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THE ART OF ISMAEL NERY

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Abstract: The main subject of this text is the imagery that constitutes Ismael Nery from his plastic production. The aim is, therefore, in view of the analysis of some works, to verify the various influences received such as expressionism, cubism, among others and how they functioned in a productive way in his art. In its final phase, the evident approximation to surrealist language stands out, but also the importance of essentialism on its poetics. Finally, it is verified that the imagery that he produced, in his expressionist period, constitutes the basis of his essentialist conceptualization and that the operative procedure and the philosophical thinking form a unit in the set of his poetics.

Keywords: Ismael Nery; Imagética; Essencialismo

INTRODUCTION

Ismael Nery is an enigmatic figure. His art and life still intrigue us, as there seems to be no boundary between them. Although there was, on his part, a clear attempt to erase his plastic production, when he asked his friend Murilo Mendes to destroy his work, we also face the fact that not even his philosophy, so much talked about among his closest friends, was ever written by him. He was indeed an artist with many skills, of varied production, but who had a short life span. In any case, he generated a mysterious and even ambiguous imagery universe around his artistic production. Through the analysis of certain works, the aim is then to reflect on the meaning of this production. Works like *Satanic Self-Portrait*, 1925; *Eve*, 1923; *Superimposed Figures*, 1926; *Self-Portrait*, 1927; *inner vision-agonny*, 1931, can mark his trajectory and inscribe him in the history of Brazilian art. His plastic production is quite unique, especially when one thinks of his contemporaries, the artists linked to the Modern Art Week, who had nationalism as a thematic guideline. His

art already makes us reflect on certain more universal subjects such as the physical world and spirituality, time and space, masculine duality and feminism, life and art, among others. Although he assimilated many style influences such as Expressionism, Cubism, Art Deco and Surrealism, they functioned productively in his art. The influences received were indeed decisive for the structuring of his plastic art, but it is necessary to pay attention to the particularity of the imagery he creates, the conduction of the development of his poetics that is revealed.

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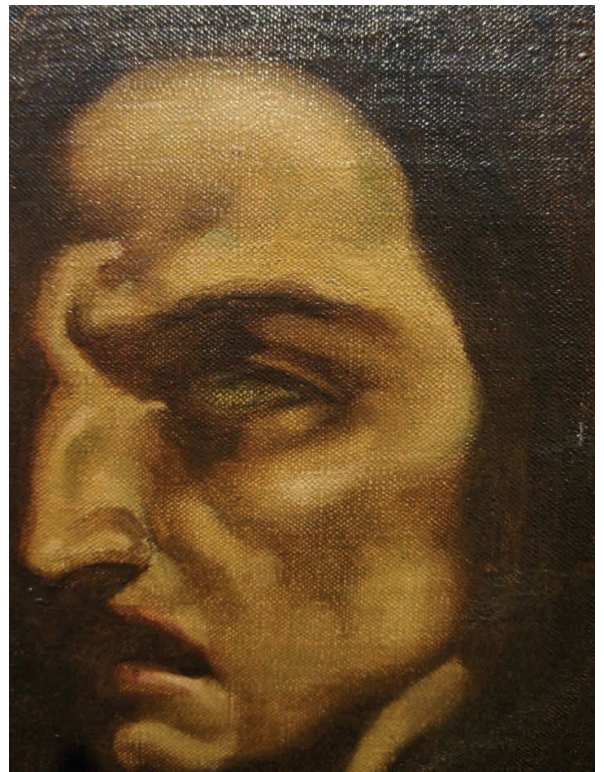


Figure 1: Ismael Nery, *Satanic self-portrait*, 1925 (Detail). Oil on canvas. Private Collection – SP. Source: own.

Nery was born in Belém, in the state of Pará, Brazil, in 1900. He moved with his family to Rio de Janeiro in 1902. He began his studies at the School of Fine Arts in 1915 and in 1920 attended the Julian Academy in Paris.

He was, as we said, a contemporary of the Modern Art Week of 1922, but his art subject was not nationalist like that of the members of this movement, who wanted to reaffirm the idea of Brazilianness. Regarding this issue, Nery's production does not seek this brand of identity. It is for reasons like this that, in a certain way, there is a timid participation in the local artistic milieu. He will only exhibit from 1928 onwards, with a solo exhibition in Belém do Pará. His last exhibition in life was a group show, in 1933, by the Sociedade Pró-Arte Moderna in São Paulo.

