Suzette Bell-Roberts. "Leda Catunda: Softness, Surface, and the Politics of Excess," *Art Africa*, 27 November 2025.

ART AFRICA

Leda Catunda: Softness, Surface, and the Politics of Excess

Exploring a practice where tactility, ornament, and material play unsettle the boundaries of contemporary art



Installation view of 'I Like to Like What Others Are Liking' at Sharjah Art Foundation. Image courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation. Photo: Shafeek Nalakath Kareem

In this conversation, Suzette Bell-Roberts speaks with Brazilian artist Leda Catunda about her fluid, tactile practice—where painting meets sculpture and ornament becomes critique. Transforming textiles such as velvet, voile, and patterned cotton into tools for cultural reflection, Catunda navigates both the pleasures and pressures of contemporary visual life. She discusses the evolution of her materials, the sculptural turn in her recent work, and how softness, excess, and surface operate as both seduction and inquiry.

Suzette Bell-Roberts: Your work moves between painting and sculpture, ornament and critique. What draws you to these "in-between" spaces, and which works in the Sharjah retrospective best illustrate how these thresholds shaped their making?

The work I began in the 1980s set out to create space for a new kind of painting—one that diverged both from the narrative tradition of painting in art history and from the abstract expressionism that so decisively shaped the visuality of the twentieth century. Influenced by a mix of Pop art and the genius of Conceptual art, I set out to explore the possibilities of a conceptual painting, which led me to start a series titled *Vedações* ("Closures"). I looked for printed images on soft objects—blankets, towels, curtains—which I would partially cover, leaving only fragments of the figures exposed and thereby recreating the image through subtraction. Working with industrialised objects and materials introduced volume and spatiality into the works, as can be seen in the plastic rooftops of the little houses in *Paisagem da Estrada* (1987) and in *Fígado* (1990), made of fake fur and Formica, where the contrast of surfaces is explored theatrically.



Leda Catunda, *Vedação Rosa*, 1983. Acrylic on fabric, 220 x 140cm. Museu de Arte Moderna RJ coleção Gilberto Chateubriand. Courtesy of the artist.

Textiles and patterned surfaces are central to your work. What first drew you to these materials, and what do they let you express beyond decoration?

The idea of bringing everyday visuality—what is found in the streets, in people's homes, and in daily life more broadly—has been, and continues to be, the main reason I seek out images in commonplace materials to create my works. This is also why the retrospective in Sharjah is titled 'I Like to Like What Others Are Liking'. Under capitalism, all kinds of things are offered for purchase, and their consumption is shaped not only by economic factors but, above all, by matters of taste—a taste tied to the subject's personal identification and revealing the group or place of belonging in which they wish to situate themselves. What attracts me to all of this is the affective dimension of such forms of consumption, where a particular style is chosen to become part of a person's life. These choices can be pretty intriguing, and I love deciphering them.

Critics often link your work to Pop and collage, but note your emphasis on tactility and intimacy over irony. How do you see your relationship to Pop, and which work in the Sharjah exhibition best shows this shift toward touch and affect rather than detachment?

During my days in art school, I was deeply affected by the intensity of artists such as Rauschenberg, Johns, and Warhol. In Brazil, I was also able to follow the work of artists like Antonio Dias, Cildo Meireles, Claudio Tozzi and Nelson Leirner, who was my teacher.

Collage is the best word to describe my creative process. The anti-hierarchical attitude inherent to this gesture becomes a powerful force in generating analogies and metaphors. In *Caprichosa* (2024), appropriated images—such as a heavy-metal skull T-shirt and the camel figures from a Moroccan pencil holder—are brought together within an intensely baroque landscape. I believe that the artisanal aspect, which recalls Brazilian handmade traditions such as lace and embroidery, softens the irony found in Pop art in favour of an atmosphere of affection. At the same time, I like to think that a healthy dose of humour is always at play in many of the works.



Installation view of 'I Like to Like What Others Are Liking' at Sharjah Art Foundation. Image courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation. Photo: Shafeek Nalakath Kareem

The idea of intimacy becomes more evident in the volumetric works, which possess a body that asserts itself through occupation of space. Recheada, for example, is a suspended piece with a bulging form—almost like a belly—covered by multiple veils and a red cape that envelops it. Its structure was inspired by that of flying insects, such as beetles, whose delicate wings are covered and protected by a more rigid shell, preventing us from seeing them in their entirety.

