

## **Presentation of the solo exhibition “Máscaras” (Masks) Mônica Figueiras de Almeida Gallery São Paulo, 1989**

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After the minimalist rigor of the 1970's and of the waves of wild expressionism that predominated during the 1980's, it is emerging an artistic scene that allows a greater number of individual options. The theoretical structures that sustained the last twenty years have already many cracks, but it is stimulating to know that, in the land where the ruins fell, the soil is fertile and promising. The concept of what is contemporary and the stance of how to face the artistic gesture now have new shades. In the same way that the last fin de siècle anticipated the polemics of modernism and the 20th century, we are already in an end of century and with proposals that reflect a mirror of many faces.

With this spirit of time –zeitgeist– one can see and appreciate Athos Bulcão's Masks. He was always nationally known for the rigor of his panels and tiles. In Brasília, for instance, where his presence is as important as Lawrence Durrell's Quartet for composing the city of Alexandria, it is impossible to escape from his marks and lessons of formal precision. Entrances of buildings, hallways, passages and open air spaces gained a new category thanks to his modules and the graphical work of his tiles. Oscar Niemeyer made good use of the facet of Athos Bulcão and incorporated his works into many of his own projects. The reliefs that cover the National Theater are perhaps the best known. Nevertheless, a recent and particularly successful example is the collection of murals for the round restaurant that is part of the Latin American Memorial, in São Paulo.

The Masks, at first glance, could seem like the other side of such rigor, the other extremity of the pendulum's balance, for they are profiles of images, intuitively conceived and taking on different nuances: they can be ironic, dramatic, violent, delicate, erotic or simply imaginary. Athos Bulcão has already called them by “my archaeologies”. Indeed, the collection of these masks could form a delirious frieze of a palace in Crete or Cartage, but also (why not?) in the planet Mongo or in an anticipating architecture. The artist, in this case, changed his language, but didn't change his control over his work. If in the tiles or panels we rarely see any color, here it is abundantly present, yet with subtle modulations. Besides, even if the gesture is intuitive, also here there is a research of industrial materials: the delicate, scintillating and velvety texture of some masks is obtained with glass powder used for signaling highways. Such images, exhibited almost at the threshold of the 1990's, actually find resonance in the artistic production of centers as varied as Germany, California or Japan.

A curious and recent characteristic of international artistic production is the rehabilitation of the human figure as a departing point for a visual work. For a long time, to be freed from the figure was a crucial point for artists. The employment of an image taken from reality meant a limitation or a connection with a past they would

prefer to reject. In different geographies, to deal with a human figure is no longer so painful. Even artists who worked with quite simple forms, such as the North-American Joel Shapiro, who employs geometric modules cubes and rectangles – in more recent pieces is daring to convey an anthropomorphic geography and create volumes that resemble human profiles. In Japan, the manner of exorcizing the formulas of Modern Western sculpture is precisely to deal once again with the proportion of the face and the body of Man. In Germany, young sculptors and some older ones, such as the painter Baselitz, resumed the representation of human shapes in wood volumes. In Baselitz's case, his most recent images resemble the primitive Polynesian totems. And nothing more updated than this thoughtful connection between allegoric art, shamanism, archaic forms and contemporaneity.

The profile of Athos Bulcão's masks also keeps some familiar distance from the images produced by the Dutch painter Karel Appel. However, and this also serves as a hint to understand the extension of Athos Bulcão's universe, Lewis Carroll is one of his favorite authors. When the Cheshire cat or the Queen of Hearts asked Alice – “But, after all, who are you?”, she simply answered – “I'm Alice and I'm looking for the White Rabbit”. In order to justify his simultaneous activities, he does not look for any explanation. Both in the tiles and in the masks he goes beyond the simple visual discipline: an enormous poetic freedom is always present. But his Dionysian aspect of the masks is still less known in his work. Even if nowadays such vocabulary is also found in some international art, Athos Bulcão develops such fantastic images for over a decade. The first mask I found, in the collection of a diplomat in Brasilia, Carlos Garcia, dated 1975, and this, remembering the artistic scene of the time in Brazil, in general, is a proof of a solitary belief in a quite special poetic imagination. Nowadays, as a collection, Athos Bulcão's Masks start to reveal a remarkable presence in the Brazilian scene. But he still keeps a whole sculptural bestiary that slowly starts to be developed and lives in perfect accord with his new panel and tile projects – always of impeccable harmony and elegance.