

Leda Catunda – I love you baby

All of us, from the privileged 1% to the remaining peripheral 99%, act – consciously or not – as part of a world dominated by images, in which individuals create themselves as images through their clothes, postures, features, biotypes and the lifestyles they cultivate. Mass society, identified by the excessive image flow, is little by little updated as a multidirectional network in which people consume as well as edit, customize and share themselves as just another image that will be devoured by others.¹

In this scenario, we are willing (or compelled) to act as proficient experts to whom it is possible and desirable to conform our own lifestyles. We seek our own identities, aligned with the beliefs and desires we elected as personal priorities: a healthy life, an adventurous spirit, a relation with nature, a cosmopolitan connectivity, sexual freedom, spiritual devotion, political engagement... countless options in multiple permutations. In order to access them, we rely on social circles, slangs and specialized languages, behaviors and specific attitudes, and on a myriad of symbols, signs, brands and objects.

All this, combined with technologies, clothes, foods and other cultural objects, play a fundamental role in proving the conformity between our conduct, our appearance and our life choices. However, there is a trap that can be seen but cannot be avoided: in order to distinguish ourselves from “everyone”, we end up doing what everyone does so diligently: we consume. For some, the affinity is found on the vibrant colors and textures of surf; for others, on the dramatic heavy metal icons; or the exclusive items of the so-called independent design... In any case, the imperative of accumulating symbols that reaffirm ideas as purchasable, wearable and recognizable images still reigns.²

Leda Catunda, an artist from São Paulo, is very familiar with this process. From the moment she first started showing her work, in the beginning of the 1980s, she employed as the medium for her paintings materials that are identifiable as cultural objects, rather than using a blank canvas and its supposed historical neutrality.³ She chooses, between affection and detachment, rugs, towels and printed blankets; tarps, plastics and processed leather; t-shirts, windows, and Formica – substances with different textures, shapes and fits that contrast with the ideal of the virgin regularity of a canvas stretched on a chassis and, more importantly, which are impregnated with meaning long before the artist’s first brushstroke. Patterned or

shiny, fluffy or printed, these have always been more than unusual mediums, not only for their peculiar materiality, but also for the appeals, images and/or symbols that Catunda insists on emphasizing in her painting, sewing, gluing, covering and recombining processes.

Thus, the association between her work and the strident popular taste of consumption objects and their ornamentations isn't something new. This interest was kept dormant during the three decades that followed this first manifestation, and it was reworked in the face of the artist's pictorial research and the gradual transformations of the notions of taste, fashion, popular, consumption and ornament. Recently, this compromise led her work into a potent resonance with the world inhabited by "image-people" who are hysterically devoted to "crushing the look", "taking mirror selfies", and, of course, "posting on Facebook".⁴

Leda dedicates herself to collecting fabrics, prints, illustrations, and objects from various lifestyles (rockers, surfers, skaters, bikers, fans, teenagers, romantic couples etc.). In her studio, she accumulates constellations of figurations, symbols, emblems, labels and chromatic palettes that represent the desire to belong and the affirmation of one's personality through consumption. She blends these materials with many other fabrics, patterns and textures from the post-Fordism industry (often *made in China*) and the vertiginous production and consumption cycle of the global commodity circulation network. She then edits these images into works that sway between collage, patchwork, image clouds, drawing and painting.

As she processes the vast current material culture, Leda Catunda frequently reiterates the stylistic inclinations from each lifestyle (or each market niche) she touches, while condensing their clichés and allures. At times, when she levels icons from different origins as interchangeable particles from the same substance that flows among her works – like in a system of communicating vessels – she emphasizes the equivalence, redundancy or continuity one can perceive between symbolically distinct universes, yet so similar in their appeal. In all these cases, her works from the past six years has worked as a seismograph – or a fly-trap – of the image whirlwind that demands so much energy, dedication and investment from individuals and contemporary society.⁵

Works such as *Lobo [Wolf]* (2014) and *My Way* (2016) are particularly paradigmatic of this process, inasmuch as they link very peculiar image universes that are possibly aggressive to middle-class' average taste and definitely strange to the prevailing aesthetical regime of the contemporary art milieu; however, which are absolutely familiar and affective for those who share the intercommunicating universes of heavy metal, motorcycles and rock. From band

names to jacket and t-shirt patterns that show off skulls, wolves and tigers, the first image creates a beam of symbolical and commanding signs, which resist to customary collage procedures. In order to overcome the visual hostility of the icons she brings closer together, Leda Catunda's works appeal to equally glaring and unusual patterns, inks and traces (painted or sewn), favoring the balance of the inside out and the backwards, in detriment of any attenuation hypothesis. The resulting atmosphere has a somewhat byzantine golden aspect, while fabric-lined friezes define the pieces' borders, evoking beach mats or patchwork quilts.⁶

