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Vdrome

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Adriana Varejão

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Varej (Rock), 1993, oil on canvas, 165 x 195 cm, photograph © Eduardo Ortega,
courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro Gallery, London

Adriana Varejão



Encounters



**CULTURALLY
CONTAGIOUS**

Text by Margherita Dessanay
Photography by Daryan Dornelles

Across a career of more than 20 years, Adriana Varejão has produced an incredibly varied body of work, from paintings and drawings to installations. Her rich inventory of inspirations includes antique maps, travel chronicles from colonial times, anthropological studies and erotic literature.

Adriana Varejão's visual language joins baroque exuberances with delicately minute details, the fascination for Chinese ceramics with the Portuguese tradition of azulejos, Lucio Fontana with Francis Bacon. Her art defies linear analysis so I decide to start our conversation at the end, asking her about her new installation project, *Polvo Project*.

'I am creating oil paints! I am developing 33 colours in all the details, from the brand to the design of the tubes and the crate. They will be multiples. Each installation consisting of a crate made of wood with the 33 different colours of oil paints inside. The brand and logo of my oil paint is Polvo. The factory with which I am producing the colours is called Eagle: it is an animal, so I decided to stick to the animal world. In Portuguese *polvo* means octopus and the sound of the word is very similar to *povo*, which means people.'

This linguistic detail is not accidental, as Varejão explains: 'I began to construct this work in my mind a long time ago. Since the 1990s, I had collected oil paints of skin colour from all over the world and I knew that one day it could become a work. All the colours were in pink flesh tones. Then, two years ago, I went to the US and for the first time in my life I found an oil paint named "Caucasian flesh tone" and it was the first time I stumbled on a colour name related to an ethnicity. The 33 colours for the project are based on a census that took place in Brazil in 1976. The people interviewed were asked to name their own skin co-

lour. Some of the definitions in the resulting list are very poetical and cannot be translated in a specific existing colour. Some of them are also impossible to translate into English. I had to ask five different translators; one of them is artist Arto Lindsay. Although he lives in New York, he was raised in Brazil and is very familiar with the language.'

The survey used by Varejão reported 135 words and locutions, each indicating a different skin nuance, and they give an idea of the complex social and cultural classification of races in Brazil. I ask Varejão about Brazilians having developed such a rich and suggestive vocabulary for differentiating skin tones. 'There is a book from a very famous anthropologist: he was studying a tribe in Indonesia and found out that they didn't name colours, they just named dark and light. In their society to have names for colours was not a relevant thing. In a way, *Polvo Project* is more about language than about colour.'

With names such as 'Enxofrada' (Angry Sulphur), 'Queimada du Sol' (Kissed by the Sun) and 'Fogoiô' (Fox on Fire Red), it is clear that these colour definitions do not correspond to objective colours and that they carry more than their literal meanings. 'This is why I chose those names and definitions in which the words do not mean colour, but something more culturally and emotionally related,' Varejão says. 'There is a colour called "Cor de Burro Quando Foge" (the colour of a runaway donkey), which does not mean



Mapa de Lopo Hornem II (Map of Lopo Hornem II), 1992-2004, oil on wood with suture thread, 110 x 140 x 10 cm, photograph © Jaime Acioli, courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro Gallery, London

Adriana Varejão



For my work I prefer the word eroticism instead of violence

anything. We use it for those kind of undefined colours like greenish or pale-brownish. That shows how any classification related to racial colour is imprecise. What is interesting is that in Brazil racial definitions can change according to social position. For instance, if you become richer you will be whiter. The way you are racially defined is fluid, it can change, just as when you say that someone is suntanned. The project says that skin colour has to do with social relations more than with race.'

The installation includes murals: 'I commissioned an academic painter to realise 11 portraits of me. Each of them looks exactly the same but the skin colour changes from black to very white and they'll be part of the installation.' In the past Varejão touched upon something conceptually similar when she realised a triptych in which she was portrayed as Chinese, Moorish and Indian. It is evident that investigating the notion of race is a constant thread in her artistic practice.



Lingua com Padrão Sinuoso (Tongue with Winding Pattern), 1998, oil on canvas and aluminium, 200 x 170 x 57 cm, photograph © Eduardo Ortega. Courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro Gallery, London

There is supposed to be a proverbially large degree of racial mixture in Brazil, and this fact is generally considered as one of the positive virtues of its social structure. Already in 1933 the sociologist Gilberto Freyre used the term 'racial democracy' to define Brazil, in the belief that the continuous interracial mixing had eliminated racism and racial discrimination. Nowadays Brazilian society is often enthusiastically celebrated in the name of multiculturalism, but also often criticised for its increasing levels of social inequality, which appear to be closely connected with racial differences. Varejão tells me: 'Since the beginning, my work has dealt with the notion of *mestizaje* [the biological encounter between different ethnicities and cultures generating a new race], which is very different from multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is a tricky concept and it is mainly used in relation to very strong cultures, like the North American and European ones, which normally dominate the other cultures.' It is probably for this reason that she finds inspiration in different historical sources such as ancient chronicles written by explorers of what were once remote countries and antique maps, as well as prints and drawings from Chinese art.

