HYPERALLERGIC

Echoes of Joy and Peril in Leda Catunda's Textiles

The Brazilian artist practices an erasure poetry upon textiles and assembles the results into evocative, semi-sculptural configurations.



Leda Catunda, "Mapa Mundi" (2022), acrylic and enamel on fabric, wood, plastic, velvet, voile, flags, rug and foam, 90 1/2 inches x 118 1/8 inches (all photos by Eduardo Ortega, courtesy the artist and Bortolami Gallery, New York)

The jazzy textiles that comprise Leda Catunda's "Mapa Mundi" (2022) portray a world whose material fecundity is a source of both joy and peril. The boisterous fabrics — velvet; carpet; repurposed flags — have been painted by the artist and displayed within the sinuous interior sections of an enormous ovoid wooden frame. The frame is painted in glossy blues, to evoke waterways, making the fabric sections appear like islands in an archipelago. Some fabric paintings include figurative imagery, such as an idyllic house nestled in a mountain valley or a cluster of rocks glazed a translucent magenta color. Others are more abstract: patchworks of earth-toned plaids; swathes of reddish-orange flame-like shapes; teeming strips of pink and teal voile. All possess a dimensional quality in the way they bulge or extend beyond their section of the frame, as if they compose a topographical world map.

In fact, the charismatic landscapes that comprise Catunda's exhibition, Geography, at Bortolami gallery, are closer to palimpsests. Since the 1980s, the artist, celebrated in her native Brazil yet lesser known in the United States, has been practicing a kind of painter's erasure poetry upon various textiles and assembling the results into evocative, semi-sculptural configurations. You can see evidence of that process in "Cordilheira (Mountain Range)" (2022), a group of 17 irregularly shaped panels, each about the size of a boogie board, whose colorful paintings trace or erase mashed-up pop cultural iconography, from the logo on a Rolling Stones t-shirt to the lettering on a Santos Football Club pennant. The craggy panels hang on the wall in a way that suggests a metaphorical mountain range but they're also an artistic archeological record of contemporary material culture.

The question is whether Catunda condemns or celebrates that culture's excesses and the answer seems to be a bit of both. Her work's over-the-top artifice (such as the fuchsia plastic river that bifurcates "Rio Rosa (Pink River)," 2022), and undercurrent of sadness (her signature and recurrent use of teardrop forms), maintain an element of critical distance from consumerism. But the work's Pattern and Decoration whimsy is ultimately too fun, too bright and inventive, to limit itself to somber critique. The artist delights in the surprising representational possibilities her media a!ord, whether it's the airy strips of voile that incongruously comprise most of the terrain in "Paisagem (Landscape)" (2022) or the dangling tongues of camouflaged greenery in "Onça (Jaguar)" (2022). Even the more subdued works — the tranquil minimalism of "Paisagem com lua (Landscapes with Moon)" (2022); the tower of cascading green, oven mitt-like forms that comprise "Escamosa (Scaly)" (2022) — evince wonder.

Such wonder derives from the way Catunda's painted textile assemblages exercise their material imagination rather than from any sense of nature's intrinsic beauty. Her artistic landscapes' conspicuous constructions, brimming with discrete forms in distinctive combinations, hint at humankind's influence — witting or not — on the shape and contents of actual landscapes. The exhibition's rubric of "geography" highlights how her impish formalism troubles boundaries not only among aesthetic categories, such as painting and sculpture, part and whole, hard and soft, but also among more ethically freighted categories, such as natural and artificial, purity and impurity, good and evil. Accelerating, often harmful, anthropogenic e!ects on the planet provide cause for great concern and reason to enact systemic, eco-social change. But Catunda's landscapes accept, even embrace, that for the moment, as well as the foreseeable future, those e!ects form a constituent part of our world.

Leda Catunda: Geography continues at Bortolami (39 Walker Street, Tribeca, Manhattan) until December 23. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.