

LEDA CATUNDA: AN ANNOTATED INTERVIEW

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Approaching the work of Leda Catunda involves a degree of intimidation, necessitating the kind of caution called for when faced with an extroverted interlocutor. The kind who, invested with a heightened sense of purpose – or by virtue of sheer freedom – hides nothing and offers herself explicitly, out of a compulsion to disclose. The work of Catunda exudes generosity and exuberance. Dressed in an extravagant visuality and saturated with discordant colors, it projects itself out from the wall towards the viewer. Perhaps, because of this expansiveness and demonstrative force, there are multiple ways to access her work, and its audiences are as varied as the layers of meaning that each path generates. However, at the same time that the work offers itself to the viewer so openly and unconditionally, the work remains unyieldingly raw, insisting that it be apprehended on its own terms. In a sense, Catunda's work exceeds categorization. In describing her practice, the artist evokes the non-sterilized realm of popular art:

My choice of color is always very simple, very direct. Therefore, it bears a strong affinity with popular art. Primary colors, without much elaboration. I'm not interested in the idea of good painting. It is useless as far as my work is concerned.¹

Navigating in between the languages of painting, sculpture, popular culture, and craft, Catunda collects all sorts of mass-produced materials from the world,² building her work from procedures drawn from collage, and informed by a free-associative process. Her method involves the incorporation and transfiguration of the materials of everyday life: woven fabrics and flat objects, rich in texture and intense colors, are superimposed, mixed, interlocked, cut, glued, stitched, sewn and then painted. This results in a thickly agglomerated surface which appears to almost explode the picture plane.

The fabric works for me as a paintable material. The question of painting is very curious. When I finish cutting and assembling everything, people ask, "What, are you still going to paint? It seems that everything is already there." But I still insist and reaffirm this issue. Paint unifies the different materials, it provides a context.³

Painting as medium

When Catunda's work first appeared in 1983, it had a formidable impact. With the strength of an answer to an urgent question, it seemed to fill a need whose existence no one suspected. The work immediately occupied a space that belonged to no one, emerging fully formed, multi-faceted and relevant, while also clearing the path for other artists. At the

time, it seemed impossible to imagine how Catunda's work could develop and maintain that level of relevance. Yet more than 25 years later, in retrospect, we can identify the conduits, the ebbs and flows, and the relational lines that penetrate the work, and which reveal its story to us.

Catunda's artistic development has not been linear, but more like a rhizome, with multiple, simultaneous strands of articulation. In this thick web of forms and meanings, hierarchies seem to disappear. From the start, Catunda proposed to infiltrate rarefied conceptual and process-oriented methods with images culled from the archive of collective memory. The iconography ranges from the Japanese garden to flowery patterns of baby blankets, including cartoon characters, quilts, crochet patterns, dirty doodles from public restrooms, even the perforated leather used in the interior lining of Volkswagen Beetles.⁴

During my training, in the midst of so much conceptual art and new technologies, it was subversive to paint. We hid the fact that we painted because everyone expected us to be working with new media. I believed in the possibility of a painting that could be more conceptual, where paint could have a function other than expression, like covering, or concealing. A different attitude to painting. At the time, the idea of conceptual painting seemed absurd, an impossibility.⁵

Hence, from Catunda's perspective, there is an understanding of painting not as an end in itself, but as a vehicle for ideas, for criticality. In other words, the notion of painting indexing the conditions of its own language. Since her first body of work, referred to by Catunda as *vedações* (imperfectly translated as "concealments"), the artist has applied paint directly onto printed towels, blankets, sheets, and a range of fabrics – materials mostly borrowed from the "household section," as Catunda points out with a smile. In the *vedações*, each brushstroke cancels a part of the pattern, thereby editing, censoring, and transforming the image. The act of painting becomes a process of erasure.

In a world saturated with objects and images to suit all tastes, all sorts of visualities are absorbed by our peripheral vision, without much possibility of editing [...]. In this sense, visual excess is tolerated or even acclaimed without much questioning [...]. This may have to do with a need to cover the world, coating nearly everything that is not natural with mild patterns, different kinds of prints and strange characters.⁶

This aesthetic of synthesis, found in the *vedações*, would permeate all of Catunda's subsequent production. The artist combines evidence of process, of the making of the work, with the extravagance of appropriated imagery that appears to belong to everyone. During the 1950s, Robert Rauschenberg's "combine paintings" and Jasper Johns's targets and flags had already broken the dichotomy between figure and ground, precisely by isolating the figure and eliminating the ground. In this operation, the wall becomes the ground and the painting is no longer the representation of the thing, but the thing itself.⁷ An analogous condition can be identified in Catunda's work. Because of the character of materials utilized

by the artist, the image is *already* the thing itself, rendering ambiguous the traditional relation between figuration and abstraction, and between the real and its representation. Here, the support functions as a platform for content, and is also the content *per se*. The viewer experiences the work as both painting and sculptural object; in other words, as image and thing.

