

nilda neves: visages and wonders of the sertão

25.03 – 29.04.2023

Visages and wonders of the sertão or “No Raccoon is dumb enough to climb on a cactus!”

/ Lisette Lagnado

“Visages and wonders of the sertão” is the artist’s first solo exhibition at Galeria Central and gathers more than twenty mostly unexhibited paintings produced since 2010. The great-granddaughter of Tupi-Guarani Sia Simplícia, Nilda Neves grew up in the Fazenda Patos property. As the firstborn of Ana Rita Neves’s five children, she was as *cheeky as they come* in her childhood and youth as she kept up with her father Osvaldo, described as a *relentless worker, a strong farmhand and farmer, [who] could fell an ox by the tail*. There were frequent displacements, which required new route calculations. She was already married when she moved to Brumado, a city known as the Ore Capital near Aracatu and Anajé. With an accounting degree, she arrived in São Paulo in 1999. She owned a snack bar in Taipas (a Pirituba subdistrict) and worked as a shopkeeper, a manicurist and a hairdresser at the Dallas salon on Rua Cardeal Arcoverde until she moved to Camanducaia, upstate Minas Gerais, where she set up an atelier-home, with a backyard, a vegetable garden and a collection of saplings brought from Bahia.

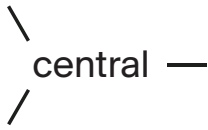
A living book

I would like to introduce Nilda Neves as an artist who makes her presence an indispensable reference as she makes her stand in the world. I learned the value of this presentation from feminist poet Audre Lorde, who rebelled against the violence of silence – a silence upheld by the white patriarchy, by the way. Lorde raised her voice to assert her condition as a black woman, a mother and a lesbian – an intersectional mix shyly muttered by art critics in Brazil. That being said, Nilda Neves’s path is important because it provides us with the matter of her sertão inhabited by struggles and dreams, that *sertão that never sleeps*.

A reader and a fan of a vast list of authors (Ariano Suassuna, Euclides da Cunha, Graciliano Ramos, among many others), Nilda Neves belongs to the lineage of oral tradition, a living book and the guardian of so many passions stoked by the scorching northeastern sun. *O Lavrador do Sertão* [The Farmer of the Sertão] (2011) stands out among her writings, with a plot set in Aramado, near the Taperipó Sierra: “Aramado was not a village and not even a hamlet, it was a place. It was a different village, where the houses were built in a circle and formed a circumference, their backyards separating them from each other. Over there, the Indian culture mingled with the Black culture. They married. It became unique. Which is one of the reasons it is mystical and enchanted.”

The “mystical” and the “enchanted” are also the main ingredients of her charismatic eloquence, permeated with semantic and melodious textures (*ochem, fi duma égua!*). Nilda Neves’s yearning for expression is inspired by the same telluric force that surges from of a Guimarães Rosa landscape or rules Itamar Vieira Junior’s characters. Her prose is an invitation for a journey

1 This regionalism roughly corresponds to “Bummer, son of a gun!” for its euphemistic and colorful quality, but is obviously untranslatable. (Translator’s note)



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through the human geography of a dazzling Brazil, fueled by social, religious and love-driven conflicts, the epic poems of a heroic time. They teach us to laugh and a series of wonderful truisms (“the strongest weapon in the world is faith”), not to mention the intensity of her curses (“Cross my heart three times!”). In her company, it is impossible not to evoke singer Elomar’s attachment to the land and his moral commitment impregnated with exaltation and fury against the ideology of progress.

Her refined descriptions of the sertão life still praise its thousand and one Marias. Although called “women of Athens”, they are able to challenge the authority of fathers and husbands. We are quickly taken by a profusion of species of trees, animals, fruits and berries, rural architecture, saints, objects and musical instruments. Her passion for language translates into an explosion of *jacus*² and *jquitaias*³, the differentiation between lamps, candlesticks and lanterns, the recognition of different musical instruments, bass drums, cavaquinhos, accordions, tambourines, violas, berimbaus, harmonicas, flutes, guitars... Words worthy of a dialogue between Socrates, Hermógenes and Cratylus: *it is crazy to realize that men can be dried out by the sun and hunger but still find the words to name every single thing God placed in this world.*

A memorial painting

Obstacles and unforeseen events, however, did not fail to appear along her singular path. The origin story of this painter’s career is emblematic. Given her need to order and pay for the cover of her first independent book, Nilda Neves took on an unusual task: she painted a mandacaru⁴, managed to sell it and made the publication possible. The episode would only be anecdotal if not for the unusual emergence of possibilities set off by her overcoming a problem. This realization allowed Nilda Neves to delve into the investigation of an unknown language, despite her lack of any previous learning. Without knowing it, she was responding to the crossroads’ active principle which, according to Yoruba culture, yields emancipatory teachings.

Aside from her ability for self-transformation, one should now observe the manifestation of pictorial qualities beyond one of those intangible random events that precipitate twists of fate. What is the participation of oral tradition in the constitution of each painting? How do poetry and literature contribute to these compositions?

One may first remark that more than half a century in the Bahia hinterland created an exuberant legacy of experiences informed by the richness of vegetation and fauna. In this sense, looking at a painting by Nilda Neves requires a lot from someone who only grew up in an industrialized city and would not recognize any *tatarena*, *faveleira*, *juazeiro*, *umbuzeiro*, *baraúna*, *jequitibá*, *gameleira*, *macambira*, *gravata*, *aroeira*, *leaves of licuris*, *xique-xique*⁵, *palms*, *pinos*, *peppers*, *papayas*...

