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MARIA MARTINS: APPROACHES TO SURREALISM

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Abstract: Our purpose in this text is to verify the approach to surrealism that is evident in the work of Maria Martins. Having started her production with more academic works, she starts to compose her work from Brazilian mythical themes and finally makes a real change in her operative procedure, with the use of metaphors and an open game of association of meaning. This issue is then analyzed from certain works, such as: “*Sem Eco, Boiúna*” and “*Impossível*”, among others. Finally, Maria Martins’ production takes on an air of mystery and no longer has obvious logic, whose meaning is sometimes inaccessible, in a clear surrealist guideline.

Keywords: Maria Martins, Surrealismo, Brazilian art

INTRODUCTION

A Brazilian sculptor whose moment of greatest vigor in her production occurred in the 1940s, Maria Martins began her involvement with art, working in wood, still in 1926, in the city of Quito, Ecuador. In Japan she learned to make ceramics and later studied with the sculptor Oscar Jespers in Belgium and with Jacques Lipchitz in the United States. She draws attention in her career precisely because of her involvement with other artists. It was certainly this exchange of experiences, notably with European artists who emigrated to the United States from 1940 onwards, that allowed him to further develop his poetics. In addition to Lipchitz, she became close to Breton, Ozenfant, Brancusi, Léger, Duchamp and Mondrian.

The artist’s production is generally divided into three phases: one academic, another with her strong involvement with Brazilian mythology and a third in which she shows evident contact with surrealism. Our objective, then, in this text, is to verify this relationship from the analysis of a certain number of works, among them: “*A procura da luz*”, “*Boiúna*”, “*A*

mulher que perdeu a sua sombra”, “*Sem eco*”, “*O caminho, a sombra, longos demais, estreitos demais*” and “*Impossível*”. We aim, therefore, from her works, to stick to the artist’s operative procedure and her change to a more mysterious bias, no longer characterized by the domain of logic and traditional narrative, but by a surrealist direction.

Our examination of Maria Martins’ poetics reveals an approach to Rosalind Krauss’ thought, notably in the book

“*Caminhos da escultura moderna*”, from 1998, which shows us the importance of the game of metaphors in surrealist works, making them “resistant to analysis” (Krauss, 1999: 128), from a rational logic, that is, from a traditional analytical narrative. This analysis bias, which questions the reading of only logical basis and which takes into account issues of the unconscious, so close to surrealism, was important for the critical examination of Maria Martins’ unique production.

THE WORK OF MARIA MARTINS AND SURREALISM

Maria Martins’ first exhibition took place in 1940 in Philadelphia, USA. Later that year, she presented several sculptures in an exhibition of Latin American artists at the Riverside Museum, in New York. This production is in fact academic, with emphasis on biblical themes and female figures, although it has already begun to explore issues related to the mythology of the Amazon, as in *Yara*, from 1942. Certain pieces from this period make us think of works such as: “*A urna e Selene de pé*” by Bourdelle, whose influence on Maria becomes perceptible in the clear verticality of “*A procura da luz*”, from 1940 (Figure 1) and in the monumentality of the vigorous “*Cristo*”, from 1941. A certain tendency towards an elongated vertical line is evident in the figures of our artist, which is accentuated later, notably

in pieces such as: “*However*”, from 1944, and “*A mulher que perdeu a sua sombra*”, of 1946, perhaps then in a more forceful approach to Giacometti.



Figure 1: Maria Martins, *A procura da luz*, 1940, bronze, 270x70x70cm. Source: own.

In this first phase, Maria also carries out personal themes, as in: “*Nora*”, representing one of his daughters, and “*Refugiados*”, certainly referred to the many Europeans fleeing the war that she met in this period.

From 1942 onwards (Naumann, 1998:12) the artist refines her theme and starts to explore, in a deeper way, subjects related to properly Brazilian myths, especially Amazonian ones. As a result of this imagery production, a set of diverse pieces related to the gods of the forest could be seen in the exhibition held in 1943 at the Valentine Gallery, in New York.

