

Visual Art Culture of São Paulo and Beyond

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# Paint It Black A Conversation with Fabiana Lopes on the Quest for Equality in Brazilian Art



*Fabiana Lopes/Photo: Brian Hieggelke*

Like so many young Brazilian art professionals, Fabiana Lopes splits her time between New York and São Paulo. I made her acquaintance quite accidentally when, as she was visiting Chicago, Newcity's street style photographer and São Paulo native Isa Giallorenzo spotted Lopes' striking expression of style and asked her if she could photograph her for her column. Only after some overheard Portuguese did they realize their shared heritage, and before long, I was introduced via email. I met her during SP-Arte, where we discussed her growing interest in art created by black artists in Brazil.

**Tell me your life story.**

I was born and raised in São José do Rio Preto, a city in the state of São Paulo. My background is in literature and language, then communication and contemporary art. More recently, I earned a master's in contemporary art in New York and now I'm about to start a PhD in Performance Studies at New York University.

**Did you work as a curator or administrator for a while?**

I worked with so many things. I worked in the corporate sector for about fifteen years, first as an executive assistant and later I worked in communications for organizations like Enron and American Express, where I was communications manager. And more recently in 2008 or 2009, I went back to school for a master's in contemporary art. Then I worked for Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, a private collection based in New York that specializes in works from Latin America; I work as a curatorial assistant for two years there. I have also worked for about four years with the art advisor Simon Watson as a curatorial assistant in different projects in the U.S. and in Brazil.

**What interests you right now in the world of art?**

After I left Colección Cisneros, I decided that I wanted to go independent. I wanted to learn about the artistic production by black artists in Brazil. About fifty percent of our population is black or is of African descent. I was curious to understand why I didn't see this population represented in art fairs or in museum shows. So I wanted to see who are these artists that are working right now and what have they have been doing. So for the past almost two years, I started this research in São Paulo. I've met about

twenty-five to thirty artists so far here. Most of the works that I've seen has a strong political take. The works deal with questions of race as it's understood through the experience of the black population in Brazil or, more specifically, in São Paulo. It's been very interesting.



Paulo Nazareth, "CA\_Bagamayo," fabric flag, 169 x 122 cm. Photographed at the Mendes Wood DM booth at SP-Arte

**What's the definition of a black artist for you, because Brazil is famously very mixed race?**

Yeah it's a very complex discussion, even for us [black Brazilians]. I think we are still in the discussion process of should we say "Afro descent" or should we say "Afro-Brazilians"? But the thing is, the darker one gets—the darker you get, the harder it gets for this person in different senses. So here in Brazil there are a number of people who would be considered black outside of Brazil, in the U.S. for instance, but here they are not considered black, and they do not consider themselves black. So the definition of "black" for me in this research is with people who consider themselves black. In most cases, that means dark-skinned people. And we always say here that the police never make a mistake on that. They are never confused as to that. So it's a complex issue and it's definitely different from how it's perceived in the U.S. where you have this concept, if I understand it well, that one drop of black blood makes you black. Here it can be quite the opposite.

**Your comment about the police, is that in reference to racial profiling?**

Yes, it is.

**And so you have that just like we do in the United States?**

Yes, very strongly, yes. In Brazil we also deal with the issue of police brutality targeting black citizens. In Brazil we struggle with the massive killing of young black men by the police.

**In the history of modern and contemporary Brazilian art, are there black artists who are well known?**

Here in Parque Ibirapuera there is a museum, the Museu Afro Brasil, and the director of that museum, Emanuel Araujo, did a very important job in the eighties doing exhibitions and bringing into knowledge the contribution of artists who were black. They are not very well known but we have a couple who can be recognized—but we still have work to do. He created an important publication in 1988, when we were celebrating the centennial of the abolition of slavery, called *A Mão Afro-Brasileira*.