Facing these works, the panel that welcomes the visitor into the exhibition concentrates dozens of medium and small-sized pieces as a sample of the repertoire from Leda Catunda's recent production, in all its diversity, vibration and dynamism. Piled up in large amounts, the works express a centrifugal nature, as the expression of the imagery turmoil itself. In the eye of the hurricane, as one can imagine, there is no hierarchy or apparent order, and everything tends to an equivalency in the cacophony of meanings and differences.

Yet, it would be narrow to only identify the artist's work with the possibility of capturing the image voracity of her time. Leda Catunda does more than diagnosing and mirroring this present scopic drive.* As seen in the medium and large-scale works in the exhibition, there is a clear effort to dominate the dispersive turmoil effect that was described above. Each piece attracts our gaze like a cohesive and unified body, a recognizable composition of colors, images and outlines: one shape. Against the entropic tendency of missing the images' particularities, Leda Catunda creates works of great pictorial intensity that slow down our sight and our interpretation in order to regain the plastic specificities as well as the dormant senses from each collected fragment.

Ana e André [Ana and André] (2016), for example, begins with a completely vulgarized image quality, the native record of a couple's road trip referred to by "America", the United States. Breathtaking mountain landscapes, the sea, horizon lines, the raised flag, all the scenes that can be saved as universally shareable memories of a recognizable experience are present in self-explanatory frames, without a distinctive photographic aspect.⁷ Printed on voile fabric, they become even more washed and impersonal, although they still maintain their unequivocal legibility as symbols of the trip. Leda Catunda chooses several of these scenes, with no hierarchy, assembling them like in a digital image archive. Then, a delicate balance happens between the installation that emphasizes the generic nature of the painting and the drawing that gives the whole ensemble a unique, seductive and – why not? – beautiful aspect.

* From the French *pulsion scopique*, a psychoanalysis term noted on Freud and developed by Lacan. (T.N.)

A circle of graphic eye-catching colors and images, kitsch or camp, frames the main part of the body of works and defines a circular shape. Golden lines, once again, connect the images, sewing them like a fabric, while at the same time, defining a rhythmic structure in the interior of the picture. Other images are chosen to fluctuate around the circle, echoing its shape in a loose arrangement of pieces that are also framed by graphic works in green, orange, red and gold. Everything is spread out, but nothing exceeds in a composition that clearly establishes a coherent and structures visual field.

It is essential to remember that, as much as she uses assemblage, collage and even patchwork procedures, Leda Catunda operates inside painting traditions and inherits from them the notion of a picture as a consistent and centripetal unit. In the irregular formats, eccentric even, her painting can be identified as a structured and self-sufficient body in its narrative and visual elements. The picture, in the strict notion of the frames, is remodeled and subverted with great freedom, but the pictorial body is sustained as a unit that concentrates the artist's and the spectators' attention.

One of the consequences of this condition is that the experience in front of the works doesn't surrender to the hyper-excitation of the senses: the eyes, seduced by each piece, don't glide indifferently to the images' surfaces anymore. Likewise, each piece demands its own judgment, emphasizes conflict or harmony, beauty or shock, humor or drama, often in contradiction with what could be expected if it depended only on the images appropriated by the artist.

Saleti (2013), *Morumbi* (2014) and *Crowd* (2016) – a large-scale triad in the end of the main exhibition room – deserve mentioning. They are three distinct possibilities of drawing an organic grid that can be a self-sufficient image, as well as the structure for an improbable constellation of appropriated icons and colors. Facing this work, one has to consider the importance of drawing for Leda Catunda's pictorial operations. In the mid 1990's, the organic drawing she practiced on various mediums gained prominence in her work, bringing cuts shaped as drops, circles, tongues, wings and other outlines that defined the structure of her works. With these cuts and the shapes that entailed the name of each piece, the artist strengthened the object-aspect of her paintings, their weight, density and own quality. She also partially displaced the attention on the picture's superficial images to the work itself (with its colors, materials and shapes) as an image or meta-image.⁸

It is not by chance that the emphasis on the outlines and the predominance of printed themes are two characteristics that have played a dialectical game in Leda Catunda's production since that time: alternating polarities in the configuration of each painting. What can be highlighted in the creations from the past three years is the unprecedented synthesis that concentrates a wide range of images with the complex and assertive use of drawing as a pictorial structure.