The artists associated with the influential *Pictures* exhibition, held in New York in 1977, operated in this interval between image and thing. "Pictures" was the term chosen by Douglas Crimp to characterize art production that engaged critically and analytically with the world of images, and that was based on an appropriative process that sought to reveal the pictorial mechanisms of commercial culture. American artists from a generation immediately preceding Catunda's – such as David Salle, Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman, and Jack Goldstein – departed, like her, from the orthodoxies of Conceptual Art by embracing mass-produced images. Utilizing strategies of appropriation in order to generate a non-differentiation between high and low culture, figuration and abstraction, original and copy, these artists engaged with critical theory, psychoanalysis, and feminism. "Those processes of quotation, excerptation, framing, and staging that constitute the strategies of the work I have been discussing necessitate uncovering strata of representation. Needless to say, we are not in search of sources or origins, but structures of signification: underneath each picture there is always another picture."⁸

*I am interested in images that are already in the world, with which I can interfere. And that is directly linked to the idea of appropriation. The appropriation of pictures or objects, or the meanings of the things that I bring to the work, are constantly changing, transforming themselves, varying all the time. But the idea that the world is a place that already has images and these images already have contents, that is what I find inviting, and it is something that remains, from 1983 until now. I want to use them, rearrange them, create new roles for the images I find.*⁹

*Each work has a different structure, and it always supports the image. The image completes the subject. Otherwise it becomes a very formal exercise, an exercise of skill. The images provide the narrative, appropriated images, part of our day-to-day, and others that I have chosen, such as photos and prints.*¹⁰

Catunda bestows an exuberant physicality upon dematerialized processes of image mediation. In her universe, the image rarely appears dissociated from its material source within the territories of quotidian life. Appropriative practices require the viewer's fluency with certain cultural-visual codes, and a certain familiarity with the materials employed. The work becomes the touchstone for the interconnection between personal memory and collective cultural experience.

I think about this contemporary condition of being constantly at the hub of several intersecting lines: you are standing in traffic, talking on the phone, listening to the

*radio, remembering the holiday at the beach, thinking about your mother. You are constantly juggling five layers of thought, something very particular to our time, you're on YouTube, the Internet, with several screens open on your computer, your head compartmentalized.*¹¹

Catunda brings into her work transient images that are precariously poised within our quotidian perception, and that are continuously morphing into other signs. She systematically dismembers the image, thereby liberating the line, the plane, the geometric grid, and creating a space of ambiguity available to the viewer.

In terms of her working method, Catunda always creates numerous drawings and collages in preparation for the final work. The apparent spontaneity and *laissez-faire* attitude that characterizes her visual language belies the meticulous planning of each stage of a work's creation. The first notations are drawings made with color pencil, intimately scaled, measuring one to two inches. These sketches, technical yet raw, have a fundamental immediacy. These visual notes are then given shape into small collages, becoming autonomous works.

*The watercolors and drawings are more direct processes of registration, offering greater possibilities for creating pictures [...]. Usually made as a group, the drawings are created quickly and simply, and allow me to speculate about form and composition, proportion and scale. The preparatory studies in watercolors can also be useful for color treatment. They can also provide a preview of the types of materials that I might use. They are autonomous as works on paper, but in the creative process they serve mainly as a tool for the selection of images.*¹²

Remaking

Catunda builds her works out of parts, piece by piece, a method of construction that she makes transparent for the viewer in the finished work. The eye navigates the topography of each work without sensing a unified whole, as if the work cannot be totally apprehended, the opposite of a totalizing gestalt impulse. Transposing this notion to her production generally, it is not hard to imagine a vast quilt in which all of Catunda's works would appear physically interconnected, an expanse made up of pieces which, in turn, are made of pieces, a vertiginous vision à la *mis-en-abîme*. This fragmented, fragmentary condition calls for a physical confrontation with the work that threatens to undermine its optical dimension. This multipartite structure implies the absence of fixed meanings, or heightened indeterminacy, evoking constant transformation. Catunda allows amorphous materials to give form to her work, wherein the coherence of the whole dissolves so that the making of work surfaces into visibility.