As is clear by the amount of books and visual artifacts referenced in her work, Varejão is a committed researcher who mixes unusual and unknown sources. 'I like to research in a very casual way,' she says. 'My research process does not follow a rational path and is very free. This is probably why it also seems original.' According to what she once said to *10* magazine (issue 46, winter–spring 2012–13), she believes that we can always reopen the past and remake it, changing the meaning of history. 'I believe that history is more about different versions than one big objective history. What is generally accepted as one big history is just one of many versions. You can always play with different versions and in this way rewrite history. In my work I always deal with the edges of the world, like, for instance, China and Brazil, which used to be, and in a way still are, considered marginal cultures. I like to look at how the edges meet without Europe or North America being involved. So there is a sort of "cultural contagion" between the edges that does not pass through Europe.'

Her work *Map of Lopo Homem* is a good example of this. 'The map is from a Portuguese cartographer from the sixteenth century. You can see the Portuguese colonies in China, India, Africa and South America as they are in the main part of the map. I used it for my work. There is a geographical connection between China and Brazil and the other colonies.' In *Map of Lopo Homem* these countries share a physical cut, a seemingly open scar that reveals bloody flesh. Critics have read the piece as a representation of the colonial wound. But the artist does not feel completely comfortable with this interpretation: 'I love Por-



Ruina de Charque Santa Cruz [Quilina] (Santa Cruz Jerked-beef Ruin [corner]), 2002, oil on wood and polyurethane, 233 x 90 x 166 cm, photograph © Eduardo Orrego. Courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro Gallery, London

Azulejaria Verde em Carne Viva (Green Tilework in Live Flesh), 2000, oil on canvas and polyurethane on aluminium and wood support, 220 x 290 x 70 cm, photograph © Eduardo Ortega. Courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro Gallery, London





It's about giving birth, creating life – not about killing someone

tuguese culture. All my work deals with that. What I create has much more to do with cultural encounters. The Portuguese were sailors and explorers. They had colonies in China, India, Africa and South America. The common Portuguese presence produced a cultural contagion between these countries. It happened in many ways, and you can see it, for instance, through the ceramics, if you think of the Portuguese *azulejos* and Chinese pottery. Once again, it's about the *mestizaje* that has really happened.'

But why has she used a scar and what does that bloody wound stand for? 'I think that the wound represents the presence of the body in the work. It stands for the idea that history is printed on the body. In my current project you can see this in the issue of skin and its social definitions. In my older works this concept passes through the presence of the body. The cut is made to reveal the body, but it does not have a negative meaning. If you see the map you will see a vulva, not necessarily a wound. For my work I prefer the word eroticism instead of violence.'

Since *Map of Lopo Homem* Varejão has frequently used the motif of exposed flesh erupting from a wound in her paintings, drawings and installations, and her work has often been associated with violence. An association she is not entirely comfortable with, as she says: 'In Portuguese we have the word *contundente* [mordant, caustic] for what I want to do with my art. In my series *Walls of Tiles* from the late 1990s I created monochromatic and very rational surfaces with cuts and flesh behind it, like *Green Tilework in Live Flesh*, now permanently at the Tate. The tile wall is cold and rational, and being aseptic makes it very violent. The insides of the body coming out of the wall are rather related to passion, exuberance and life. The flesh stands

more for an impulse of life than an impulse for death. This experience of the body is very feminine because we, as women, deal much more with interiors than men. We bleed every month and we give birth. It's a very difficult moment and some people feel uncomfortable with it. But it's about giving birth, creating life – not about killing someone. This would be my response to those critics who refer to my work as *violent*.' Rather than violent, the word visceral (both in its literal and broader meanings) seems more accurately to convey the feeling arising in front of these works of art.

Another artist often accused of visual violence, Adel Abdessemed, once told me something very similar. For both artists it is important to stress that using flesh and blood does not automatically correspond to violence. Varejão tells me: 'The way you perceive something as violent is a cultural thing. Normally Protestant cultures deny the body. The same thing can be said of Catholic cultures, except for the baroque moment, where the body was very present. But in general there is a denial of the bodily dimension of life. I also want to stress that my work is about fiction: I never use real skin or flesh. Nothing is real and there is no act of violence. It's theatre! In the history of painting there is a long and strong tradition of painting meat and flesh, like in Rembrandt, Géricault, Goya and up to Francis Bacon. And I always like to keep a link with the history of painting too.'

