

Brazilian Art History and Markets Through the Work of Adriana Varejão

This essay considers the intersections between the Brazilian past - starting from its colonisation by the Portuguese in 1500 - and the art of Adriana Varejao, illustrating the parallels between the Brazilian cultural, social and political context and her oeuvre. Because there is no way of talking about Adriana Varejão's work without a perspective on Brazilian history, this paper gives an overview of that background, pointing out its three key moments: Baroque, Week of Modern Art and Neo-Concrete. After becoming an independent republic in 1822, Brazil continued under European cultural supremacy, resulting in a lack of national identity that endures today.

Varejão started her extensive research on decolonisation matters in the early 1990s before this term became common amongst global art market participants. Her dense body of work fills gaps in a country still building its cultural heritage. Additionally, the global market has received her production in a manner that proves the correlation between her sales and Brazil's economic performance. Her international career grew quickly but also felt the impact of difficult political times and recession in Brazil. Nonetheless, the paper finishes with optimism as the country's economy recovers speedily after the COVID-19 pandemic, encountering a global moment that is enthusiastic about art that revisits history from the perspective of colonised peoples.

Brazilian Art History

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Brazil was still a colony under Portuguese dominance. Gold mining became the main economic activity following the decrease of sugar cane culture on the coast, and shifted the attention to a region located in the centre of the country, in the state of Minas Gerais. Further away from the shore, thus more isolated from the transatlantic trade, this period of colonisation starts seeing the rise of a small middle class coming from liberal enterprise. Artisans became part of an incipient commerce of a new urban life in an aesthetic that is now known as Brazilian Baroque. Even though its routes and principles came from the European Baroque, the result is very particular for its reflection of the characteristics of the local population. It orbited around religious themes, but the formal qualities were looser and freer. Distinctive from the notion of high art found in the European Baroque, Brazilian Baroque originated in the working class and is in this popular culture.

In 1808, King Dom John VI moved from Portugal to Brazil to escape from the Napoleonic invasion of the Iberian Peninsula. This arrival of the Royal Family transformed Rio de Janeiro into the capital of the Portuguese Kingdom, and an interest to have a high cultural scene appeared, attracting the development of arts and sciences in Brazil. Throughout the 20th century, this stimulus was strongly influenced by European currents, and the prevailing style was academic, outdated, and limited to Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo.

It was only in 1922 that a movement penetrating all fields of arts allowed for Brazil's different time zones and latitudes to be included in the national cultural scene. The "Week of Modern Art" (*Semana da Arte Moderna*) reacted against the dominant academic style. The exhibition lasted only one week, but it marked the start of modernism in the country. Domestic themes started to prevail against the European cultural authority, with the notion of anthropophagy as the core of this new approach. You "could devour progressive European concepts, ingest them through a local filter, and produce something that would be entirely new and vibrant, and specific to Latin American culture" (Andrade, 1928). Cannibalism was a key concept in Brazilian modernism. Artists used the Tupi ritual of eating human flesh to symbolise a cultural digestion or, in other words, a process of absorption. Brazil continued under the European hegemony in postcolonial times, but from 1922 onwards, they would create their own cultural production.

Principles of nationalist roots reemerged in the Brazilian art scene in the 1960s with the Neo-Concrete Movement, inaugurating an original approach to contemporary art by the way in which the viewer activates the artwork. The spectator started to be part of the artwork. Painting, however, was mostly ignored. Finally, just in the 1980s, it got the attention of the mainstream art system when a group of artists from Parque Laje brought it back, mixing abstract and figurative motifs to their pictorial practice.

Works and Market

Adriana Varejão was born in Rio de Janeiro in 1964, where she currently works. Her undergraduate training started in engineering, but she decided to change and become a visual artist, graduating from *Escola de Artes Visuais do Parque Lage* in 1986. She starts to paint with material excess in what will later challenge the limits of painting and its blurred distinction with sculpture. Varejão aims to shed some light on the narratives that have not been told yet. Different from how visual registers portray this past; she proves through her art that there are many stories illustrating how Brazil became the country it is today, and she is interested in voicing the overlooked angles and peoples from this social, political and cultural structure.

