

The exhibit “César Bahia: Poetics of a New Beginning” shows approximately two hundred wood carvings by the artist from the State of Bahia, who lives in Fazenda Coutos, on the outskirts of the city of Salvador. César presents to us works conceived close to the body, to his lap, and he seldom uses tools other than the wood chisel and the carver’s mallet. Such carvings result in heads, ex-votos, goddesses and gods of the African diaspora. The artist’s repertoire preserves the tradition of most of the popular woodcarvers in Brazil. At times, the carving presents itself as a relief, at other times, in full shape. In the act of carving, more direct lines, chips, single blows can often be regarded as the final result, and sandpaper and machines are spared.

The images featured in the artist’s works are broad, but Afro-Brazilian art and culture are the focus of his interests. The son of Otávio Bahia, from whom he inherited the pseudonym and the carving technique, César shows his works in areas of Salvador where there are shops, especially those who cater to tourists. Thus, certain compromises in the creation of the carvings prevail, which often makes them go unnoticed by the institutional art circuits. His father, according to one of the developers of Acervo da Laje, José Eduardo, “did without the recognition he deserved, that is, without feedback in terms of finances or from art critics regarding his work”.

An innovative feature of the work of César Bahia is the polychrome that associates goddesses and gods to their insignias and mythical facts. The presence of Blackness, for example, is reaffirmed when the artist replaces the tan of the woods by the black painted with a roller on the skin. Regarding the repertoire presented by the artist, Africa is constantly evoked in the observations of the masks or in the profile carvings, which are traditional in Angola, with pregnant women and people who carry pots and children. Thus, we could say that Africa is his greatest reference. However, in a wider manner, what is considered the source is created in Bahia, in the mixture of Bantu and Yoruba gods and goddesses. In the very presence of different types of wood, we see the artist’s ties with the region called Cidade Baixa, for he uses demolition wood from colonial farms, pieces of boat wreckage soaked by the mangrove, as well as fence posts and dead tree trunks. Broadening the direct relationship with the orishas, and César makes almost every one of the most known gods in the Nago-Yoruba tradition, and includes encantados¹, such as the caboclos² and the indigenous peoples, the owners of the land.

¹Ancestral indigenous spirits worshiped in candomble.

²Generic term for the Brazilian ancestral indigenous spirits that supposedly appear in the ritual ceremonies of candomble.

The mask maybe marks a particular turning point, as well as the uniqueness of the artist. There, bows are added behind the faces, and, in the foreheads, “chorões” (face coverings) that cover up to the eyes of the carving, in the case of goddesses and Obatala. Thus, we get a kind of liberation of the artist from his father’s own teachings. The attire worn by the initiates in the candomble religion is associated with the development of the images of gods, that is, deviating from the mythical interpretations, in which orishas are ordinary people, and fixating the image of the carvings based on what is witnessed in the dirt courtyards celebrations, an act that is even more amplified when César makes Oshosi masks in full metamorphosis with features of the Brazilian countryside: the leather hat covering part of the face, which morphs with the attire of the caboclos.

Conceiving with Acervo da Laje an individual César Bahia exhibit in MAR is to put in other terms what has been traditionally known as “popular art”. Here, Lina Bo Bardi and Emanuel Araujo work as references for this debate. In Lina, the possibility of seeing a challenging Brazilian production, because it is marked by family traditions (César even shared the occupation with his father, Otávio), and by a larger number of pieces in the commercial circuit. Otherwise, we stand before variations of topics correlated to the Nago pantheon, which aggrandizes the possibility of specialization in the gestures of the artist, who makes the same orishas more than once. Architect Lina herself had already included, in her exhibits, woodcarvers such as Otávio Bahia, Agnaldo dos Santos and the family of Louco, who, according to José Eduardo, form the great triad in woodcarving from Bahia. However, popular woodcarving has often limited itself to the label of tradition, taken back to an invented past, without providing individual and contemporary prominent roles to the artists themselves. Emanuel Araujo, on the contrary, valued the works crafted by Afro-Brazilian artists by promoting a certain poetic horizontality among modern, contemporary, and popular artists, as we see in the “Afro-Brazilian Hand” exhibit.

