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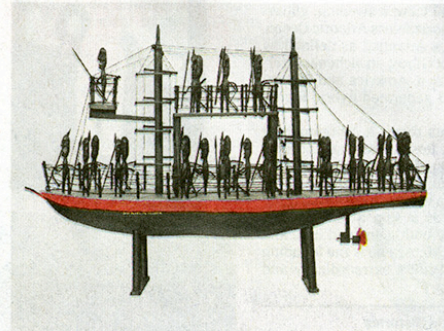
Arts

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STATENS MUSEUM FOR KUNST (SMK)



MUSEU AFRO BRASIL



DALTON PAULA

HOLLAND COTTER | ART REVIEW

Enthralling, From Brazil

A timely exhibition speaks of a resistance to racism.

SÃO PAULO, BRAZIL — It's worth going a distance for greatness. And great is what the exhibition "Histórias Afro-Atlânticas" ("Afro-Atlantic Histories") is. With 450 works by more than 200 artists spread over two museums, it's a hemispheric treasure chest, a redrafting of known narratives, and piece for piece one of the most enthralling

shows I've seen in years, with one visual detonation after another.

Its timing, for better or worse, is apt. In national elections scheduled for late this month, a right-wing populist candidate, Jair Bolsonaro, has a strong chance of becoming Brazil's next president. He's been vocal in his hostility to the nation's Afro-Brazilians, calling current immigrants from Haiti, Africa and the Middle East "the scum of humanity." The exhibition, which focuses on the dynamic African-influenced New World cultures that emerged from three centuries of European slavery, takes precisely the op-

posite view.

The story of the westward African diaspora has been told many times, but never, in my experience, with this breadth or geographic balance. The European trade in black bodies hit South America early in the 16th century, and lingered late. By the time slavery was officially abolished in Brazil in 1888 — the show coincides with the 130th anniversary of that event — the country had absorbed well over 40 percent of some 11 million displaced Africans. Today it is home to the world's largest black popula-

"Afro-Atlantic Histories," at the São Paulo Museum of Art and the Tomie Ohtake Institute, includes, clockwise from left, a portrait of the envoy Don Miguel de Castro, José Alves de Olinda's slave ship "Eshus's Barge" and Dalton Paula's "Zeferina."



Afro-Atlantic Histories (Histórias Afro-Atlânticas)
São Paulo Museum of Art and Tomie Ohtake Institute

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HOLLAND COTTER | ART REVIEW

Enthralling History, From Brazil

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tion outside of Nigeria.

Installed at the São Paulo Museum of Art, known to everyone as MASP, and the smaller Tomie Ohtake Institute, the exhibition is divided into eight thematic sections. Afro-Brazilian material dominates — which is fine; in New York, we hardly ever see what's here and much of it will be new to many museumgoers in Brazil. And it's generously interspersed with work, old and new, from other parts of South America, the Caribbean, North America, Europe and Africa itself.

In the opening section, we find ourselves at sea in a clip from the Brazilian filmmaker Glauber Rocha's 1967 "Entranced Earth," showing, in aerial view, a swelling, glittering, apparently horizonless Atlantic Ocean. This is the "Black Atlantic," as defined by the historian Paul Gilroy, an alchemical terrain in which Africa, America and Europe met, merged and generated hybrid identities.

Images of boats recur. A contemporary São Paulo artist, Rosana Paulino, incorporates 18th-century diagrams of slave ship interiors into a quiltlike fabric hanging. In a wood wall piece, a veteran local artist, Emanoel Araújo, gives a ship a half-abstract shape suggesting both a chained man and an African god. (Mr. Araújo is the founding director of São Paulo's extraordinary and

Afro-Atlantic Histories (Histórias Afro-Atlânticas)

Through Sunday at the São Paulo Museum of Art; masp.org.br. Also through Sunday at the Tomie Ohtake Institute in São Paulo; institutotomieohtake.org.br.

eccentric Afro Brasil Museum.)

And in a haunting piece by José Alves de Olinda, at the Tomie Ohtake Institute, the gods have taken charge. Figures of two dozen Yoruban divinities — grave, armed and alert — line the deck of a miniature slave ship. They are now its guiding crew.

Are they heading back to Africa or on a rescue mission to the Americas? The show encourages creative readings. Its organizers — Adriano Pedrosa, the director of MASP leading a team that includes Lília Schwarcz, Ayrson Heráclito, Hélio Menezes and Tomás Toledo — note that the Portuguese word "histórias" has a more complicated meaning than "history" in English. "Histórias" can be fact or fiction, reality or fantasy, and in art such binaries are often confused, sometimes purposefully.

The first European known to have painted the South American landscape was the 17th-century Dutchman Frans Post. His "Landscape With Anteaer" in the show is a mild-mannered thing; block out the coconut palms and you're in Claude Lorrain's Italy. And a Peaceable Kingdom effect is enhanced by the inclusion of what looks to be a group of mixed-race neighbors — white, black and Amerindian — having a chat. No hint that, at the time Post concocted this idyll, African slaves were working 20-hour days on plantations and indigenous peoples were being exterminated.

A century later, with the slave trade generating fortunes, tourist advertising grew more extravagant. In an 18th-century French Gobelin tapestry from MASP's collection, the New World is a fever dream of fecundity, with litter-bearing black slaves picking their way through orgasmic profusions of fruit and flowers.

