



Maria Auxiliadora
10/14/22 – 11/11/22

The Afro-Brazilian figures in Maria Auxiliadora's paintings, especially women, appear as protagonists. The importance of Auxiliadora's work to the history of Brazilian art cannot be overstated, however the widespread appreciation of her legacy remains long overdue. Beyond conversations within the Brazilian context, Maria Auxiliadora's body of work speaks to the richness of art production of the Black Atlantic. The narratives and aesthetics of her paintings constitute points in a constellation of Afro-diasporic artists whose art has been whitewashed or silenced by much of art history.

The exhibition of Maria Auxiliadora's works at Mendes Wood DM shows the contemporary reach of an ongoing historical movement led by Afro-Brazilian artists and thinkers to amend systemic erasure. The works exhibited range from 1970 to 1974, the year Maria Auxiliadora, aged 39, passed away from an aggressive cancer. This group of works represents the diversity of subject matters Maria Auxiliadora covered during her career. A painter of Black people's everyday lives, the black figures in Maria Auxiliadora's works at Mendes Wood DM appear worshipping in *terreiros*, snuggling in parks, partying in bars and restaurants, dancing samba, and tending the land.

Early writing on Maria Auxiliadora's work, such as in Pietro Maria Bardi's monograph, emphasized her depictions of Candomblé, an Afro-Brazilian religion, or explored the fact that she was a self-taught artist, categorized as a naive painter. Authors have recently sought to redress writing gaps by considering Black protagonism in her works. Writers such as Renatta Bittencourt have discussed how Maria Auxiliadora organizes her paintings as narratives. Indeed, her artworks ask viewers to look carefully and imagine conversations that could unfold between characters, all ornamented with rich visuals.

In *Untitled/Sem título* (1974), Maria Auxiliadora painted a black woman at the center of the canvas, framed by two black men to her left and right. All three figures sit or stand on tree stumps juxtaposed with a colorful flower crop field that resembles gorgeously stitched embroidery. Maria Auxiliadora organized the crops—groupings of three or four flowers and leaves—in symmetrical rows painted over a background of vibrant yellows and orange tones. The two men rest their feet on the stumps while hoes rest near their bodies, perhaps to demonstrate the men's work on the field. The woman sits comfortably on the stump, embracing a bouquet of many white flowers in one of her arms. All figures have their mouths open; the man on the left has his eyes closed as if singing. The woman, too, appears to be speaking or singing; she has her fixed eyes on the man singing, while the man to her right looks at her, suggesting a love triangle. Like in many of her paintings, Maria Auxiliadora adorned her black protagonists with highly detailed bodily features and embroidered clothing, a signature of her work.

The storytelling that structures Maria Auxiliadora's paintings represents oral traditions in Brazil, with their popular and Black roots: narratives, singing, chatter, gossip, and whispers are vividly present in her works. In some of them, such as *Untitled/Sem Título* (1970), Maria Auxiliadora included speech bubbles—in a pop art style—with phrases placed above specific figures to indicate dialogue. This representation of everyday life, and Black everyday life in Brazil, is reinforced by the meticulous depictions of clothing and bodies that

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Maria Auxiliadora achieved by applying skills often undermined by hegemonic art historical narratives. For instance, her unique technique of painted resin allowed Maria Auxiliadora to create volumes that lift off her paintings. She also transposed embroidery and sewing skills into the works so as to endow her protagonists with various popular fashion styles. The freedom to introduce techniques linked to manual labor or contemporary pop art points toward a consciousness of the time and moment she was making art. Moreover, the portraits of Maria Auxiliadora show that she not only fashioned her protagonists with different styles, but was also a fashionista, passionate about the fashion culture of her time and inspired by her mother. The latter encouraged Maria Auxiliadora to be a seamstress and an artist.

Maria Auxiliadora was not working in seclusion; she was a protagonist in a vibrant Afro-Brazilian intellectual and arts scene. She was the oldest daughter in a family of artists, guided by Maria Almeida, their matriarch and mentor. Many of Maria Auxiliadora's siblings also had a strong aptitude for arts and crafts. In the 1950s, her older brother, Vicente de Paula, married artist Raquel Trindade, daughter of Solano Trindade, an important figure for 20th-century Black activism in Brazil. Raquel convinced the da Silvas to move from the capital to Embu, a then small São Paulo town still famous for its arts and crafts communities. In Embu, the da Silvas joined the Trindades and other intellectuals and artists, to aid in building an Afro-Brazilian artistic community for a couple of years.