The juxtaposition of a rational minimalist surface with an eruption of guts executed in foam characterises not only the *Walls of Tiles* series, but also the *Jerked Meat Ruins* and the *Tongues and Incisions*: 'In these works the space is open. There is meat and there are tiles, there is again that opposition: the rational and the erotic.'

Encounters

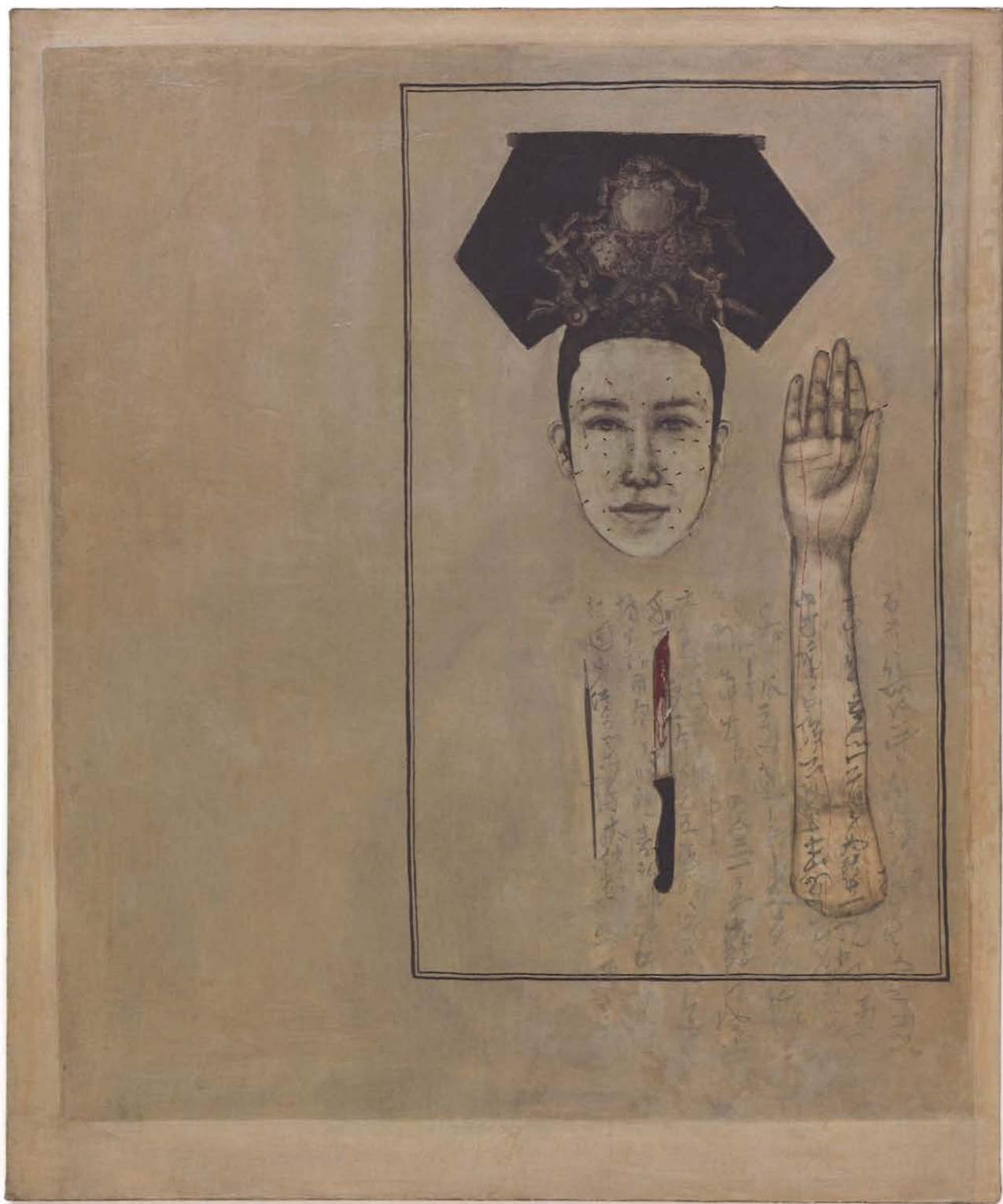
Testemunhas Oculares X, Y e Z (Eyewitnesses X, Y and Z), 1997, oil on canvas, porcelain, photography, silver, glass and iron, 200 x 250 x 35 cm, each canvas 85 x 70 cm, each object 16 x 88 x 25 cm. Photograph © Eduardo Ortega. Courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro Gallery, London