Varejão is such a prolific artist, with a career of nearly forty years, that this paper can only focus on a small sample of her work. However, some works stand out and can give a spectrum of Varejão's complex and diverse trajectory. She works in series that are grouped around themes, each new series exploring a focused narrative with a particular aesthetic. These sets follow a common thread linked to the Brazilian colonial past, and this essay looks at them in chronological order.



Figure 1: *Angels*, 1988



Figure 2: *Cristo*, 1988

These early works depict angels and Christ in a European Baroque composition. Religion played a central role in this aesthetic during a time when the Iberian Peninsula was strongly reacting against the Protestant Revolution that was fast spreading across Europe. The monopoly of the Catholic Church was being threatened and the new colonies in South America represented a vast terrain to regain that power. But Brazilians adopted Baroque in their own terms, mixing the coloniser mindset with elements of their local population, which was then starting to be a product of interracial generations, combining African, indigenous, and European ethnicities. This aesthetic was grasped by a newly born social class that were mainly self-employed artisans. As it was coming from a lower class, rather than from nobles and royals, the Brazilian Baroque became imbedded in the collective subconscious and stands as part of the national visual identity. It was later dropped by the aristocracy, however, remained popular amongst Brazilians.

The work *Angels* was acquired in the 1980s by the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, where it remains to this date. Varejão painted the angels in different skin colours, nevertheless, after a restoration, all the white ones appeared with the same light pinkish skin tone. The painting *Cristo* sold for £99,954 in June 2020 at Christie's online.



Figure 3: *Map of Lobo Homem*, 1992

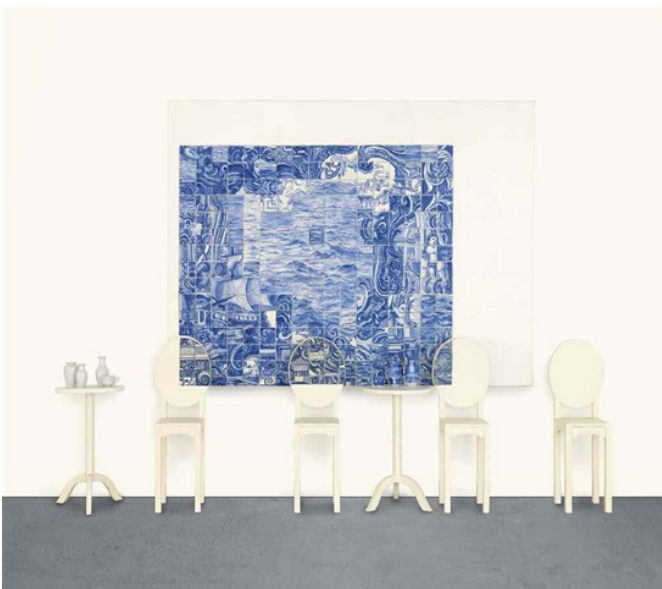


Figure 4: *Tea and Tiles II*, 1997



Figure 5: *Tongue with Flower Pattern*, 1998

The Cartographies Series (figure 3) tells the story of the Iberian Peninsula's gigantic project of expansion including Asia, Africa and the Americas. This domination happened with the use of extreme violence and barbarism. However, the iconography that populates history textbooks portrays an idealised view of the 'new world' that was painted by traveling artists sailed to the Americas to record what life was like there, and went back to Europe carrying an illusion of the colonised land as a place close to Eden, where the native peoples coexisted in a certain degree of harmony with the invader. Adriana Varejão denounces this misrepresentation. As a form of critical language, she started using red paint to depict the open scars left by the brutal colonisation process. The Brazilian modernist concept of cannibalism is also present in the raw meat works, when reminding the native Tupi tribal ritual consumption of human flesh to incorporate the strength of the other, and not as a means of biological nourishment.