Yet, few writers have discussed the significant number of representations Maria Auxiliadora created of the countryside. In that regard, we were amazed by Mendes Wood DM's remarkable collection of her rural scenes, which, like most of her works, are characterized by their multiple narratives, full of poetic possibilities. In *Colheita* (1973), Maria Auxiliadora painted a group of five Black people in a field of red flowers. There are two scenes in the painting. In one of them, a man is tilling the land, his lips wide open and his eyes closed as if singing. Another man seated in a squatting position looks at him, thinking or waiting. In the second scene, a woman holds a girl's hand while talking to a man: What are they talking about? Is this a couple's quarrel? Or is this woman asking for help? The movement of the bodies, the patched clothes, the embroidery: every detail is about the lives of these characters.

Maria Auxiliadora's meticulousness suggests a multiplicity of Black subjectivities. If these rural scenes' main themes seem to be the fieldwork, the characters in these paintings are not reduced to their role as rural workers. In *Untitled/Sem título* (1973), a man lies down smoking while a group of women around him collect flowers. In *Untitled/Sem título* (1972), the artist painted a seated man who collected some leaves. He sings while the rest of the group works in what seems to be a coffee plantation. In other paintings, children run around, playing or eating oranges, as in another work titled *Untitled/Sem título* (1972).

Despite the colorfulness of the paintings, the singing, and the conversations in the works, Maria Auxiliadora's rural scenes are not nostalgic. The fields are worked: crops of cotton, sugar, coffee, oranges, or flowers. The fields produce, and to do so, they need bodies. Thus, we see the women and men bending over with tools for planting and harvesting. In *Untitled* (1972), Maria Auxiliadora painted a cane field. She

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depicted different moments of the harvesting: the cutting of the sugar cane, the piling, and its transportation. The workers' outfits are humble, and most are barefoot.

On the one hand, these representations of rural spaces as working spaces place Maria Auxiliadora in an Afro-diasporic tradition where the working Black body is embedded in the legacies of slavery. The field, as a space of work, the precarity of such work, and the consumption of the body through work are at the core of many contemporary representations of the plantation in Afro-diasporic visual traditions. On the other hand, Maria Auxiliadora's rural scenes become a sort of environmental memory of the Southeastern Brazilian countryside. These paintings suggest a couple of questions: What does it mean to look at Maria Auxiliadora's work in the light of mechanized farmlands of São Paulo or Minas Gerais, where her parents and ancestors lived? What does it mean to look at her practice in light of the interactions between capitalism and environmental racism, or the devastation produced by the agro-business within the territories of Black communities around the Americas?

Maria Auxiliadora's practice is part of an Afro-diasporic visual tradition that considers the quotidian. In doing so, it also unravels the continuity of colonial paradigms which gave birth to the Americas. Practices such as Maria Auxiliadora's unravel the structures of our societies, our relations to labor, the urban space, the rural, and the strategies Brazilians and the peoples of the Americas have developed to survive ongoing inequalities. The richness of her poetics gives us the possibility of asking questions, and by asking them, they open us up to imagining other futures. Viewers are given a task when looking at Maria Auxiliadora's works: to accept her invitation to engage in myriad, unending conversations.

– Nohora Arrieta Fernández and Tatiane Schilaro Santa Rosa

Maria Auxiliadora da Silva was born in 1935, in Campo Belo, Minas Gerais, Brazil and passed away in 1974 in São Paulo, Brazil. Her paintings are included in the public collections of: Museum of Contemporary Art, Sofia, Bulgaria; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Spain; Museu do Embú, São Paulo, Brazil; Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Brazil; Museum of Contemporary Art, São José do Rio Preto, São Paulo, Brazil; "Museu do Sol", São Paulo, Brazil; Laval Museum, France; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA, USA; Musée d'Art Naïf de l'Île de France, Paris, France; Museum Rade, Hamburg, Germany.

Her recent solo exhibitions include: Mendes Wood DM, New York (2022); Galeria Estação, São Paulo (2021) and Museu de Arte de São Paulo, São Paulo (2018). Her work has also been included in recent group exhibitions at: Museu de Arte de São Paulo, São Paulo (2022); Galeria Base, São Paulo (2021); Galeria Estação, São Paulo (2020); Fundação Juan March, Madrid, Spain (2018); Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA, USA (2014); among others.

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