This is the same as saying that Leda Catunda's shapes have never been so elaborate and present (in this exhibition, other than staring in a series of prints and many of the presented watercolors, they were transposed for some of the walls in the exhibition room as ubiquitous patterns), and, at the same time, the presented world images have never been so striking, so banal and so anxious for attention.

We have a mirror of the image world, as we live and produce it, but we also have its reverse: the possibility of the self-sufficient shape and of prolonged contemplation. A serene reflection of a hysterical world. Consumption scenes that resist immediate consumption demand reflections: how can these arrangements of disposable materials be so memorable? Is there any authenticity in the core of readymade icons? Why should we create new images? Why should we insist in looking carefully at what surrounds us? How can we live within images and not become one of them?

It is to be expected that the artist will be the last to hold definitive answers to these questions. She is sufficiently committed to observing the world to know that any distant reflexivity, protected by theoretical certainties, tends to be naïve or arrogant. Leda Catunda's work avoids presenting itself as a protected vision that evaluates and judges what surrounds it. She prefers to double down, accelerating even more the tendencies she encounters, letting them express their contradictions themselves, through absurdity or exaggeration. And always with affection, like someone who cannot but love what they eventually criticize.

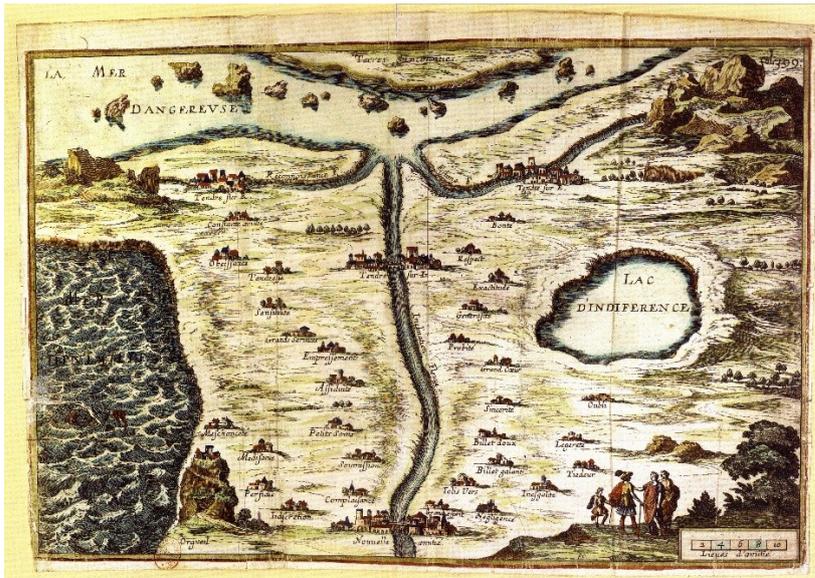
Let's take the *Coisas para comprar* [*Things to buy*] (2016) collage, for example. When combining an endless amount of brands from labels, logos and cards from the most various products, the artist creates a homogeneous and a little perverse fabric, a simulation of a geometric abstraction exercise whose substance is made of, as the name states, things to buy. The resulting pattern is the reverse of her first works using textiles, the *Vedações* [*Gaskets*] (1983): a product had a pattern that the painting could partially cover and, that way, reach an intermediary place between pictorial gesture and consumption appeal; here, the brands themselves are gathered by the paintings in a print pattern, they don't need to amass other

images. So, this image could well be presented as a tautology of consumption in the 21st century.

This work materializes a critical project that has been outlined since Leda Catunda chose the first patterns and “soft” objects as primary materials in the 1980s. En bloc, these materials outlined a specific taste universe that resided between the kitsch of middle-class directed merchandise and the artist’s preferences, as she described in her doctoral thesis (2003). From that point forward, the expansion of her work’s visual repertoire and the unstoppable eclecticism of merchandises and packaging led to a scenario that extrapolates taste as a subjective choice and defines taste as a kind of *medium* traversed by hordes of anesthetized consumers. As she states in her thesis:

In a universe saturated with objects and images, so to speak, for all tastes, these visual stimuli are absorbed by the peripheral vision; the person exposed to them doesn’t have the chance to try and edit them, due to the amount and intensity with which they are released into the world. So, a placid coexistence is established, and it is hardly questioned, where the visual excess is tolerated, or even acclaimed and simply regarded as the result of the need to cover the world...⁹