The surface of the traditional Portuguese *azulejos* becomes crackled when Varejao added a layer of plaster between the canvas and paint. Like old porcelain that composed the colonial buildings in Brazil, these panels had some pieces that fell but were reinserted back in their façade in a different section. With time, the old tiles crack and start to lose their grip, so someone else must eventually reassemble the little pieces that fall, forming a new pattern that resembles the waves of the Atlantic Ocean, which separates Portugal and Brazil.

In the 1990s, Varejão extended her paintings beyond the rectangular frame of the canvas in the *Língua* (*Tongue*) series, using thick blobs of oil paint to construct the internal representation of the body rather than to show its external appearance, which is what we usually see in paintings. Typical Portuguese ceramic tiles (*azulejos*) are just a surface that covers a building. This skin is neatly organised by an inherited imposed culture, but the interior of this structure wants to be heard. Thus, she dramatically tears the membrane to find what is underneath and finds the meat inside like a voice that shouts, leaving the tongue rolled down. The blood and scar stand as an exaggeration of the Baroque. The viewer senses the contradiction of the cold outside against the heat of the smooth visceral organs. The *Tongue* series carries that Baroque excess and illusion. In Europe, this movement served as a vehicle for the bourgeois economy, but in Brazil the sacred imagery of the Baroque was altered, denatured, and secularised by a local population into a pagan iconography.

Above are *Tea and Tiles II* (in 16 parts), which fetched £391,250 at Christie's London in June 2012; and *Tongue with Flower Pattern*, sold at Sotheby's New York in September 2018 for £601,128.



Figure 6: *Blue Sauna*, 2003

Blue Sauna was sold at Sotheby's London in September 2017 for £488,750, having come from Mario Testino's Collection.

Saunas and Baths deals with perspective and simulation, evoking once more the illusionary theatricality of the Baroque and residual architecture. This is a quieter series where the artist invites the viewer to explore their own history, rather than suggesting a narrative. The ancient baths were both a space for congregation, but also a place for interior perception. They are meditative spaces that invite silence and reflection.

Brazilian art has a tendency for geometric abstraction following the seeds planted by Modernist artists from the Concrete and Neo-Concrete movements. As a contemporary artist, Varejão drinks from that fountain, and that influence can be seen in these cold modernist grids.

The first years in the 21st Century marked a key decade in Varejão's career, when she started exhibiting in mega galleries like Lehmann Maupin and Victoria Miro. In 2008 she gained her own pavilion in Inhotim, which received significant international attention from important art collectors, dealers and institutions.



Figure 7: *Polvo Oil Colours*, 2013 – edition of 200



Figure 8: artist's notes

Figure 9: Victoria Miro Gallery, London, UK, 2013



Polvo was a research Varejão engaged into the skin colours that form the Brazilian DNA, showing the vast array in the mix of Caucasian, African, Indigenous and Asian genes. In Portuguese, '*polvo*' means 'octopus' and sounds like '*povo*', a synonym for 'people'. In addition, octopus ink contains melanin, the pigment forming human skin.

The wooden box with acrylic cover displays 33 oil paint tubes in different skin colours. The aluminium tubes are labelled according to names that people came up with to classify their racial types in a demographical study made in 1976 by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE). This research offered an open question for people to classify their ethnicity, and names such as 'Snow White' and 'Milk Coffee' were among the terms describing their skin type. The crate is part of Varejão's broad research in *mestizaje*, exploring the multiculturalism that forms the Brazilian people and the variety composing this rainbow. As a painter who searched for the 'skin tone' paint, she found a pink colour which did not resonate with what the Brazilian people looked like and disguised racial hierarchies. "If the naming is wrong, we have to change that", so she went on to create her own brand of oil paints.

Figure 9 above is an installation view of the exhibition *Polvo*, which happened in London in 2013 at Victoria Miro Gallery. Besides the box, it displays five portraits of Adriana Varejão in different skin tones. Her first solo show at Victoria Miro was in 2002. In 2018, this gallery exhibited her work at their space in Venice, Italy.



