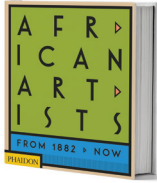


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Sonia Gomes in her studio in São Paulo, Brazil.

BEST PRACTICES

Sonia Gomes Creates a Sculpture

The Brazilian artist finds the poetry in fabric and materials she makes her own

BY MAXIMILIANO DURÓN

OVER THE SUMMER, BRAZILIAN artist Sonia Gomes was at work on new bodies of work in various stages of completion for three different gallery shows. For an exhibition that opened in August at Mendes Wood DM in São Paulo, she was nearly done with a series of installations related to earlier birdcage sculptures in which light fixtures act as “interventions.” She was also in the early stages of experimentation with sculptural wall works that will be the basis

of a show at Pace Gallery in New York next spring. But during a Zoom conversation this past July, her two-level studio in São Paulo was engulfed by pieces under construction for a show opening in November at Blum & Poe in Los Angeles. In progress were some 20 to 30 works that will go on view in the gallery, including a centerpiece of sorts: *When the Sun Rises in Blue*, a striking sculpture made with radiantly colored textiles—among them a curtain and a fishnet—atop a white embroidered

fabric called *renda renascença* that one of her assistants had brought back from his hometown in northeastern Brazil.

As with all her work, the new pieces draw from Gomes’s vast inventory of fabrics that people have donated, from a mother’s wedding dress and a grandmother’s towel to a son’s T-shirt and domestic items like tablecloths and bed throws. Some of the fabrics used in *When the Sun Rises in Blue* have been in her collection for almost 20 years, and each of them has its own unique



Mood Indigo

When the Sun Rises in Blue, a new work by Sonia Gomes made with collected fabrics.

history, memories, and stories to tell.

“There’s a relationship between time and reflection—all the materials that I work with are an exercise in exploring the soul of these objects,” Gomes said. “It is closely linked to the history of other people.”

A major influence on Gomes’s practice is poetry, with the titles of her work forming what she called a “poetic language” created over the years. “My work is poetic, intuitive,” she said. “I feel it comes from a mysterious place inside me.” At the moment, Gomes was reading the concrete poetry of Ricardo Alexio, a writer from her home state of Minas Gerais, who recently wrote a poem about her art. And Maya Angelou has long been essential to her thinking, as a literary figure she is “always revisiting.” (Gomes’s 2018 show at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo was titled “Still I Rise” after a poem by Angelou, and her numerous birdcage sculptures are in part a reference to Angelou’s foundational 1969 autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.)

Another important text for her is a 1998 essay titled “Marx’s Coat” by the literary theorist Peter Stallybrass, in particular a section that considers the memories of clothes and garments belonging to the dead. “Clothes reach me when people don’t want to get rid of an item but would like them to have a new fate,” she said. “I transform them, and they gain new forms. This happens through the making of the work and the respect I have for the histories that are handed to me, which are materialized in these objects.”

BORN IN 1948 IN CAETANÓPOLIS, A textile hub in the southeast of Brazil, Gomes dedicated herself to art making full-time only when she was 45, after a career as a lawyer. But the drive to create “has always existed in me, since I was a child,” she said, adding that her “first expression as an artist was fashion, using my body as a medium. I expressed myself through clothes I customized. When I was a teenager I used to refurbish my clothes, and I used to make my own jewelry. This made me follow a path, and where this path was going to end, I didn’t know. The need to create was bigger than me.”

Gomes presented her first solo exhibition at the Casa de Cultura de Sete Lagoas, a community culture center in Minas Gerais, in 1994; but her next one would wait a decade, until 2004, before showing at Sandra & Marcio gallery in Belo Horizonte. “It was difficult, as I didn’t comply with any commercial appeal,” she said. “Nobody liked anything I did. I showed it to people and nobody understood.”

As her fortunes changed, she began working with one of Brazil’s leading galleries



A Place for Poetry

Sonia Gomes in her studio in São Paulo, where she creates new sculptural worlds with poetry as a muse.

“Clothes reach me when people don’t want to get rid of an item but would like them to have a new fate.”



A Notable Showing

View of Sonia Gomes's installation at the 2015 Venice Biennale, where she was the only Brazilian artist included in the main exhibition.

Mendes Wood DM, in 2011, and in 2015, she was the only Brazilian artist included in the Venice Biennale's main exhibition, curated that year by Okwui Enwezor. "I thought that the Venice Biennale was going to be the apex of my career and that the end of it was about to follow," Gomes said. "But to my surprise it was only the start."

After that, in 2018 came her first shows at major museums in Brazil, at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo and the Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Niterói—and her star has only continued to rise. Earlier this year, she was included in the Gwangju Biennale in South Korea and the Liverpool Biennial in the United Kingdom, both of which included examples from a series titled "Raízes" (Roots), in which her fabric creations twist and meld with found pieces of wood. Those works, she said, "emerged from my desire to experiment with new materials. The trunks and roots I use were found at riversides. They carry a sort of strength that only exists in nature. It was challenging to integrate something so inflexible into my work,

almost like a simultaneously dissonant and complementary fusion between the malleability of the fabric and the rigidity of the trunk."

For Gomes, it's important to embrace the opportunities that certain materials provide: Wire is malleable, whereas wood is rigid. Clothes can be cut and sewn—a sleeve removed, a pant leg closed—and filled with even more fabrics. "Cages," she said, "are a beautiful object, but I don't like their function, so the first thing I do is destroy them." Recently, her engagement of jute, a rough fiber used in rope and twine that figures in some of the works for her Pace show, has proven "very challenging for me—at the right moment."

She continued, "I listen to the material so I can hear what it has to say. The materials I receive present qualities that challenge me to deal with their own unique references. Every weird and unusual material that reaches me is a challenge."

Though Gomes takes different approaches to different shows, her practice

is free-flowing and organic when she's creating work. "My process has three pillars: freedom, resistance, and courage," she said. "The process takes me to different places, and I don't allow myself to be confined by rules. I'm often working on one project and then have an idea that pulls me in another direction, so I like to start several projects at the same time, without the need to think about what will eventually be exhibited and where."

Gomes explained further, "I start all the works together, because one work talks to another. It's important to understand what they are saying to each other. They complete each other. The end of one work is the beginning of another. Sometimes, I'll remove a part of a sculpture and put it in another because it's important to connect them."

It's through this process that she comes to understand the materials so she can transform them and give them new life. Then, the end point is clear. "The work looks at me and says: 'I'm ready.'" ■