**If I went to a top museum, would there be any African, Afro-Brazilian artists?**

Pinacoteca, a very important museum in São Paulo, is now showing the Afro-Brazilian artists from its collection (the title for the exhibition is “Artistas Afrodescendentes no Acervo da Pinacoteca”(Artists of African descent in Pinacoteca’s collection). This type of exhibition can start a discussion. We will start to have more of those conversations, or the museum directors will start to think, “Well, why aren’t we doing this type of exhibition? Maybe we should do more of it?” So we are in this period of change. We recently had one exhibition in an institution (“Histórias Mestiças” at Instituto Tomie Ohtake) that was also dealing with this type of discussion two years ago in 2014. We could consider it to be the first exhibition in recent years outside of the Museu Afro-Brasil to provoke these discussions and now we have this one at Pinacoteca. At the same time, when you read the reviews of the exhibition at Pinacoteca, we expected to read comments about the works. But instead the reviews challenge the relevance of an exhibition showing artists of African descent (or black artists to be more specific). And so there is even this discussion about the relevance of such exhibitions and it has to do with the fact that, in our society, we don’t have an open discussion about race.





*Dalton Paula, from "A notícia," 20 x 30 cm/Photo: Heloá Fernandes 2013*

**You didn't have a civil rights movement in the same way that we did in the United States?**

Not in the same way, but we have a movement which we call Movimento Negro (Black Movement), which is very similar, but it maybe didn't have the same strength, or the same reach as the counterpart in the U.S.; it's a very important movement but



we are still working to achieve the relevance of the civil rights movement in the U.S. And also, in the U.S., the civil rights movement is recognized by the society as a whole. We are still dealing with the relevance of the discussion. I just had a lunch with a person from the U.S., a white woman, and she look at me and said she comes here a lot and she thinks, “Oh my God, just looking you have so many race-related problems here.” We are not going to hear that in Brazil. Even if you bring this up, and we are in a very specific moment because we, or the young generation of black people, are are bringing up this discussion even if it’s by force of will.

**You’ve lived in the United States where there are many similarities with Brazil. We are both countries that had a major problem with slavery for a long time. We’re both countries that have a very diverse public body. In the United States, where I’m from in Chicago, two of the best-known artists are both black — Theaster Gates and Kerry James Marshall. But at the same time, there are also galleries that are more targeted at black collectors. There is still kind of a parallel world even in Chicago outside of those who are crossing over to mainstream success. But there is this whole black middle class supporting black artists; is that happening here?**

It’s not similar because we are not in the same position economically. First of all, we are not a minority. We are around half of the population but the advancement or the advancement of the black movement has not gotten to the point of achievement that they had in the U.S. We are still in the lower part of the economic pyramid, so you’re not going to find many black collectors yet so people are not in the situation of supporting the artists that way. Now, and I keep on repeating it because for me if I think twenty years from now — it’s a moment when things seem to be changing. About ten years ago the government passed a law to make sure that young people who come from the black population would have access to public schools and higher education. So now you have a generation of people coming out of the universities in a different position, but we are early in this process. If you look around, you’re going to see the presence of the black population even here [at the art fair] but you will see where they are. They are people cleaning the spaces or serving so that’s the difference. We are not yet in the position to support the black artists economically so we are not collectors

yet.



*Sonia Gomes, 56 Biennale di Venezia 2015, "All the World's Futures," curated by Okwui Enwezor*

**Talk about the artists and the gallery culture here. Are there black artists who are being represented by galleries, and what should people look for?**

Well we have very few representations but one of them, Dalton Paula, is an artist who is represented here in the art fair. Paula is from a different part of Brazil, the central part of Brazil—Goiânia is the name of the city, which is close to Brasilia. And he just got, here in the fair, a prize for artists under thirty-five years old. That's a first for the fair. He's been with his gallery for about two years, and he has very powerful work. His research right now is on the process of healing through plants, which is we can see in different traditions within Brazil, indigenous traditions and local popular culture traditions. His paintings reflect his research: he is painting over encyclopedias and over books that talk about healing with plants. He says that he chooses encyclopedias instead of canvas because, for him, an encyclopedia represents Eurocentrism and

classicism and this is how he's overriding it with the culture and the information of local communities here in Brazil.

Other than him, in galleries, Paulo Nazareth is very well known. Paulo is represented by Mendes Wood. Another artist represented by Mendes Wood who is known because she was at the last Venice Biennial is Sonia Gomes. She's from Minas Gerais, the same state as Paulo Nazareth. Rosana Paulino is an incredible, incredible veteran artist. I think she may be represented by Galeria Virgílio, a small, small gallery. She's very well known in the U.S. and in Europe in the academic scene, much less in the commercial or institutional scene. Paulino is very interesting because she is in her mid-forties now and, in my research, I've noticed that, for many of the young artists I've been meeting and talking with, when I ask about the artist that they look to as a source of inspiration, Rosana Paulino's name is always mentioned. Even Dalton Paula, when he came here last year to start his research on healing through plants, contacted Rosana Paulino because she's a reference as an artist. He wanted to come and talk to her and she invited him to do a residency with her. So he spent about half a month here and that's when I met him. She's an artist's artist.