Although some pieces reveal personality in their execution with unique images of themes from Brazilian mythology, they still show an anecdotal character, such as the representation of *Boiúna* (Figure 2). In this work, we can see the emphasis attributed to the mysterious force of the feminine nature of this deity, which is placed through a strange and voracious sensuality. Besides: *Boiúna*, in this exhibition there are also representations of other mythical figures, as in: *Cobra Grande*, *Aiokâ*, *Iacy*, *Amazônia*, *Yara* and *Boto*. The character, at first, literary of this production is, however, quite clear, because the artist’s objective at this moment is to give an account of the representation of the invoked god.



Figure 2: Maria Martins, *Boiúna*, 1942, bronze, 72.39x68.58x46.99cm (Martins, 2013:301). Source: own.

Maria Martins’ involvement with the surrealists, especially Breton, is already materialized at this stage of her work. The leader of the movement is delighted with “*Cobra Grande*”. This goddess would be superior to the other deities of the forest,

because she would have generated the Amazon River, her son. She is an interesting deity, who seduces and captivates us, but also frightens and terrifies us, as she has a good side and a bad side. Cobra Grande would then live in a palace further down the river, full of “precious stones and ambush among rare flowers” (Naumann, 1998:14), but it would be sweet on the one hand and cruel on the other. She thus constitutes one of the strong female figures that inhabit our artist’s imagination. And Maria can perhaps represent not only the strength of women in a male-dominated culture, but also a new breath of energy circulating in the dominant thought system. Breton saw this exposition of Maria and later wrote a text in which he refers to this work: “*Cobra Grande*”. And he mentions precisely this relationship of fear and wonder that this goddess causes, adding:

It is undoubtedly, in the final analysis, Desire raised to panic power – and it is the master desire of the world – for the first time in art managing to free itself – who will go on infusing, like a poison, its unique virtue, sublimating – confusing, works of strictly interior inspiration (as opposed to previous works), such as the “*Impossível*” and “*O Caminho, A Sombra, Longos Demais, Estreitos Demais*”, presented last July at the International Exhibition of Surrealism in Paris. (Breton, 1997:14).

To a certain extent, Breton in this text makes us think that there seems to be a connection between the idea of myth and human thought. The force of nature whose sap Maria exposes is contrary to the intellectualism solidified by culture. Breton would then see in Maria the good winds that blow from the equatorial forest. The artist, coming from a place with an uncertain future until then, would be bringing good and continuous vibrations, and her art would be a breath for a culture historically sedimented by reason and morals.

One of the first pieces performed by Maria in which, based on her operative process, a closer approximation to surrealism can be seen is “*Sem eco*”, from 1943. The construction of the work is interesting, as it is as organic as the motif. Its linear shape twists and resembles twisted branches, but you can also see the image of a snake there. Another important point is the fact that it has a trunk as a base, which helps to give the piece compositional unity.

From then on, our artist’s work is increasingly characterized by the accentuation of metaphors, thus allowing free associations in relation to the meaning of the pieces. The works acquire, therefore, the character of enigmas. The titles of the works become extensive, thus constituting true traps for the eye. Maria modifies her structure of thought, the way of composing her works. Reading the meaning of the work is sometimes inaccessible, as it frees itself from traditional conventions such as narrative and subjection to the theme of the work.

Another important piece of Mary is “*Impossível*” (Figure 3), which gained several versions. The insistence on motive prompts us to question its meaning. In the three known sculptural versions, formal modifications were made to the female figure, specifically the arms. It is perceived in this set a difficulty of meeting, of union between the parts. Something common in surrealist works, such as in “*Bola Suspensa*”, of 1930-31, by Giacometti, is the constant game between excitement and frustration. In “*Impossível*” the same drama of desire emerges, but the approximation does not take place. This problem of the unstable encounter seems to be part of the composition of the work itself, as the two figures present precarious harmony. And perhaps this is the meaning of this work, the difficult constitution of unity.

