

Presentation of the exhibition Athos Bulcão – A Plural Trajectory

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Fernando Cocchiarale

Athos Bulcão's work is undeniably a particular case among the last unfoldings of Modernism in 1992. A period marked by international (Second World War) and national (Vargas dictatorship in Estado Novo) crisis, the 1940s have seen a generation of artists blossoming in the field of plastic arts influenced by the modernist ideal and the radical renewal, this last one represented by a rupture with the past which was introduced by Geometric and Informal Abstractionism.

Although connected affectively and even aesthetically to some emblematic artists of the period, the insertion of the young Athos Bulcão in the reference board left by Modernism in 1922 was always lateral, discrete and even dimmed by an experimental curiosity that ended up leading him to trajectories very different from those followed by other artists from his generation. The contact with Oscar Niemeyer from 1943 on, his work with Portinari in 1945 after the architect's invitation for the St. Francis of Assisi panel at Pampulha church in Belo Horizonte and even the internship at atelier Portinari, stimulated by his companies during the creation of the panel mentioned are more a preparation for the autonomy that would characterize the unique plurality of Athos's work than a simple adoption of political and aesthetic ideas from these artists. The Social Realism, so important to Portinari and Di Cavalcanti, for example, were never part of Athos aesthetic concerns.

From 1948 to 1950, Athos lived in Paris with a scholarship granted by the French government. When he returned to Brazil, he found a cultural environment totally different from the one he was used to. Coincidentally, during those years he spent in France, Brazilian art maybe experienced the biggest changes ever. Not only were both São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro Museums of Modern Art created, but also São Paulo Museum of Art and the Biennial; moreover, Abstract and Concrete Art came up as radical alternatives – focused on investigating the pure shape itself – to the politicalization inherent to the Social Realism of modernist origin.

After the end of his scholarship and his coming back to Rio de Janeiro Athos had, again, to make a living, something just a few Brazilian artists could do by only selling their works. The admission at Documentation Service at Ministry of Education, the illustration of books magazines and recording covers, incursions into scenography, left a little time for the artist and made him appear especially by means of experiences in applied art, seen then by many as a minor and decorative work.

This laterality of Athos Bulcão's work set him aside, slowly, not only from the modernist tradition, his origin, but also from the radical abstractionism and, finally, from the cultural environment, sometimes frivolous, in Rio de Janeiro, determining factors for his definitive moving to the new capital, Brasília, in 1958, a huge construction site at that time.

It is undeniable that Informal Abstraction and Constructivism (Concretism and Neo-Concretism) were vital for the Brazilian art renovation. For the first time the country's visual production, though in a peculiar fashion, synchronizes with the international vanguards. The investigation centered in the form, color and space caused by new tendencies, gave the Brazilian artists a full and conscious dominium of the only repertoire known as exclusively from the Modern art: the field of the relations strictly plastic and, for this reason, adverse to any representation of the reality.

For Athos Bulcão, the formal learning presented by the abstract issue, and since then an essential requirement for the Brazilian artist formation, intensified especially after the moment he moved to the new capital under construction. He became not only its first artist, but also the one who had the biggest opportunity in Brazil, and maybe in the world, to have his art integrated with architecture.

Consequently, the work of architectonic integration of Athos Bulcão (murals, tile panels, reliefs, etc) was crucial for the development of a repertoire that, although personal, is similar to the ones from the artists of the Brazilian constructivist trends, thus, essential for the understanding of the collection of his production.

If we look at his works – the beautiful photo collages, made in 1952 by the artist; the special organization almost hieratic of his recurring series about carnival (which first works date back to 1954 and the latest to the 90's); his organic masks contained by a frame capturing them, almost as a tile, and also his geometrical and even figurative paintings – under a modular point of view we can learn that, beyond the suggestive plurality of Athos Bulcão's work pulses one of the most significant singular contributions for Brazilian art in our century.