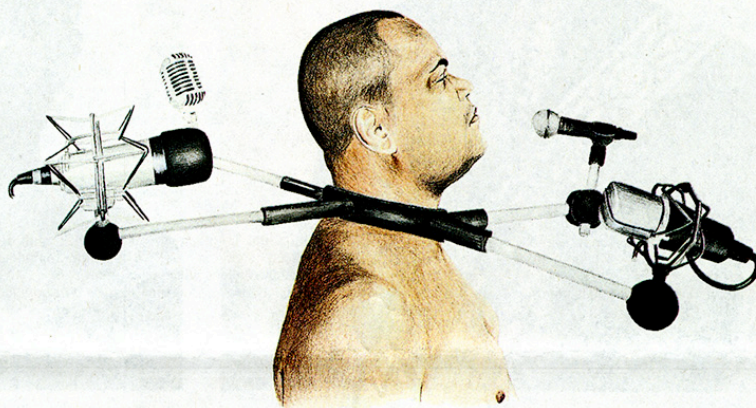
Eroticizing the unknown was a way of controlling it, making it ripe for taming. "Negro Man," a near life-size painting of a dark-skinned Brazilian Indian by another Dutch artist, Albert Eckhout, reads like a textbook case of ethnographic sex panic. Everything — a spear, a tree, an elephant tusk, the man's head — is a phallus.

Eckhout's 1641 picture is in a section of the show at MASP called "Portraits," a gathering so varied in mood, rich in new information, and nuanced in its critical views of otherness that it is suitable to be airlifted intact for international travel.

Nearly every one of its 60-plus images, all of black subjects, is mesmerizing. Some sitters appear trapped in European conventions. Don Miguel de Castro, a black envoy from the African kingdom of Kongo to the Dutch court, looks forbearingly out at us from under his absurd Rembrandt-esque hat. Four oil studies of black men by Theo-



EDUARDO ORTEGA



VIA THE SÃO PAULO MUSEUM OF ART

Top, an installation view of "Afro-Atlantic Histories" at São Paulo Museum of Art. Above left, Sidney Amaral's "Who Shall Speak on Our Behalf?" (2014). Above right, the unsigned "Woman From Bahia."

dore Gericault are, by any formal standards, gorgeous. But they're also disturbing. All but one of the sitters have been cast as emoting bit players in a French Romantic drama.

A large 19th-century painting, "Woman From Bahia," stands in contrast to all this. We don't know who the subject is, or who painted her, or when (the guess is around 1850). But, wearing white gloves, a midnight-blue gown and ropes of gold beads, she's a self-contained presence. She has a life and thoughts all her own. She may be an ex-slave; she's also a queen.

In the context of this racially fraught moment in Brazil, she reads as political statement. Many images in the show do. And some were intended to. One picture is of João de Deus Nascimento who, in 1798, led a predominantly black rebellion demanding the end of slavery and Portuguese rule. The other is of a woman known only as Zeferina who, brought to Brazil from Angola, established a runaway slave community in Bahia

and plotted an armed rising against the white population.

For Afro-Brazilians both are martyr-heroes, though official history books barely mention them. They represent a long tradition of resistance to the racism that is hardwired into the social and political structure of that country, as it is to the rest of the Afro-Atlantic world. And the exhibition is fundamentally about resistance, and black sovereignty. It's about change, not chains.

Told from different but overlapping perspectives, we see that dynamic in images of everyday Afro-Brazilian life, urban and rural, by artists like Castera Bazile in Haiti, Gerard Sekoto in South Africa and Benny Andrews in the United States. At the Tomie Ohtake Institute, we see it in work by the São Paulo artist Sidney Amaral (1973-2017), who promoted black power outright.

Not all of the eight thematic sections have equal force. One called "Afro-Atlantic Modernisms" is small and tame, but even that delivers surprises by including African-



MUSEU PAULISTA DA UNIVERSIDADE DE SÃO PAULO

born painters — Alexander Boghossian, Ibrahim El-Salahi, Ernest Mancoba — rarely encountered in Western-style museums, which MASP basically is.

Or was. Since Mr. Pedrosa came on as artistic director in 2014, he has transformed an institution that advertises itself as having the most significant collection of old master European art in the Southern Hemisphere into a cultural laboratory. He sounded the call by restoring the original 1968 permanent collection design by the radical architect Lina Bo Bardi, which had objects from Classical Greek to the present displayed, as if floating, on transparent easels down the length of a single open gallery.

He has since initiated an ambitious series of issue-driven surveys: "Histories of Sexuality" in 2017; "Afro-Atlantic Histories" now; "Feminist Histories" to come in 2019; "Indigenous Histories" in 2020. With them, he is setting a benchmark for other globally minded art institutions in North America and Europe, many of which are working with far greater financial resources than he is.

And his resources could be severely cut depending in how the Oct. 28 presidential election goes. The very premise of "Afro-Atlantic Histories" — that all culture is at some level immigrant culture — is anathema to Mr. Bolsonaro and his supporters. And at least one work in the show, by the New York City-based African-American artist Hank Willis Thomas, could confirm their deepest fears. Titled "A Place to Call Home," it's a wall-size black silhouette map of the Western Hemisphere, with the South American continent replaced by Africa.