"Whatever art is, at a very simple level it is a way of making," wrote Robert Morris in 1970. "I believe there are 'forms' to be found within the activity of making as much as

within the end products.”¹³

*There's something very manual about my work. This has to do with the means available for making it. One cannot idealize the work and then go looking for a sponsor. I have no time for this. Since I am not the queen of carpentry, I decided to sew. These works strongly reflect my universe, how I was raised, and the universe of my possibilities, materials that are not too expensive, that I can cut, paste, and cover with these paints. The work has this look, of what I am capable of doing. My choice reflects some anxiety: I want to make the work now, with what is at hand. I like to establish the structure, the execution of the work. I even had a rule: I would only do work that I could carry. Later on, I added a proviso: even with much effort. I can do any of them by myself, although, recently, I've had assistants. To date, no one has ever sewn anything for me because this is something I cannot delegate. It becomes too much like a personal decision, almost like a drawing.*¹⁴

This deliberately handcrafted aspect of Catunda's work, based on activities related to the domestic environment of women, such as sewing and patchwork, finds resonance in the concept of *femmage*. Miriam Shapiro and Melissa Meyer coined "femmage" as the activities of collage, assemblage, decoupage, traditionally practiced by women, such as sewing, stitching, cooking, etc. A hybrid of "female" and "collage," the idea of "femmage" relates to artistic production systematically excluded from the mainstream: "Women have always collected things and saved and recycled them because leftovers yielded nourishment in new forms. [...] Collected, saved and combined materials represented for such women acts of pride, desperation, and necessity. [...] Each cherished scrap of percale, muslin or chintz, each bead, each letter, each photograph, was a reminder of its place in a woman's life, similar to an entry in a journal or a diary."¹⁵ During the 1960s and 1970s, at the height the Women's Movement, such ideas were generally not taken seriously, as they were perceived to have influenced the appearance of art practices that were considered less relevant. However, this perspective would go onto thoroughly inform and deeply influence critical thinking in subsequent decades.

*There is, in my work, a deliberate choice of the precarious and the hand-made. I felt tremendous pressure, during my training, to employ technological media. I realized that there was an increasing tendency to produce work that was less and less handcrafted, and I wanted to put up a certain resistance. A work can have a conceptual content and, at the same time, be painted and hand-made.*¹⁶

Soft world

In her doctoral thesis, written in 2003, Catunda identifies as a central issue of her oeuvre what she called the "poetics of tenderness." In her words,

*[...] painting that evokes softness, or that is effectively soft, combining that with tenderness [...] through the creation of transmuted versions of common things drawn from the world.*¹⁷

Catunda's work can be understood within a tradition of art that challenged established notions of the work as something rigid and unitary. It is interesting to identify a current in the history of art that identifies practices that express a soft or tender physicality. In the early twentieth century, several artists undermined assumptions of permanence and solidity, and began to incorporate everyday objects, *objets trouvés* and eccentric materials into their work. The type of assemblaged materials became even more diverse in the 1950s, with the profusion of mass-produced synthetic objects, such as those fabricated out of plastic, or new types of metals. From the 1960s onwards, artists began producing sculptures in soft materials like rubber, canvas, felt, and fabrics (e.g., Lygia Clark, Claes Oldenburg, Yayoi Kusama, Robert Morris, Eva Hesse), creating forms that evoked conditions of susceptibility or mutability, or which suggested organic processes and the visceral qualities of the body.

*Swellings, bellies, my works wear clothes, but are prisoners of the wall... Bulky works, which come into being as objects. My reasoning depends on the vertical plane, on the force of gravity.*¹⁸

Characterized by structural elasticity and shifting densities, Catunda's soft and tender sculptures are shaped by gravity and surrender to the natural condition imposed on all bodies: i.e., over time, they collapse, fall, drip, accumulate, and relax. This phenomenon may find its earliest pictorial counterpoint in the work of Lucio Fontana, with his treatment of the canvas as a phenomenon of both surface and depth, like skin.

*Since Fontana attacked it with slashes and holes, the surface of painting has been revolutionized. The canvas became itself, existing as a fabric-and-paint material, with surface, thickness and resistance. In considering what is behind it, we expand our understanding of space in painting. The possibility of volume and irregular planes opens up; thanks to the characteristics assigned by Fontana, it can be understood as a kind of skin. Functioning as a container, with exterior and interior, the canvas can be folded, wrinkled, filled, stretching and projecting volumes in space.*¹⁹

Iconography related to the organic world appears in Catunda's work during the mid-90s. The results are hallucinatory objects, yet, ironically, among the most realistic and sculptural created by the artist.