Figure 10: Gagosian, New York, USA, 2021

Ruins is the most recent series and brings the architectural element of columns which support a structure. In 2021 they were shown in New York at Gagosian's third exhibition of the artist. In 2022, the *Ruins* series filled the octagonal patio in Pinacoteca de São Paulo (Pina) during the major retrospective *Adriana Varejão: Sutures, Fissures, Ruins*. This year marked the centenary of the Week of Modern Art in 1922, and the bicentenary of Brazil's independence from Portugal in 1822.

If *Tongues* started coming out of the canvas, now these columns abandon them entirely. The viewer can walk around these standing structures with painted surfaces and examine the contrast of the geometrical tiles against the *Jerked Beef*. We go back to looking inside because behind a column are hidden layers denouncing the violence of a nation built upon a brutal foundation.

International Milestones

Adriana Varejão is unmistakably one of the most important Brazilian artists and her technical ability with materials comes alongside her deep research of Brazilian visual history. Why is that relevant to countries other than Brazil and Portugal? Because the world as we know was built under imperial projects and their geopolitical repercussions shape the current world map. These cultural and economic values possibly explain the immediate international recognition that Varejão has had from the start of her career.

Varejão's work is part of public collections in leading institutions in Europe and the US, such as Tate, Museo Reina Sofia, Fundación "La Caixa", Hara Museum in Tokyo, Solomon R. Guggenheim and Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Stedelijk Museum, Fondation Cartier, Dallas Museum of Art, Museum Van Hedendaagse Kunst and Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent, Belgium, also own her work. Adriana Varejão is a name prized in contemporary art institutions in Portugal, where her work is present at Museu de Arte Moderna in Sintra, Ellipse Foundation and Fundação Serralves.

She was invited to take part in the Biennials of Venice, Sydney and São Paulo, and has exhibited at public institutions like Museo Tamayo in Mexico City, Dallas Contemporary in Texas, and ICA - Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston.

Private collectors queue to purchase Varejão's work in the primary market as the demand for her paintings is much higher than her production. Her representation is shared between Brazilian Fortes D'Alóia & Gabriel, and two mega galleries: Victoria Miro and Gagosian. Alessandra Modiano, Victoria Miro's director of sales in

London, reported that whenever they get any work from Varejão, they will put it in their next fair, and usually these works sell to someone within a select list of important clients before the fairs' opening day. The most sought after are the *Tongues*, but collectors do not get to choose when it comes to buying her works; it is largely whatever becomes available. Prices in the primary market vary from approximately £290,000 for a work measuring 1,50 x 1,50 meters, and £370,000 for paintings of 1,80 x 1,80 meters. Her *Cracks* are one of the favourites from collectors buying at auction, e.g. *Celadon Song*, sold in October 2022 at Christie's London for £529,200. Above all, her works that pay homage to legendary artists like Alberto Burri, Joseph Albers and Lucio Fontana make strong sales.



Figure 11: *Celadon Song*, 2018

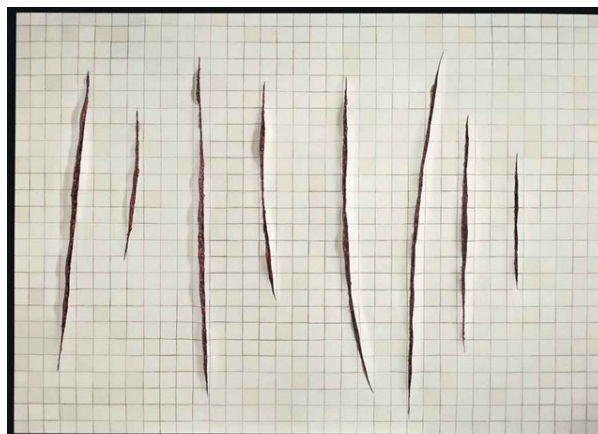


Figure 12: *Wall with Incisions a la Fontana II*

The secondary market shows consistent results for Varejão. Her *Wall with Incisions a la Fontana II* was sold at Christie's London for £1,105,250 in 2011, a record for a Brazilian artist. In the two following years, her work continued to sell at auction for seven digits. However, from 2015 her appearance in the international market plummeted and has been inconsistent since then. In 2018 and 2022, her international market recuperated and performed well, closing an annual turnover of almost 1.8 and 1.2 million pounds, respectively. These market indicators conclude that Varejão has a good presence in the global art trade, but not as significant as it was between 2011 and 2014.