*Rosana Paulino, 2006*

**Now talk about a few artists who are outside of the gallery system that interest you in the context of what you are doing.**

Ayrson Heráclito, he's from the state of Bahia and he has very, very interesting work; he's also in his forties. He works with performance pursuing discussion on slavery and the results of slavery in the generations that came after. Also it's very informed by elements of the Afro-Brazilian religion that's called Candomblé—very complex work, very incredible work.

Eustáquio Neves, he works mainly with photographs and he found his own method of developing the photography. He is also from Minas Gerais—the same state as Sonia Gomes and Paulo Nazareth—and he works with the history of black families in a general sense with the development of the black population in Brazil. Interestingly, I've mentioned four or five artists from the same location.







*Ayrson Heráclito, 2011*

**I was going to ask you about it. Is that a predominantly black part of the country?**

Minas Gerais means “general mines,” and that’s where, during the colonization of Brazil, they sent slaves to do the mining so we have a very densely black population there. Bahia is a place to go and do research as well, because it’s roughly a ninety-percent black population—what is the production like in a place like that? One of the things that I’ve been noticing with the younger artists mostly from São Paulo, not



everyone, is how they've been doing a research that is formal, so you see a research on the history of painting but it's interconnected with other elements, elements of race, elements of gender—that's what makes it so interesting and complex. I also noticed that because we are, in general, so used to what we call the avant-garde, which is the abstract modernist tradition, that we don't have the language to unfold those works. I think maybe that's another reason why the galleries in Brazil don't represent those artists.

**Some of what Brazil is very famous for comes from the African tradition—samba and the music and the dance that everyone in the world thinks of from Brazil is black.**

Yeah and, even after living abroad for ten years, that's what I find interesting: the idea that people have about Brazil, how we are known for the discourse of Brazil and the practices. It's very interesting as you said that's a strong element that we are known for, because we had a time when black people made up to seventy percent of the population. The number of slaves that came to Brazil is enormous compared to other places. But for some reason it's engrained in our society that it's not recognized. There is a hierarchy of what's important (and will be accepted) and what is not going to be from the African traditions or African "ingredients" although they are in (almost) everybody (in this country). The more European "ingredients" one has, the more important he/she is going to be. That's what caught my attention as I was learning more about art in Brazil while in the U.S.. When you're talking about the thirties and forties, this group of artists went to France and to Europe and spent some time there and it became the dominant discourse. And I was thinking, okay but what about these other groups of people in this country who didn't go to study in Europe in the thirties and the forties?



*Eustáquio Neves*

**Great.**

It's a little complex, right? And that's why I want to bring my research outside of Brazil because I think people are much more embracing and open to understand these issues. They want to talk about it. And here in Brazil it's like "Why are we talking about it, why is it relevant?"

**I'm guessing it's not the black people who are saying that, though.**

Never [laughs], never. We have a problem and it could be like "Okay, it's painful but we need to look at it and see how we move forward." But instead, people's reaction is like "No, it happened *there*. I love black people, I love my maid." The distinction is very clear and we still have a very colonial mindset and we are not aware of that. And the process to be aware of that is painful. I mean we'll have to go through this pain and I think we are starting to go deeper, a bit deeper in this pain because the younger generation of black people is fierce. They are fierce. They say "We will for sure have

this discussion.”

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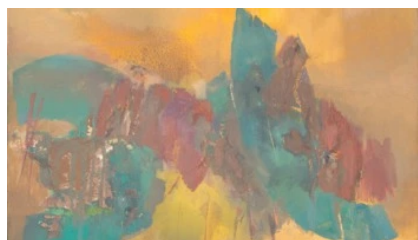
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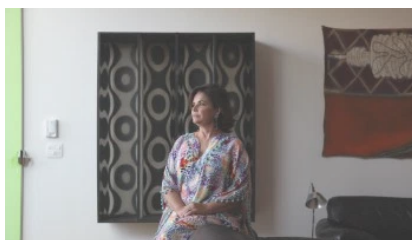
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