Some elements are recurrent in our sculptor's pieces. In "A mulher que perdeu sua sombra", from 1946, we have an elongated figure, with a small head - surmounted by two serpents symmetrically exposed - and outstretched arms. This work is similar to another, from 1944, entitled "However", which also features the female figure in similar proportions and a snake that comes from the head and coils around the entire body. The meaning of these two pieces, however, is doubtful. In "O Caminho, A Sombra, Longos Demais, Estreitos Demais" from 1946, there is a new similarity with the figures of these two works, and even so, full access to meaning seems difficult to obtain. A resource to access a possible reading of the work may be in the title. A long and difficult path is what emerges from this enigma, and few options must have this woman, who does not seem to see the light ahead, in her destiny. Yes, the problems of the spirit, of human mental life, seem to be profound because of the contradictions existing in the system.

Ozenfant (1997:27), in his interpretation of this work by Maria, tells us that this figure who goes ahead represents "freedom without chains, without brakes, without obligations". Freedom and desire are important words for surrealists. The focus of the movement, therefore, appears to be man. To define surrealism Ponge (1991:17) argues that it is, in fact, "a state of mind" and adds: "Surrealism is not defined based on technical or thematic considerations". Well, although the existence of technical and aesthetic issues does not seem to be decisive to demonstrate an approach to surrealism - that is, it is not essential to stick, for example, to the technique of automatism -, it seems evident, however, that Maria's link with the movement. Since its second phase, its poetics is already imbued with the spirit of the group, and the approach becomes more determined from the new structuring of its

operative procedure, with the accentuation of the use of metaphors and consequent opacity of meaning of its pieces. Maria breaks, therefore, the traditional structure of analysis of the work and, thus, meets the main guideline of the surrealists' struggle, which is to go against the historically sedimented rational culture, and it is this traditional logic on which reason is supported, which is expected to fight.

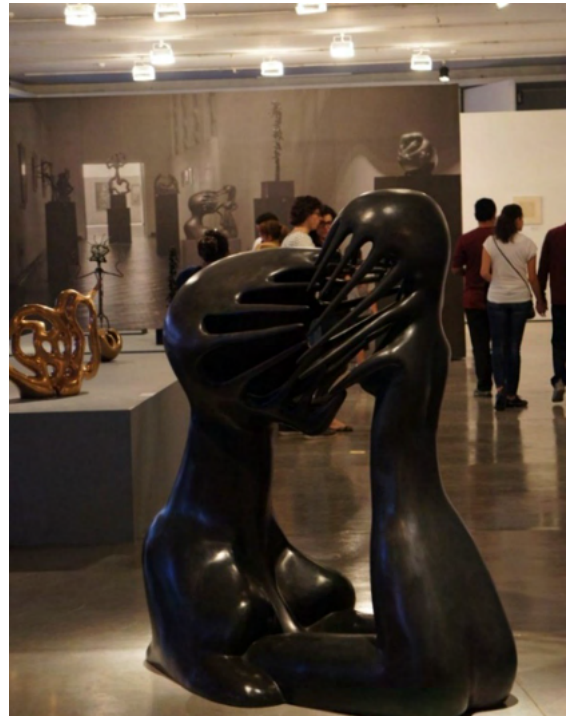


Figure 3. Maria Martins. Impossible, 1940s, bronze, 178.6x167.5x90cm (Martins, 2013:303). Source: own.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, Maria Martins' work is generally divided into three phases. In the first two, it remained linked to a still representative sculptural procedure. In the second phase, however, the approach to surrealist artists can be seen. Breton was delighted with the 1943 Amazon exhibition in New York, whose main theme was the deities of the forest. The way in which the artist worked on her themes and her own origin would already represent,

for him, a new energy coming from the tropics to circulate in the dominant cultural system. The strength of its female figures also exposes a counterpoint to the historical male dominance in the system. It is worth remembering the sensual voracity present in the piece *Boiúna*, a goddess who devours men. As in the works of the surrealists, Maria's production already denotes this taking of a position in front of the system. In any case, the evident approach to surrealism takes place through an update of his work. In her operative process, she starts to work in a determined way with the use of metaphors and moves away from a production of a logical and rational nature. Maria then seems to explore the externalization of her psychic reality, which is then presented, at times, in an illogical structure, but which certainly contains profound meanings, which traditional reason insists on classifying and ordering.

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