Managing to bring such a number of carvings by César Bahia to the center of this exhibit is a fact that corroborates the greatness of Acervo da Laje. What can resist the realms of tourism and of a Brazilianness that is harmful to artistic creation? Every art institution in Brazil must urgently learn, with this collection project, to provide meaning to artistic works which, to begin with, are scattered throughout the neighborhoods and vicinities, because the purchase and collection of the pieces in that collection focus on the artists from the outskirts of Salvador; pieces acquired, received, or picked from the trash. Moreover, José Eduardo and Vilma Santos overcome art history’s prejudices and inability to see what there is in terms of quantity, what is present in fairs and markets, airport shops, but also what

makes sense in the faith of the people. Here, Brazilian art reveals itself from the outskirts and makes use of driftwood and plants native to the mangrove.

César Bahia gives continuity to his father's occupation driven by the hope that the country where he was born and raised can live up to its name.

MAR Curator Team

UPDATING THE ART OF CÉSAR BAHIA

To talk about the work of woodcarver César Bahia (Salvador, 1964) after 13 years of the existence of Acervo da Laje and its collecting of works of said artist is to reflect upon the creative process under adverse conditions, that is, how, in spite of the hardship and impermanence, the cracks and precariousness, the works insist on existing, on inhabiting the imagery of the outskirts, of Bahia and of the world, thanks to the insistent power that emerges from the need to exist, survive, and make a living from your own art.

César Francisco dos Santos, who took on the same pseudonym as his father, Otávio Bahia, grew up at a time of discovery for his father, a carpenter who realized he was a craftsman and, soon after, woodcarver. Coming from a family of woodcarvers from the town of Alagoinhas, Bahia, he states he has worked with Lina Bo Bardi on what would be Museu de Arte Popular, currently called MAM Bahia, at Solar do Unhão, and that he has also worked as a carpenter at Museu Carlos Costa Pinto. At his home, located in the neighborhood of Fazenda Coutos, in the region called Subúrbio Ferroviário de Salvador, his Father had a fully-furnished workshop-school which oversaw the seasoning of the wood, the use of the machinery, and the finishing and painting of the different works sold in the shops of Mercado Modelo, which were fought over by many collectors, and would even rival, according to a great specialist in popular woodcarving from Bahia, with the traditional and ongoing woodcarving school of the town of Cachoeira, in the region called Recôncavo Baiano, which was started by Boaventura Silva Filho, known as Louco, and is continued by his sons, grandsons, relatives, and friends.

Agnaldo Manoel dos Santos, Doidão, and Otávio Bahia formed the triad of modern popular woodcarving from Bahia, and we know present the works of César Bahia, who provide continuity and freshness to this production, because he uses as symbolic tools the memory inherited from his father, the Afro-Brazilian traditions, and the religions of African origin, which are still his main reference.

Regarding the conception of the works, we must inform that they are all handmade, using machines as little as possible, and the artist even goes to the woodlands of Subúrbio Ferroviário to pick the wood with his axe, and continues to use ancient technology that the urban has not been able to erase with its predatory disarrangement, for, in Subúrbio Ferroviário de Salvador, there are still woodlands, waterfalls, springs, rivers, seas, and lagoons, in places historically known for ancient resistance, such as the former Maroon community called Quilombo do Urubu, where currently Parque São Bartolomeu is located, which was headed by warrior Zeferina in the nineteenth century.

Throughout the past few years, the work of César Bahia has been on display in locations such as Acervo da Laje (2010-2023), MAM Rio (2021-2022), in the exhibit “Memory is an invention”, curated by Keyna Eleison, Pablo Lafuente, and Beatriz Lemos, in MAM Bahia (2022), in the exhibit “Outskirts: a three-act exhibit”, curated by Vilma Santos and José Eduardo Ferreira Santos, and in Sesc Pompeia (2022-2023), in the exhibit “The parable of progress”, with curatorial coordination of Lisette Langado, assistant curatorship of André Pitol and Yudi Rafael, and now arrives at MAR, in his first individual exhibit.

Acervo da Laje

This exhibit presents approximately 240 woodcarvings made in the last 13 years (2010 to 2023), which coincide with the same period of existence of Acervo da Laje, house-museum-school located at Subúrbio Ferroviário de Salvador, which has raised questions such as the decentralization of museum venues, to democratize the access to the arts, memories and esthetics produced in peripheral regions, and make futures in the present, through the creative force manifested by peripheral lives, as well as to show the peripheral regions as exponents of esthetic elaborations, the place or the creation and production of black and ancient memories, for memory is the rack in the carving of the life that time cannot erase.