*These images, which often derive from each other, were inspired by the shapes of living beings. Tongues, bellies, insects such as beetles and their shells, flies and their wings, dripping salivating mouths, are some of the images that make up this group of works, which attempt to build a world of softness.*²⁰

Catunda's choice of the word "maciez" (translated here as softness, tenderness) is a curious one. In Portuguese, "maciez" is so related to touch that it is almost meaningless to use the word to refer to something visual. However, like other Brazilian artists such as Cildo Meireles and Lygia Clark, Catunda explores the visual field in concert with tactile and haptic dimensions. This is evident in her choice of round and organic shapes, as well as in her choice of materials. Tactile memory matters to her, along with connotations of kindness and gentleness, and the emotions and feelings they evoke.

What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art which might be for every mental worker, be he businessman or writer, like an appeasing influence, like a mental soother, something like a good armchair in which to rest from physical fatigue."²¹ (Henri Matisse)

There is an affectionate aspect that took me a long time to acknowledge, but can be found in all the works. Slightly hokey, corny, tender, rounded, it is always an idea that is linked to comfort, as a very legitimate need that people have. Comfort translates into an aesthetic sense, which is what interests me the most. It doesn't matter whether this relates to bad taste or good taste, what interests me is the attraction and the need that people have to surround themselves with a certain type of visuality in order to feel good. This, incidentally, is a testament to the bankruptcy of the modern program, which bites the dust because of this drive that people have to adorn and embellish, to go back to a pre-modern moment, in opposition to the detachment proposed by modern architecture. It transgresses all existing orders, and ends up creating its own level of cuteness.²²

Idyllic landscape

Dreams come before contemplation. Before becoming a conscious sight, every landscape is an oneiric experience. Only those scenes that have already appeared in dreams can be viewed with an aesthetic passion [...]. The unity of the landscape appears "as the fulfillment of an often-dreamed dream." [...] But the oneiric landscape is not a frame that is filled up with impressions; it is a pervading substance.²³ (Gaston Bachelard)

In recent years, the representation of the landscape has recurred in Catunda's work, ranging from the literal to the merely suggestive: the landscape as something at once personal and collective, emblematic of psychological, mnemonic, and oneiric qualities. The body reveals itself as an accident in these landscape-inflected works, signifying intimate associations with places real and imagined. Catunda creates fragmentary portraits that, instead of highlighting the attributes of particular subjects, emphasize their location within a network of social interconnection. Other works evoke genealogical trees, but where the subjects are associated through a kind of emotional mapping, more than by structured family ties. "I

always think of places. The place is always present. I am never nowhere.”²⁴

*Rousseau, Volpi, Guignard. Those flying churches in Minas, with interconnecting paths, describe a place simultaneously real and affectionate. Tarsila, a world of thornless cacti, a world that is all round, with a sunset that looks stitched, like in a quilt.*²⁵

Catunda identifies the recurrence in her work of the “lake and cottage” motif as “the most basic representation of an affectionate place,” simultaneously “shelter and leisure,” in relation to children’s drawings. For the artist, the lake cottage is emblematic of a kind of unattainable simplicity, an idyllic image that takes the place of the dream – a child’s dream.

*My mother designed city squares. When I was little and had nothing to do, she would ask me to decorate the floors of the squares. She would also make me memorize the names of trees and plants. Acáciamimosa, acácia-tipuana, acácia-mutijuca... There was this fantasy of an organized nature, where everything has a name. She was always drawing these little trees, these paradisiacal landscapes, with leisure sites and all.*²⁶

*I am interested in constructed landscapes, not in landscapes that you receive from nature. We create an image that is an archetype. To sell travel packages, people always use a picture of a beach with a coco- nut tree. That’s something you deserve and you will pay for it in ten easy installments. You’re stuck with that archetype.*²⁷

This cultured landscape, at once internalized and constructed, contains elements of fantasy, as exemplified by the *Japanese lake*, an image that holds a strong meaning for Catunda:

*A gentle world, where landscape is organized as in a story. Reality itself is different, nature is wild. People tend to draw nature in their head. Think of a waterfall: do you imagine freezing water, your skin scraping against the rocks? No, you imagine a beautiful scene, warm, with crystal clear water.*²⁸

This idea of landscape, or the “organized landscape” that Catunda often alludes to, emerges in various forms in works since the mid-1980s such as *Landscape with lake* (1984), *The mountain* (1986), *Japanese lake* (1986), *Path with cottages* (1990), and *The abyss* (1990). This motif recurs in recent works about natural events and situations, such as *Minas* (2002), *Katrina* (2009) and *Landscape with jaguar* (2009).