In 2014 Brazil hosted FIFA World Cup, and in 2016 Rio de Janeiro held the Olympic Games. These events attracted international attention to the country. That came together with a decade of prosperity for Brazil. Emerging countries Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa formed the alliance BRICS. In that optimistic period, sales of Brazilian art rose. However, in 2015 the momentum faded as corruption scandals in the house of billions dominated the headlines of the national and international press. The following years were of significant political instability, and scared collectors from pursuing a portfolio in Brazil. The ArtTactic Report *Latin America Auction Analysis* showed that sales of Latin American art decreased during the first half of 2016, “putting an end to the positive sales trend which the market had been experiencing since the first half of 2014” (Pettersson and Rutkowska, 2016). The cover of this publication features Varejão's work.

The graphics below prove the correlation between sales of Varejão's works in the secondary market following Brazil's GDP growth pattern.



Figure 13: Brazilian GDP growth

Figure 15: ArtTactic Report

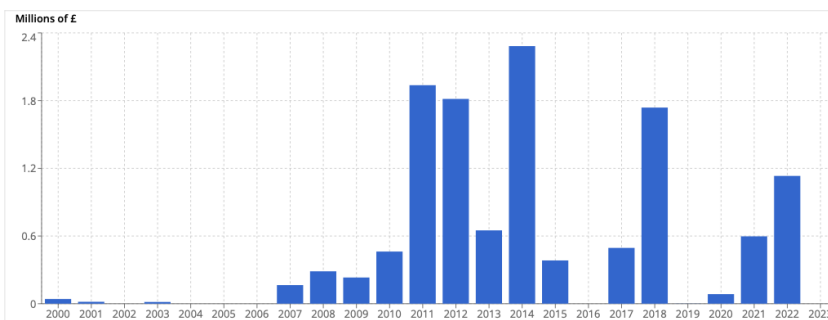


Figure 14: Varejão's turnover in auction sales



After the COVID-19 crisis, Brazil's economy recovered fast with steady growth and there is hope for a resurgence. The local cultural infrastructure counts on strong and independent institutions, such as the long-standing Sao Paulo Biennial, founded in 1951. But challenges for Brazil to become a serious player in the global art market remain, primarily due to high taxes on imported art goods, which add up to approximately 55%, and scare away mega galleries and international art fairs.

The 2022 ABS Art Basel Report shows a survey of 11 countries, including Brazil, that have important art markets and large high net worth (HNW) populations, to analyse the buying behaviour of collectors. Despite the volatile world scene, it states that confidence in the art market remains strong because it behaves differently than other sectors during economic crises. The concentration of wealth has increased since the pandemic, boosting the expenditure on luxury goods. Through the analysis of the growing digital sales, the report concludes that the future of the art trade is hybrid, which opens the path for artists based in more remote areas, like Brazil. The report concludes that there is a necessity for new art hubs to flourish because "homogenous art ... comes at a loss of cultural identity" (McAndrew, 2023, pp.72).

Varejão tells the visual story of a country that has not been told yet. Chimamanda Adichie talks about the dangers of a single story, saying that humans can only become equals once they speak for themselves (Adichie, 2009). Our stories make us who we are and can repair people's broken dignity. A nation's cultural heritage is integral to its social network and builds a sense of where we are going as a society. Before postcolonial studies and practices turned into a pivotal debate in contemporary art, Varejão was already using the "mechanism of art accessing the past guided by the urgency of the present" (Herkenhoff, 2022) She proves to be an artist ahead of her time, adding an insightful responsiveness to the complexities of our world.

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