marco Terranova

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Lined up like a cinematic sequence, Pimentel's paintings seem, at first, to narrate the everyday life of the same female character (of whom we see only feet and legs) coping with an asphyxiating landscape of consumer technology. However, the household objects are animated – subjected to a sort of anamorphic lens – and the room's proportions are distorted into a *mise en abyme* that toys with spatial perspective. All of Pimentel's subjects appear on a simultaneous plane, where character and setting merge together; the artist deliberately disregards volumes and shades, in order to ultimately break the distinction between the protagonist and her props. Or, in the artist's own words, 'transfusing the soul into the object in order to conciliate both'. The world created by Pimentel is a stage, upon which the relationship between actors and set-pieces alludes to real-life social and political relations. Her innocuous household objects and partly-nude bodies are typical of the subliminally political artworks that concealed their messages to avoid heavy-handed censorship in the wake of AI5. Messy piles of clothing, pools of spilled liquid and slowly dripping faucets seem to reflect the recent collapse of the political order, but also the excitement of sexual self-discovery.



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Headed by artistic director Adriano Pedrosa – who co-curated the exhibition with Camila Bechelany – MASP's 2017 programme delves into issues of gender and sexuality, whilst critically reviewing the historiography of Brazilian art. Reconsidering Pimentel's iconic series is part of an attempt to come to terms with Brazilian female artists of the 1960s and '70s. A new look at Pimentel's erotic and restless work is particularly relevant in a country with a barbaric rate of misogynistic violence, which threatens to grow even worse under the regime of its current authoritarian, theocratic government.