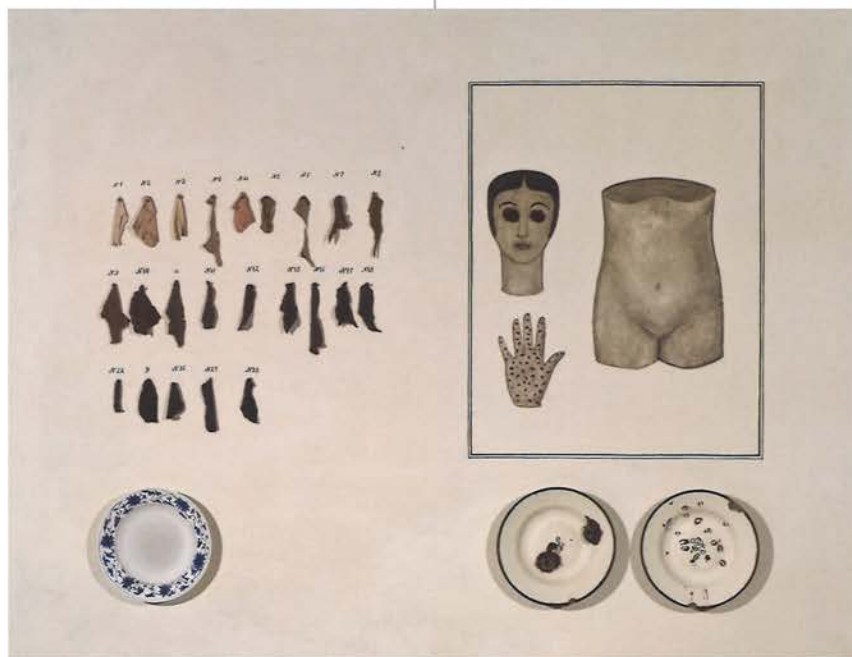


Adriana Varejão



Chinesea (Chinese), 1992, oil on wood with suture thread, 120 x 100 cm, oil on wood with suture thread, photograph © Eduardo Ortega. Courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro Gallery, London





Ex-Votos e Peles (Votive offering and skins), 1993, oil on various materials, 130 x 170 cm, photograph © Jaime Acioli. Courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro Gallery, London

The common Portuguese presence produced a cultural contagion between these countries

Though formally very different from these, the *Saunas and Baths* series (2002) in fact originated from them. 'In that period I was taking pictures of meat shops, meat markets and bathrooms, all examples of a specific kind of architecture that uses tiles in a very practical and functional way, not for decorative purposes. And then I found a book, a study of architecture in Macau, which was a Portuguese colony in China. They have the same kind of architecture with tiles that you can find in Brazil and there was also a small drawing of a corner made of tiles, and that inspired me to do the *Saunas* series.' The project consists of 16 paintings representing tiled spaces and corners, devoid of any presence of narrative. Any trace of the life so vital in her previous work is seemingly absent here. 'While in the wall there is an explicit contraposition, in this series there is no overt counterbalance,' she agrees. 'The *Saunas* paintings deal with space. Space is a very traditional issue in painting, involving perspective, light and shadows, colour. These paintings are very complex studies of colour. In the one with the blue sauna, the blue goes from very light blue to dark blue and each square/tile is treated like a monochrome. Another compositional element comes from the fact that I was comparing two different and opposite surfaces, which is a visual strategy that baroque art used all the time.'

For *Saunas and Baths* the references were not just from the history of art but also from literature. 'I was reading

Sade and Bataille. You can see it from the titles of the paintings, like *The Seducer*, *The Obsessive* or *The Voyeur*. I read a very nice essay about Sade by the French intellectual Philippe Sollers titled "Sade against the Supreme Being". While a lot of people talk about violence in Sade, Sollers compares him to an engraver who operates with language. Once again, violence in art is just a fiction. But in the works where I was focusing on architecture, there is almost no narrative dimension, just an atmosphere, and people looking at the work can project their own stories. Once I had arrived at that point, I decided to go back to narrative, though I make less use of parody now.'

In 2009 Varejão started developing her series of *Plates*. They are inspired by the work of Portuguese ceramist Raphael Bordalo Pinheiro and Palissy ware, a style of pottery with naturalistic elements in relief on the plate. They are richly decorated and some consider them kitsch. Varejão's interpretation involves circular paintings portraying mainly feminine deities, fruit and seafood symbolising fertility and abundance. Rich in decoration and brightly coloured, they are openly exuberant and almost baroque. Nothing could be more different from the minimalism of *Saunas and Baths*. 'There are many different directions where the works can lead you. Now sometimes I miss the *Saunas* series and I think that I could go back to that a little bit.'