Our artist produced in a frenetic way and used different techniques, mainly for drawing, such as ink, pastel, gouaches and watercolor. This production took place in different styles and in a significant amount, whether on paper, cardboard or other supports. In this regard, researcher Angela Grandó tells us:

Nery was a compulsive draftsman who used any type of support with legendary ease: his stroke ranged from caricature to portraiture, from theater costumes to costume style, from design to architectural sketches; expresses the refinement of the dandy and the passionate human being who exposes the viscera of his body. (Grandó, 2005:11)

Although Nery had little time to mature his work, he seems to have been in a hurry to experiment with styles and look for plastic solutions to his spiritual concerns. His main theme is the human figure, but he made several designs for costumes, dance and even architecture, with examples that are easy to recognize the art deco influence and even sketches of facades in neo-colonial style. When thinking about these different possibilities for the development of his art, one can also question whether there is in fact a unity in this production. It was Antonio Bento who organized the most accepted sequence of his artistic phases, that is, expressionism, cubism and surrealism. The influences of these styles were indeed decisive for the artist.

Satanic Self Portrait, de 1925 (Figura 1) it is already an impressive work from the artist's first phase. The malevolent expression immediately intrigues us, as he was an ardent Catholic. Evil at one time inhabits the body, even in the life of this artistic man illuminated by faith. This pictorial production began right here in Brazil, after the trip to Europe made in 1920, shortly after his short period of study at the Julian Academy. Nery uses color very expressively and the paintings are quite dark. His own brushstrokes define zones of light on the somber face, thus reinforcing its drama. Another work from this phase, in which a certain duality between good and evil emerges, is *A Española*. The oblique gaze is a constant in the works of this phase and can be seen in paintings such as *Self-Portrait (Torero)* from 1922 and *Eva* from 1923. Perhaps the enigma of the soul is in question. The artist seems to go on the edge of sin, so he dares to approach evil, even if only mentally. It is to this imaged universe that the artist leads us with his plastic production.

The painting *Eva* mentioned above also brings up another interesting issue in Nery's production, which is the ambiguous game between masculine and feminine. Several versions and modes of presentation of this subject appear in his production. In fact, one of his watercolors, undated, is entitled *Andrógino*. The composition was made half man, half woman, but *Eva* is a more enigmatic work. Although the biblical theme is quite common, Nery's interpretation is curious, as the figure next to *Eva* does not have her sexuality well defined. She also gives *Eva* a sideways look and appears from behind, in the shadows. The figure behind may be the artist himself. So what spirit subtracts the other from sin?

The representation of himself is constant throughout Nery's production, especially with his wife Adalgisa. This more personal side of

his work surprises viewers, as it raises many questions, including his sexuality. The wife herself would have burned part of her last drawings for finding them too erotic. This is what Paulo Geyerhahn tells us:

According to cardiologist Ivan Gonçalves Maia, a doctor who is a friend of Adalgisa Nery, the artist's wife considered some of his latest drawings too erotic. She incinerated them. We therefore fail to know Ismael's erotic phase. (Geyerhahn, 2009:52).

From this speech by Geyerhahn, we can see how much of the artist's production must have been lost. The illness prevented him from continuing to dedicate himself to painting, hence the large number of drawings produced. However, he made them and disposed of them straight to the trash. A good part of it was saved by friends, mainly by Murilo Mendes, who agreed with the nurses at the sanatorium, where the artist was hospitalized, to collect the drawings.

Another phase of Nery's production was between 1924 and 1927, also called Cubist. The way in which this influence works is quite unique, as it has nothing doctrinaire about it. First, we can see, in his works, the abandonment of the hierarchy between figure and background. In the painting, from 1926, *Superimposed figures*, verifica-se também os tons rebaixados e não há nenhum apelo decorativo. The composition is structured from the geometrization, however it is verified that the fragmentation of the figure does not operate. In the work *Nu Cubista*, the influence is evidenced even by the title of the work. Another important feature of this painting is its construction based on the juxtaposition and overlapping of different angles of view of the figure.



Figure 2: Ismael Nery, Self-portrait, 1927. Oil on canvas. 129x84cm. Private Collection. Source: Duarte, Paulo Sérgio (2018) Ismael Nery: female and male São Paulo: Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo. ISBN: 978-85-86871-90-0: 92

It is mainly from this plastic production with a more cubist bias that Ismael Nery also starts to show, in his poetics, his essentialist philosophical guideline. It is a true philosophy of life, created by him and later named by the poet and friend Murilo Mendes. Nery did not actually write this philosophy, but his main concepts were presented and debated in conversation circles, with intellectuals and friends who frequented his environment.

