

Athos Bulcão

Bené Fonteles

In Brazilian art, one is apt to find artists who have introduced new aesthetic languages, and who thereby have inspired new conceptual and creative processes that go beyond the very notion of Brazilian art. Athos Bulcão is one of them. With his unparalleled constructive vigor he builds a poetic language of extreme universality.

His presence has been fundamental since the 1950s - when formal abstraction reached, for us all, an aura of sophistication. Along with him came Milton Dacosta, Alfredo Volpi, Willys de Castro, Aloísio Carvão, Lygia Clark, Rubem Valentim, Ione Saldanha and Helio Oiticica. Abstract, concrete, neo-concrete artists have uniquely improved the so-called "Brazilian constructive project" (Aracy Amaral), turning it into an ambitious sensitive project, of sensuality and articulate and interactive plastic intelligence.

This intelligence is what separates us from the abstract-geometrical movement, from Europe and America alike, and creates the concrete movement by adding visual poetry and visual arts for the first time at an exhibition at the MAM (Museum of Modern Art), in São Paulo, in 1956. We were not simply influenced – as proposed by the theoretical advocates – by the presence of Bauhaus or the School of Ulm in Germany, from where Max Bill originated as such a strong influence among our artists. We are, rather, heirs to a rich African-Indigenous tradition, and its natural continuation in the popular art of Brazil. From his heritage, and its profound, complex and sophisticated strength of geometrical construction, reaching beyond intuition as a very well thought-of formal structure, one is to find the rigor to which Athos Bulcão is a legitimate heir.

Valuable, above all, is the informal exercise of freedom and improvisation, the same Brazilian improvisation on which Athos built when attempting to construct with great wisdom the modular panels of tiles, sided by the workers who came to build Brasilia. It was with the same and ever present freedom that Athos built his impressive and vast work, using multiple languages of expression in the process.

In 1940, he began with painting and soon developed a visual code of his own, in a series that would reach its apex from 1960 onwards to the 1980s. In the subsequent decade, his paintings started fading into abstraction, decomposing into chromatic subtleties, in a profusion of small circles, like pieces of Carnival confetti falling in a fiery spectacle, forming planes of color, landscapes that defied the look in unprecedented optical effects.

These same circles are incorporated as a form of their own and used onto the most varied types of support and materials. They lend rich texture, materiality and poetic mystery to his “mask” boxes, as self portraits that give away unsuspected and mysterious things, very often painted on the artist’s own wooden color pallets.

The initial drawings, as well as the latest, are clothed in fine humor – they are gathered in a book entitled “Athos Desenha”, which I organized in 2005. These are pieces composed between 1997 and 2002. They include drawings in watercolor pencil,

graphite and color, colored pens and black ink. They bear witness to Athos' brave resistance, not willing to surrender himself to the degenerative illness that afflicted him. Those were the last and definitive contributions by Athos to Brazilian art.

The same fine and rare humor can be found in his fantastic and ironic photo montage pieces of the 1950s. Several of them take on an expressionist connotation from the cinema art of Friedrich Murnau and Sergei Eisenstein, of which Athos is a great admirer, or from the Dadaism or Surrealism, which are no less brilliant than the collage of Max Ernst or Picabia. Athos eliminates color, and works hard on these collage pieces made of magazine and book scraps through a process of decoupage, thereby transforming them into another photograph, with a new imaginary concept of the unreal, giving new dimensions to the technical possibilities of photo collage.

His most famous work is experienced by the people of several cities of Brazil and in the world, people who enjoy the most harmonious living with his expressive panels of tiles, wood and concrete. Athos incorporates his panels masterfully in any architectural project, never allowing the modulation and colors to come into conflict with the architectural forms. Herein, too, lies his great interactive conceptive knowledge, making definitive and priceless his co-creative collaboration in the landscape of Brasilia, sharing the space with the bold architects who designed the city. His most important panel, which participates in Brasilia's daily life, is the external façade of the National Theatre, which, as Paulo Herkenhoff once put, "would be naked without Athos' relief work".

It's in Brasilia that the capital importance of his works acquired their status as pioneering and essential. Pioneering because Athos was among the founders of the city, brought along by Niemeyer himself, who had long recognized Athos as the precious jewel that ornamented his own precious aesthetic, conceptual and human values. The lot, overflowing with talent, included people of the highest quality in creativity and ethics. They were the actors behind the longing for a dream country, the search for a gentleness long lost: Lucio Costa, Ceschiatti, Bruno Giorgi, Tom Jobim, Vinícius de Moraes and many others. Athos became a "candango" himself, adding beauty, love and human touch to a city built from scratch, the fruit of the instant power of northeasterners, sprouting out of nowhere in the heart of Goiás.

No other city in the world has the privilege and happiness to boast the aesthetic and poetic omnipresence of the works by one single and such original artist. There are more than a hundred points of light, illuminating the city, its buildings and homes, museums and schools, palaces and courthouses, churches and hotels, clubs and hospitals, monuments and military installations. Not to mention the works in the City Park and the adjoining TV Tower, the National Theatre and the Alvorada Palace Chapel, the National Congress and the JK Memorial, the International Airport and, above all, the aesthetic and affective memory of the people, for whom Athos created, generously sowing in nearly seventy years of art, a strange beauty turned on its head, representing their thirst to reinvent themselves yet always in a harmonious way.

Athos accomplished to bridge the modern and the contemporary in art made in Brazil. In so doing, he left behind the contributions of a master, one of our greatest artists of imaginary Brazilian sights. Not only this. He became the advocate of a constructive and

aesthetic project, and just as well, of a life experience proposition where art is imbued with the deepest notion of humanism.

Athos did so from the valor and audacity of the utopia of his generation, whose legacy include great thinkers and achievers who once endeavored to build a dream land of fairness and beauty. Pioneering and fundamental Brazilians like Athos Bulcão wanted to accomplish more than just do art and make history. They also wanted to weave their love and ethics into it.