The carvings herein exhibited, just as life and art, have their imperfections, their movements, and are disturbed by the action of time, which gives them deformities and plasticities observable by those with eyes to see, see again, live.

Orishas, masks, carvings and ex-votos, as well as archetypical creations of the artist's restless unconscious, are, to the eyes, stimuli for the exercise of new readings as pedagogical observation drawings for the discovery of new possibilities of creating based on this exercise of what is visible and becomes memorable.

We stand before works that contain the poetics of the ephemeral in the eternal, of our ancestralities, of the astonishments that Brazil can no longer erase under the egis of the anonymity of popular art, which, when not curated by those who coinhabit the same territory as the artists, is not able to get them out of the invisibility of materiality, but out of their biography, name and last name, which are paramount to exist, make a living from art, and have your work assessed while you are still alive.

César Bahia's main references are the memories of his father, Otávio Bahia, of the recreation of the African masks that arrived here decades ago, be it in their materiality or in magazines, books, and postcards which recorded such representations, as well as the commissions by candomble temples, which were the first to value, recognize, and spread these representations in their sacred and ancient environments. Subúrbio Ferroviário de Salvador concentrates the largest number of candomble temples in the city, a trait that is extremely significant to give continuity to the work of César Bahia. Out of his family of craftsmen, he was the only in Salvador to continue this art that connects with what is sacred and artistic.

By the way, César Bahia is the nephew of Agenor, Otávio Bahia's brother, who moved to Embu das Artes, state of São Paulo, and made a career and

and fame out of woodcarving. Today, Nilceia, César Bahia's sister, is still carving in the same town.

César Bahia was born in Fazenda Coutos, a neighborhood that has always been a cradle of artists, despite its precariousness.

Acervo da Laje is a house-museum-school founded in 2010 by couple Vilma Santos and José Eduardo Ferreira Santos, which comprises two houses in Subúrbio Ferroviário de Salvador, in the neighborhood of São João do Cabrito, and houses thousands of artworks, historical works, and works on the memory of the territory, and it is also a venue for research, classes, meetings, workshops, chit chat in the terrace, and it has libraries, a newspaper archive, a music room, and holds permanent and temporary exhibits.

In the last thirteen years, it has been conducting research on the arts in peripheral areas and has revealed artists formerly invisibilized and caused esthetic and artistic shifts between the center and the peripheral areas, as well as within Brazil, with different actions, such as exhibits, projects and horizontalized curatorships, connecting the audiences of peripheral areas with environments that used to be characterized by artistic hegemonies and were located in the downtown areas of big Brazilian cities.

Through its actions, Acervo da Laje aims at democratizing the arts, memories, and the artistic production of the peripheral areas in self-sustaining environments that work with the poetics and affections contained in our homes.

We define Acervo da Laje as a crossroads for encounters, affections and poetics which were formerly invisible and are now tangible due to the materiality of the works and their narratives told by us, without exogenous intermediations.

In the past few years, we have been occupying the terraces of the outskirts of Salvador with projects such as #OcupaLajes (held in 2016 and 2018), funded by cultural incentive programs of the Culture Department of the Bahia State Government and Fundação Gregório de Mattos. Acervo da Laje has also participated in the 3rd Bienal da Bahia (2014), the 31st Bienal de São Paulo (2014), and in the exhibits “Memory is an invention” (MAM Rio, 2021-2022), “Outskirts: a three-act exhibit” (MAM Bahia, 2022), and “The parable of progress” (Sesc Pompeia, 2022-2023).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Acervo da Laje website (www.acervodalaje.com.br) was developed with funds from the Goethe-Institut, as well as projects for structural improvements in both houses, in addition to the organization of the libraries, newspaper archive, and music room, with the support of cultural incentive programs of the Urban Planning Department of the Public Prosecutor’s Office of the state of Bahia e Aldir Blanc Law, as well as of Fundação Gregório de Mattos, of Salvador City Hall.

Without official support, the venues are kept by the founding couple through instant transfers (called PIX in Brazil) and the collaboration of the residents of the surroundings as well as of the whole city.