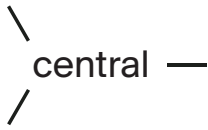
The works’ titles are often in gerund form, which suggests multiple activities – the colossal force called everyday life – cowboys, washerwomen, and candomblé followers for whom the logic of life lies in blessing repeated movement: *beating the string beans*, *making tobacco*, *making flour*,

2 A Brazilian wild bird. (TN)

3 An Amazonian fire ant, also the name of an especially hot pepper mixture. (TN)

4 A typical cactus of northeastern Brazil. (TN)

5 Names of typical Brazilian trees. (TN)



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ironing clothes, storing crystals in a cave, storing adobe, bringing lunch, grinding rice, milking, resting on the stone, bringing water, castrating the goat, disarming the traps, picking beans, lassoing the ox, skinning the goat, butchering pigs, making a trough, pulling a tooth, fishing, and even daydreaming...

Despite the abundance of themes, there is only one subject: a *sertaneja*'s⁶ life! The inventory is organized around domestic scenes, a very precise variety of utensils (from thujas to baskets), pilgrimage destinations (the caves of Bom Jesus da Lapa, for example), surprising architecture (a Byzantine cemetery in Mucugê), religious characters (Saint George), folklore (*a saci*⁷, a werewolf), the supernatural (*nego d'água*⁸), mythical beings in general, love fusions between humans and non-humans, ... and even *the devil playing merry hell*, she would say.

How does one know so much without learning? That is the question raised in copious family tales that bring up endless stories, from her drover grandfather to her mother, a former shepherdess of goats and sheep who became a housewife, *an angry woman, who peeled off hides, built a very good fence, gelded animals on her own, washed, embroidered, weaved, gave blessings and was a good shot...* From this ancestry came the countless tales that have gushed oil paint on canvas since 2010. As the talks went on, late into the night, we are told of the village people's wealth – *whoever had cattle, farms and fields in those days was rich people* – and that they all died, *most of them completely nuts*.

Nilda Neves paints from memory the stories she lived through and others she only heard. With no prior drawing, images flow directly onto the canvas from the emotion of listening. She differentiates between “visages” and “apparitions” as she seeks to explain the sources that animate her shapes. Twisted lines, tensioning the frontier of an eventual tropical surrealism, mingle illustrious facts with popular prophecies and science fiction stories.

It would be a mistake to seek an official illustration of historical events without identifying the political subjectivity that seeps from the chromatic spots. Just looking at the vultures in her most recent painting on Canudos⁹ is enough to realize how *some of them got fat on the soldiers' meat*. And for Nilda Neves, who always walked “with frenzy in her skin”, her brothers from Canudos symbolize a people's bravery: *The others had weapons, we were crafty. Not everyone is fit to get into the caatinga. The crazy vegetation drove the military so mad they had three times as many losses as we did. We won the war three times with slingshots. Only happens in Bahia!*

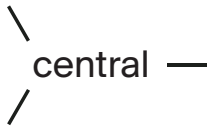
It is noteworthy to meet artists with a project. But while contemporary art has done without the need for a project to justify its ends, the same cannot be said of Nilda Neves. In her case, writing and painting correspond to the firm intention of narrating experiences that may constitute a legacy to be shared. She has no little imagination to tell us her viewpoint on the invasion of Brazil, the origin of the Bendegó Stone, the 1932 drought and the construction of concentration camps, stories of a Bahia man who went to the moon, of billionaire Elon Musk coexisting with boat figureheads on the São Francisco River..

6 A sertão dweller. (TN)

7 A mythical, one-legged mischievous creature in Brazilian lore. (TN)

8 A merman said to haunt rivers. (TN)

9 The site of a 19-th century civil war that opposed religious revivalists to the republican government and ended only after four campaigns. (TN)



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Her artistic incursions seek to build an archive with the reminiscences and the collective resistance of people *who laugh even at death*. The story flow is a synthesis between a memorialist's drive to assert traditions erased by modernity and a gift for savory fables, and it follows the drift of a journey punctuated by violence – including comicality. In times of generalized amnesia, preventing a collective memory from losing color and sparkle is a most laudable intent. *Of how things were in the past*, she argues, rejecting nostalgia as an excuse for faltering.

It is not difficult, then, to understand the visceral nature of the artist's devotion to her work. A kind of productive rage reminds us of Lorde's *drive* to combat coloniality and its intrinsic racism. I can attest that it is a privilege to listen to the author read her own writings and to try, in turn, to find on the canvas the atmosphere conveyed by her highly refined vocabulary. As in this excerpt, taken from "Preparação da Terra Seca" [Dry Soil Preparation], which describes an almost cinematographic scenery: "September arrived and the sertão sky became a murky mixture of colors, where the red drought-telling clouds mingled under the broad blue sky with the plump wisps of black smoke leveraged by the implacable forces of the flames, that even with no wings made snakes and lizards fly in the air."

In her handling of words and pigments, Nilda Neves achieved what Belonísia, in *Torto arado* [Crooked plow], would only understand many years after the tragedy:

"Had I known that everything going on in my thoughts, this procession of memories as my hair turns white, would be of value to anyone, I would have endeavored to write as well as I could. I would have bought notebooks with the money from the things I sold at the market, and I would have filled them with the words that don't get out of my head. I would have let the curiosity I had when I saw a knife with an ivory handle turn into the curiosity for what I could become, because many stories could come out of my mouth and would serve as motivation for our people and for our children to change their lives of servitude to the owners of the land and to the owners of the city houses."