Your recent works include three-dimensional forms—stuffed bellies, flaps, and protrusions. What does this sculptural expansion let you explore that painting or collage alone could not?

At first, I enjoyed exploring the force of gravity to produce deformation, which resulted in foam accumulating at the bottom, making the soft nature of the painting objects fixed to the wall clear. I was also interested in a certain theatricality—how the volume suggested a kind of movement, as if the work were advancing toward whoever approached it. At the same time, beyond the image of the voluminous work hanging and sinking toward the floor, pieces such as *Fígado*, *Siamesas*, and *Duas árvores* emerged, conceived to occupy part of the wall while also extending onto the floor. In the suspended works, this theatrical dimension became even more pronounced. Now floating, they invite viewers to walk around them, ultimately energising the entire exhibition space.

Ornament, excess, and accumulation—often dismissed as trivial or feminine—are central to your work. How do you revalue these elements, and what kinds of force do they hold today?

Excess and accumulation respond to two different aspects: on the one hand, there is the idea of reinforcing the handmade quality, emphasising the artisanal labour that interests and attracts me so profoundly. This sensibility comes in large part from watching my Portuguese grandmother sew endlessly. On the other hand, I think anxiety has significantly intensified in recent years,

especially since the pandemic, which affected us globally and became an inescapable factor. With plenty of time on my hands and working alone in the studio, interacting with people only online, I found myself responding to a kind of restlessness—an urge to keep adding something more to the works. This resulted in a substantial shift toward the Baroque, with hyper-colored pieces overflowing with endless detail.

My primary political commitment is to the reality of the present moment, recognising that the world is constantly changing and must be re-signified at every instant. Thus, the way in which the manifestations of the real are perceived is a highly intense process. I focus on reflecting, through the works, the results of this perception—its phenomenological aspects ranging from colours, light, and shadow to variations in the physical atmosphere, oscillations in the psychological atmosphere, and the expressions of madness, such as manias and anxieties.



Installation view of 'I Like to Like What Others Are Liking' at Sharjah Art Foundation. Image courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation. Photo: Shafeek Nalakath Kareem

Art is the place where the subjectivities of existence are exposed—whether in film, literature, music, theatre, or the visual arts. I say this because, like everyone else, I feel some difficulty with the speed and the way information reaches us today. Yet staying attuned to reality, even when that reality is somewhat scrambled, is fundamental to my artistic process. And having gone through the exceptional circumstances brought about by the pandemic—experiencing the stretching of hours while waiting for a return to normality—was, in this sense, deeply instructive.

In the Sharjah retrospective, are there particular works that respond to or reflect the acceleration of image culture and digital visibility? Could you reference one or more and share how they speak to that theme?

Your question is an interesting one, because 'Paisagem Selvagem' was conceived entirely around this acceleration and the anguish of realising how we have become slaves to the colourful i mages on social media, which overwhelm us with their dizzying speed. Living in large cities and permanently connected to screens, we no longer know what a sunset is, nor what it would be like to walk alongside a river. In this work, two lakes made of 3D-effect plastic produced in China are depicted, along with an infinite number of colourful, tangled, and overlapping elements—like the confusion of a carnival. At the top, a blue sky stretches wide, like portals to other dimensions.



Installation view of ‘I Like to Like What Others Are Liking’ at Sharjah Art Foundation. Image courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation. Photo: Shafeek Nalakath Kareem

Your work balances comfort and intimacy with a subtle unease. How intentional is this oscillation between seduction and disquiet?

I conduct various studies around an idea I am exploring until I arrive at a range of possibilities, then begin a new group of works for an exhibition. Usually, at that point, a certain sense of humour or a dominant theme is already noticeable. But each work is constructed in its own unique way and emerges from many stages. Almost always, the outcome brings surprises in terms of meaning, so I don’t have absolute control over it.

On the other hand, it is very gratifying to see the work come to life in its encounter with the public, whose gaze has the power to transform what I envisioned into something different—something that will be validated through the resonance it finds with the spectator, and with the way it becomes a part of his/her repertoire through their eyes.