If the blue knit from *Things to buy* can be compared to a chessboard grid, it can also be interpreted as a contemporary landscape, in which eclectic omnivorous 21st century design takes the place of flora, fauna, and topography. This analogy is supported when we see *Coisas para comprar II [Things to Buy II]* (2016), a work with a similar starting point in which the color blue makes way for the color pink in the grid, and reemerges in the center like a unexpected circular blue lake inhabited by the shapes the artist calls butterflies. If interpreted as a map, the result reminds us of *Carte de Tendre* (affection map or charter) mapped in 17th century and published in the romance by Madeleine de Scudéry.¹⁰ In this case, however, the contemporary sublimations of desire take the place of Romanesque love’s hardships from yore, while the dreadful Lake of Indifference is replaced by something we could call Lake of Escapism.



Affection itself can't escape the vortex that wishes to replace all emotions for things to buy and pre-formatted images. *I love you baby*, *I love you baby II* and *I love you so much* (2016) deal with the consequences of this vertigo, inasmuch as they absorb the iconography of romantic, heterosexual, bourgeois love that still rules the symbolic desire territory. The lingua franca spoken by the media, by the advertising and the industry appeals with very little reservation to the combination of healthy and young bodies, sensual hugs, posed intimacy scenes and contexts that refer to a generic notion of comfort – in a propagation of clichés whose power is verified, in turn, in the huge number of lovers who seek to emulate this imagery with their own bodies, lives and attitudes.

In these cases, the images' artificiality is taken as an obstacle, but rather as a valuable resource, since it replaces concrete emotions for a sum of readymade archetypes. Aware, then, of the efficiency of such artificiality, Leda Catunda collects the most vulgar of these scenes in free hand drawings that are later reproduced in works as the ones mentioned here. In *I love you baby*, one of these drawings seems kind of gigantic – an immense couple that could have come directly from a *blue jeans* ad. Around it, arabesques and shapes created by the artist react to the drawing, ornaments that surround the image of a decorative relationship.

This is an inside exit: instead of assigning depth to a cliché image, Leda Catunda emphasizes the picture's superficiality with ornamentation resources. The awkwardness of the ensemble confirms its excessive and decorative nature. Such qualities, by the way, shouldn't be interpreted as derogatory values, despite the modernist moral that conditions us to always

despise them. The superficiality and gratuity of the graphic elements employed by the artist exempt her from “saving” the images she appropriated.

There is still an unavoidable piece missing to weight Leda Catunda’s ethical and aesthetical position in her recent works. *Mar Linda* (2016), the last piece finalized for this exhibition, reiterates and displaces the qualities of the previously mentioned paintings. The main material, in this case, is the vast photographic collection created by the homonym young woman when she publicized (and enacted) her daily life on online social media.

Given the explicit performativity of Mar Linda’s photographs, it would be idle and even mistaken to use them to draft conclusions about her “real” personality. Nonetheless, it is plausible to take them as examples for thinking about two current processes.¹¹ The first is the installment of the image identification dynamics described in the beginning of this text: instead of seeking for an archetypical hyper-coherence of styles, many have chosen to further investigate the fastest and disposable logic of the *look* to experiment (and spread) countless self-images without necessarily wanting to coincide with any of them. The result is an eternal virtual masquerade ball that can be conceived and perceived as histrionic, as well as libertarian (in an unexpected update of liberation by the absurd by Albert Camus). The second process comes from the first one, particularly in the counter-use by a portion of the youth of the media demands on their appearance and sexuality: instead of refuting these requests, these young people answer twofold, exaggerating in the sensuality symbols and the image consumption of partially or totally enacted scenes.

This is important because Leda Catunda’s treatment duplicates this attitude. She conforms an archipelago of printed photographs on voile that are reframed by round frames, rustically wrapped by silver-painted canvases. Here and there, pictorial interventions give the ensemble a unit that resides on the color pink, *tutti frutti* flavor, with citric touches of fluorescent yellow. In some of the pieces there are no photos of Mar Linda, but colors and patterns. One of them is comprised only of the transparent voile, letting the wall behind it be seen. Another, the larger one, occupies the center of the circular structure with a classic three quarters *selfie*, with a steep chin, sensual eyes and mouth pointing to the observer.

