

Adriana Varejão Polvo

16 October - 9 November 2013



Victoria Miro Gallery is delighted to present a new body of work by Adriana Varejão in her fourth solo presentation at the gallery. One of the most original voices in contemporary Brazilian art, Varejão's diverse practice comprises painting, sculpture, photography and installation. Her sources are many, encompassing baroque art, history, architectural ruins, natural sciences and theatre.

Varejão has long been fascinated by themes of miscegenation and skin colour, and she explores these subjects in a fresh way in this new body of work. *Polvo* addresses the ambivalent notion of interracial identity in Brazil, where historically race has assumed a social and cultural function.

The official Brazilian census categorises people into five different groups according to their skin colour: white, black, red, yellow and brown. In 1976, however, a household survey conducted by the IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) posed the open question 'What is your colour?' The result was 135 distinct terms whose meanings are far more figurative than literal.

For *Polvo*, Varejão has created her own oil paints, named after thirty-three definitions of skin colour taken from the 1976 survey. The artist selected some of the more exotic and poetic terms, including *Fogoió* (Fox on Fire Red), *Enxofrada* (Angry

Sulphur), *Café com Leite* (Milky Coffee), *Branquinha* (Snow White), *Burro-quando-foge* (Faded Fawn), *Cor Firme* (Steady Colour), *Moreirão* (Big Black Dude), *Encerada* (Buffed) and *Queimada de Sol* (Sun Kissed).

Varejão also presents an installation of eleven self-portraits painted in an academic style using these paints. The skin tones in the paintings range in various shades from dark to light.

The artist has created a brand *Polvo* (Octopus) and a logo for the paints featuring an octopus, a creature famous for using its ink in defense. Octopus ink contains melanin, the same substance that gives colour to human hair and skin.

The artist's initial inspiration for these works comes from casta painting, a seventeenth- and eighteenth-century genre characteristic of New Spain and particularly prevalent in colonial Mexico. In the post-Conquest period, casta paintings sought to document the varieties of interracial mixing in the New World in an attempt to classify and frame racial diversity and hybridity through a complex casta system.

The casta system developed by colonial Spaniards helped establish and perpetuate a rigid hierarchical taxonomy based on notions of purity associated with whiteness. The concept was derived from the Latin *castus*, which literally means 'keep pure'. Using more than one hundred categories of racial intermixing, the casta system classified a broad spectrum of combinations of white, black, Indian and mixed-race heritage. Those considered 'pure bred' were recognised as part of the nobility and held greater economic and social power. Even at this early stage in Latin American history, those of black and mixed-race heritage occupied less privileged positions.

With *Polvo* Varejão emphasises how colour acts as a language and lexicon. These works allow us to rethink our own systems of chromatic classification and the social processes that are expressed through them.

Born in 1964, Adriana Varejão currently lives and works in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In 2012 her retrospective exhibition *Histories at the Margins* was presented at Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo. This exhibition subsequently toured to the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro and to Malba - Fundación Costantini, Buenos Aires in early 2013. In recent years she has also had solo exhibitions at Museu de Arte da Pampulha, Belo Horizonte (2008); Hara Museum, Tokyo (2007); Fondation Cartier Pour L'Art Contemporain, Paris (2005); and Centro Cultural de Belém, Lisbon (2005). Varejão has exhibited extensively internationally including MoMA QNS, New York; ARS06 Kiasma, Helsinki; Site Santa Fe, New Mexico; Liverpool Biennial; the Istanbul Biennial; the Biennale of Sydney; the Venice Biennale; and the São Paulo Biennial. A permanent pavilion devoted to Varejão's work opened in 2008 at Centro de Arte Contemporânea Inhotim in Brazil. Her work is also present in important international institutions' collections, among them Tate Modern, Fondation Cartier, Hara Museum, Stedelijk Museum and Guggenheim. She has received the Order of Cultural Merit from the Cultural Ministry of Brazil and the Medal of Chevalier des Arts et Lettres from the French government.

Victoria Miro | 16 Wharf Road, London N1 7RW. Opening Times 10am – 6pm. Tuesday to Saturday. Admission Free
Press enquiries: Kathy Stephenson, Director of Communications, 020 7549 0422, kathy@victoria-miro.com