Conceived *a priori*, this landscape – like all created by Catunda – reveals more about human desire than any aspect of the natural world. It is a landscape derived from memory, and that also dissolves back into memory, with tactile and visual fluidities. Catunda blankets the world with an image of itself that is hand-made, soft and comfortable, composed of interconnected landscapes and idyllic scenes, full of possible dreams, free-associations, and deliriums.

Appealing to our desire to recognize the everyday in an endlessly transfigured condition, Catunda offers us a certain idea of paradise. Not an unattainable paradise but a possible one.

Translated to English by Lilian Tone.

NOTES

- 1 Leda CATUNDA in interview with Lilian Tone, Pinacoteca do Estado, São Paulo, August 13, 2009.
- 2 In the past nine years, Catunda employed patterns, prints and photographs, designed or taken by herself, making her artistic process more explicitly diaristic and autobiographical.
- 3 Leda CATUNDA in interview with Lilian Tone, Pinacoteca do Estado, São Paulo, August 13, 2009.
- 4 Catunda's work was marked by the strong influence of artists Regina Silveira, Júlio Plaza and Nelson Leirner. See the brilliant analysis proposed by Tadeu Chiarelli, the most comprehensive text on the artist's work. See Tadeu CHIARELLI - "Problematizando a natureza da pintura," in *Leda Catunda*, Cosac & Naify Edições, São Paulo, 1998.
- 5 Leda CATUNDA in interview with Lilian Tone, Pinacoteca do Estado, São Paulo, August 13, 2009.
- 6 Leda CATUNDA - *Poética da maciez: pinturas e objetos*, doctoral thesis, Escola de Comunicações e Artes da Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, 2003, p. 12.
- 7 See Robert MORRIS - "Notes on sculpture, part 4: beyond objects," in *Continuous project altered daily: the writings of Robert Morris*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. 51.
- 8 Douglas CRIMP - "Pictures," *October*, n. 8, New York, Spring 1979, p. 75-88.
- 9 Leda CATUNDA in interview with Lilian Tone, Pinacoteca do Estado, São Paulo, August 13, 2009.
- 10 Ibidem.
- 11 Leda CATUNDA in interview with Lilian Tone, Pinacoteca do Estado, São Paulo, August 26, 2009.
- 12 Leda CATUNDA - *Poética da maciez: pinturas e objetos*, op. cit., p. 60.
- 13 Robert MORRIS - "Some notes on the phenomenology of making: the search for the motivated," in *Continuous project altered daily: the writings of Robert Morris*, op. cit., p. 71-73.
- 14 Leda CATUNDA in interview with Lilian Tone, Pinacoteca do Estado, São Paulo, August 26, 2009.
- 15 Miriam SHAPIRO; Melissa MEYER - "Waste not want not: an inquiry into what women saved and assembled – femmage" (1977), in Kristine STILES and Peter SELZ (eds.), *Theories and documents of contemporary art: a sourcebook of artists' writings*, University of California Press, Berkeley/ Los Angeles, 1996, p. 153.
- 16 Leda CATUNDA in interview with Lilian Tone, Pinacoteca do Estado, São Paulo, August 26, 2009.
- 17 Leda CATUNDA - *Poética da maciez: pinturas e objetos*, op. cit., p. XI.
- 18 Leda CATUNDA in interview with Lilian Tone, Pinacoteca do Estado, São Paulo, August 26, 2009.
- 19 Leda CATUNDA - *Poética da maciez: pinturas e objetos*, op. cit., p. 78.

20 Ibidem, p. 18.

21 Henri MATISSE - "Notes of a painter" (1908), in Alfred H. BARR JR., *Matisse: his art and his public*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1951; ver Herschel B. CHIPP - *Theories on modern art*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1968, p. 135.

22 Leda CATUNDA in interview with Lilian Tone, Pinacoteca do Estado, São Paulo, August 26, 2009.

23 Gaston BACHELARD - *Water and dreams: an essay on the imagination of matter*, trans. Edith R. Farrell, The Pegasus Foundation, Dallas, 1994, p. 4.

24 Leda CATUNDA in interview with Lilian Tone, Pinacoteca do Estado, São Paulo, August 26, 2009.

25 Ibidem.

26 Ibidem.

27 Ibidem.

28 Ibidem.