Essentialism is based on the idea of abstraction of time and space aiming at the absolute. Researcher Maria Bernardete Ramos Flores, in one of her texts on the artistic production of Ismael Nery, draws attention to the following subjects present in

this philosophy: “the transcendence of man, the unity between masculine and feminine, integration between sexuality and spirituality, dynamism of life (When you are born, you immediately leave for death).” (2008:42). These highlights highlighted by Flores are interesting, as they are consistent with several characteristics that can be observed in the artist’s plastic production. In any case, we must consider that all the imagery produced in the artist’s expressionist period was already leading to these points, just remember, mainly, our analysis of the work *Eva*, notably the question between masculine and feminine and the duality between good and evil.

We can better explain the issue of Essentialism based on the 1927 work *Self-Portrait* (Figure 2). There, we have the figure of the artist himself, who is located between two important cities for him. Paris and Rio de Janeiro were two important places in life and in its cultural development. On one side we have the Sugar Loaf and the calm of the city in a more colorful tone and on the opposite side the Eiffel Tower and the gray of the bustling Paris. Perhaps, the meaning of the work is precisely the synthesis of the artist’s life experience, based on the realization of this abstraction of time and space, aiming at this essential unit, integrated into life. In this work, he presents himself simultaneously in two places and this is how the essentialist positions himself, he positions himself centrally in his life to account for the experiences he has lived and judge them in an absolute way. About the essentialist method Brandão tells us:

The phenomena and objects of the universe exist at a given point in space and moment in time. The essentialist abstraction removes them from these limitations, placing the different moments of their history and their relationships in space on the same plane. (Brandão, 2009: 40).

Two heads can also be seen in this *Self-Portrait*, one female and the other male,

probably the one on the right is that of Adalgisa and the other possibly that of the artist himself. This constant reference to the unity between the couple can perhaps be thought of based on the idea of unity between sexuality and spirit. At issue is also the beauty of Adalgisa and herself, as one perceives the narcissism of the artist in all of his art. About narcissism in Nery’s production, Duarte tells us: “Ismael Nery’s exercise of narcissism is extensive...” (2018: 15). In the same text the author clarifies:

The portraits of Ismael Nery prove that he invested a lot abroad. He wasn’t in a pathological state, but cultivated his beauty and that of his wife in an almost atavistic way, as if it were in his chromosomes. (Duarte, 2018: 15).

In this work by Nery, *Self-portrait*, one can already see it, notably in the way he paints the sky, as it bears a resemblance to his series entitled *Chagalliana*, an approximation to Chagall’s work. On a trip to Europe, in 1927, Nery met Chagall and Breton. This explains the approximation to surrealism. Initially, the most striking influence is from Chagall himself. In watercolors and gouaches, Nery’s production is surrounded by a clear lyricism. But, mainly from 1929 onwards, a change can be seen in his work. In *Surrealist Composition*, from 1929, the title itself already confirms his involvement with the movement. It is interesting to see that his work becomes more organic and parts, fragments appear from the body. On this canvas, a female head appears surrounded by roots and plants. In fact, sense cannot be expressed by a purely rational logic.

The first signs of tuberculosis appear for Ismael in 1930, and that is when soul and body become a fundamental issue in his work. Nery’s works become more visceral, as in the work *Inner vision-agony*, of 1931 (Figura 3). The body in its physicality seems to be put to the test, veins and internal organs are exposed. Finally, the artist seems to ask if what is inside

is what governs life and guides the soul.



Figure 3: Ismael Nery, Internal Vision-Agony, 1931. Oil on card. 71x48cm. Private Collection – SP. Source: own.

erase the records of his plastic production, it did not actually function in a secondary way in the constitution of his poetics. In short, doing and thinking seem to form a unity in Ismael Nery's art.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Nery's artistic production was indeed quite interesting. He received several influences, from expressionism, art deco, cubism and surrealism, but he worked with them in a productive way and, therefore, knew how to conduct his art by constituting a unique poetics. The strength of his essentialist philosophy is undeniable in this production as a whole, especially in its last stages. But we also saw that the imagery he produced throughout his expressionist phase already constituted, in a certain way, the basis of his essentialist conceptualization. Therefore, perhaps we must draw attention to his plastic production as a means of substantiating his philosophical thought. Although the artist himself tried to

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