None of these choices refutes the exaggerated attitude of the poses her work appropriates. On the contrary, everything reverberates the frisson of adorning oneself and the dispute for our attention. In fashion, the consultants suggest avoiding the combination of cleavage, bare legs and tight fittings in the same outfit, under the risk of seeming vulgar. In painting, even under

the contemporary conjugation of “post-everything”, it would be plausible to adopt such similar criteria, begging artists to keep off transparency, metallic colors, prints, figuration, portraiture and collage in the same piece. Mar Linda and Leda Catunda refuse these elegant calls, using exaggeration as a weapon for creating something that cannot be placed in any existing category.

In the artist’s case, at least, the results must be sufficient to discourage prompt responses. Even if surrounded by many simulacrum and false promises, her object involves real pleasure. Even if immersed in criticism and irony, her work also speaks of the possibilities of finding effective, reflexive and dynamic pleasure when facing a painting, a painting made *with* and *to* those who live and feel in images, while living like this.

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¹ In a *mcluhanian* metaphor: the scene resembles less a large river supplying inert recipients and more the turmoil from infinite agitated particles in every direction during a seaquake.

² While this essay went through successive revisions, the essay “Self-Design or Productive Narcissism”, by Boris Groys, was published (September 22, 2016, Superhumanity, eflux architecture:

<http://www.e-flux.com/architecture/superhumanity/66967/self-design-or-productive-narcissism/>). The text, which updates the article “The obligation to self-design”, written by Groys in 1969, offers a supporting panorama for this introduction.

³ A comprehensive revision of the artist’s training years, her relationship with the professors who tutored her at FAAP, her affinities and contrasts with colleagues from her generation, and her material choices can be found in the essay by Tadeu Chiarelli in *Leda Catunda*, São Paulo: CosacNaify, 1998.

⁴ As summarized by the famous funk song “*Ela é top*” (She is top), by Mc Bola (2012).

⁵ Keeping the art history genres in sight, it is possible to think about portraits, if we recover the imagery of bourgeois portraits made by artists like Hans Holbein and the importance of objects in defining individuals. Alternatively, it is possible to think of landscapes, leading to the identification between men, culture and territory, and narcissistic hysterical exorbitance.

⁶ The reiterated association with the patchwork quilt carries a hidden term: craftsmanship. Maybe the most recurrent and founding aspect of Leda Catunda’s work is craftsmanship (which, by the way, precedes and surpasses issues relating to taste, consumption and life in images). The artist shamelessly relies on handicraft’s repertoire, not worrying with establishing a critical, ambivalent or ironic relation to it, but simply accepting its resources as full plastic possibilities. Evidently, thus, she provokes intense reactions in public, especially among the contemporary art specialists, often so distant from current vernacular practices.

⁷ Even though it doesn’t constitute an explicit aspect of Leda Catunda’s recent works, it worth noticing the way the artist accesses the materials she uses. Other than buying fabrics and all kinds of materials in various shops, Catunda establishes specific relationships with people with whom she makes exchanges. So, the materials relating to surf are usually exchanged with surfers, while the authors offer their own personal archive photos. This is important because these relationships and exchanges create more complex (and more affective) contacts between the artist and the image universes with which she relates to.

⁸ At the time, critical eyes like Lisette Lagnado and Paulo Herkenhoff (in: Chiarelli, 1998) were so bewildered with the organic morphology of this phase that they interpreted it as the overcoming of narrative, figurative and appropriation contents of her work. History ended up showing that this phase was a necessary transition for the reunion with the icons from consumerism society a few steps later.

⁹ Leda Catunda, *Poética da maciez: pinturas e objetos* [*Soft poetic: paintings and objects*]. Doctoral Thesis in Arts – Escola de Comunicações e Artes (ECA), Universidade de São Paulo (USP). São Paulo, 2003. p. 17.

¹⁰ Guy Debord, an enthusiast of the possibility of mapping affections rather than supposedly neutral technical cartographies, was the one who more recently recalled this intriguing map.

¹¹ The relation between Mar Linda and Leda Catunda exemplifies how much the artist is interested in what goes on “right now”, yet still maintaining aspects of her production since the 1980s. We can notice that, on the one hand, countless aspects of the society from three decades ago continue standing entirely, multiplied, and on the other hand, that new devices (like the internet) have created possibilities and limits that could not be predicted before. My bet is that, thanks to the maturity conquered in her trajectory and, at the same time, to the deep engagement with the current world, Leda Catunda’s ongoing works will be one of the art history’s places to which we will look in 20 or 30 years when we want to understand the state of the world in the first half of the 2010 decade.