

Presentation of the individual exhibition: Paintings and Masks, Saramenha Gallery, Rio de Janeiro, 1992

Athos Bulcão: Rigor and Humor

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I

Athos Bulcão is a typical artist from this second generation of modernists who emerged and affirmed themselves in Brazil in the early 1940's. From early on, his discourse incorporated the essential elements of modernism, here in stagnation, after the initial instants symbolized in the federative and heroic gesture of the Week of Modern Art. Among such elements in the foreground, there was a persistent belief in the utopia of the synthesis of the arts, which the profound renovation of Brazilian architecture had actuated in the 1930's helped to establish.

Thus, his relationships with Oscar Niemeyer in 1943 and Cândido Portinari in 1945 – in both cases, in connection to works in which he decorated public buildings with tiles in Belo Horizonte: the Municipal Theater and the Pampulha Church – guided the young carioca towards a work that did not seek to be isolated in the exclusiveness of a single technique and a single and unshakable support. Attracted by the mystique of the multiplication of experiments, aided by the strategy of a hand that was skillful enough to elaborate in distinct directions and convinced of the excellence of the stylistic tide, without messianic rigidity, he decidedly threw himself into production through a diversity of forms, but all directed towards a central, synthesizing axis. So, as far as he is concerned, this impression of an operistic work, that invokes everything towards finally being made manifest. In fact, he acquired a taste for Opera from a very young age, because of his sister who studied singing. And this influence remained forever in the bone marrow of his visual language. A question solved in its source.

What pleasure in exploring the diversity and engaging in situations of change, throughout a whole half century of labor! From the 1940's on, the tireless (although preferably silent) Athos continues to accumulate the experience of metamorphosis in differentiated areas of expression: drawing and painting as a foundation, however, equally, in a succession of phases, periods, and proposals, such as photomontage, illustration of books and magazines, scenography, mosaic tile work, and the creation of reliefs on a mural space. And we must not forget the six years (1963-1965 and 1988-1990) that he was a professor at the University of Brasilia. His were paths and journeys preferring the adventure of agitation.

Brasilia: the choice of going to the brand new capital to reside and work was certainly providential – it was the certainty of what one is and the discovery of what one wants. First of all, the new vibrated in it, like an improbable miracle, the accomplishment of architecture in a state of grace, available to the share of artists. Proof is that Athos Bulcão left and continues to leave the repeated mark of his happy meeting with the city-laboratory: the National Theater, the Palace of the Arches, the Pantheon of Liberty, among others; and confirm that, for the artists who settled there even before its official inauguration, the works offered to the daily lives of all were an attainable dream. The agreement of the diminutive and the monumental, of the hand and the machine, and of the intimate and the public was made orderly and flexible in each one of the murals that he had the opportunity to produce in the city.

But Brasilia also served as a refuge to him. Since he is by definition withdrawn, adverse to the hustle and bustle of large urban centers, where the law of exuberance rules, he detected the paradise of an oasis in the desert at the center of the country. The capital certainly grew, became swollen and even overflowed; however, since its beginning it has conserved an atmosphere of isolation that soothed the soul of this solitary artist. This location did not demand of him with insistence as it would if he were in Rio or São Paulo, where there is the impression of constantly being in the arena of galleries and museums. It allowed him a relative silence, which in fact he took great advantage of between 1949 and 1967 – a period in which he preferred to remain exempt from showing his work in public.

This solitude did not harm but only slightly postponed the just recognition that he finally has received as one of the tutelary figures of modernity in Brazil. To study the lengthy and multiple unfolding of his work is to find answers to configure and delimit an aesthetic conduct characteristic of the maturity of the modernist options in Brazil, since the abandonment of the inheritance of the 19th Century was ensured. Athos is fruit and protagonist of this lack of commitment to the past and the impulse towards the new that swept through Brazilian art since the primal cry of the courageous Anita Malfatti.

II

We now consider his procedures. As a premise, we have taken note of the predilection defined by the multiplicity of materials and supports: this is his starting point, his first and greatest mark. However, it acts equally as a counterpoint, the centripetal component in the construction/implosion duality, which offers him the space needed for work and language, always situated between the two poles. With this I mean to say that if there is evident diversity in the mediums that he uses, there is simultaneously still the necessary expressive concentration for the artist to achieve the united from the multiple. On one hand, everything is useful: paper, pencil, canvas, paint, ceramic, cement, marble,

plaster, modeling clay, and much more; on the other hand, nothing deserves dispersion; with rigor and humor – and imperatively with both – he develops his discourse.

In this sense, the sound of his name is already a good portent. Everything that appears in the work of Athos Bulcão pulses previously in the many contrasts that name him as a person. Athos, with the crystalline vowels, is air and water advancing together towards the high and the clear, in the logic of the purification that the spirit expresses when relieved of unwanted weight; Bulcão, on the contrary, because of the fever of its subterranean sounds – the obvious volcano in which he is soon transformed into – invites the union of earth and fire, from the depths below, imposes the torture of passion to the certainty of rigor. Thus predisposed to the coming and going between the delicacies of the smooth and the danger of the rough, our artist reaps the fruit of fertility that a well managed compromise of opposites always ensures.

Consequently, his work is constantly and simultaneously free and constructed, happy and contained, curvaceous and straight. He amalgamates the organic and inorganic setting the visceral and the stone, the landscape and the architecture in conspiracy. For example, take the series of “Masks”; these polychromed reliefs that he has been producing since 1974. If the original appearance of these, due to the image and the texture belongs to the area of combustion – like magma – the arrangement of the elements set into play initiates a careful organization in the final composition, in which the rigor is imposed as the definitive voice in the whole. Within, passes the mouth of humor or the cry; outside, the silence of discipline and control are lit. The masks never ceased to be precisely this: a wall between two worlds.

And each work of his is like this, at any formulation or stage. It is the exact meeting of geometry and fantasy, as if the architecture of each one that is nurtured could not survive without, under penalty of emptying or disaster, the contribution of the gentle smile, the counter dance of soft disorder. With Athos Bulcão, we are where two riverbanks are annulled on behalf of the splendor of the river itself, so that everything is manifest in balance after having originated in opposition.