

Quebrada:
the clear enigma of Alexandre da Cunha

Quebrada (2023) is a coherent part of what Alexandre da Cunha (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1969) has been gestating as art: a permanent practice of capturing the eye at an initial moment, and an exercise in seduction regarding those accessing it. At a single moment, the work, because of its scale and presence as a sculptural body, causes us to activate other senses and asks us to move, in a process of spatial recognition. Yet we are immediately betrayed by our eyes, which are already trained and accustomed to the intended proper place for objects, both in their use and their presence.

Just look at what is happening in the auroras patio space: awnings attached and profiled at the edges of a pool that is partially sealing the perception of depth, protecting to no effect an originally wet area from the water and creating there, in this new context, a new compositional space. Not without a bit of humor, the artistic gesture does indeed end up proposing an enigma to us. An enigma defined as art. Or better yet, a *clear enigma* where a contradiction has been underscored.

I am borrowing this expression from the now historical literary work by Carlos Drummond de Andrade, *Claro Enigma* [Clear Enigma] (1951), a book of 41 poems that redefined the trajectory of one of the greatest Brazilian poets. This book contains, for instance, “A máquina do mundo” [The machinery of the world], a fundamental poem. Interestingly, this was the book where Drummond would resume his preoccupation with form, with an awareness to meter and rhyme. In a certain sense, this appreciation for form is a key element in the work of Alexandre da Cunha. Despite the triviality of the mass-produced industrial objects, their combination and the formal neatness of their compositions, care for the compositional operation is placed at the center of the artist's investigation, a sort of search to reveal some unfounded mystery that only art could keep. This work therefore contains the strict sculptural thinking of a tradition that is historically part of the artist's work, without, nevertheless, losing the present day from sight.

As part of Da Cunha's process, the objects of and in the world - in this case, the awnings that were once storefronts - are dislocated from the architecturally useful and urban system of which they were a part. They are thus transferred to another context and given new meaning through the arrangement they now make, based on art's integrative gesture. In the abundance of industrial capitalism, whether collected from urban and/or construction garbage, whether buying materials, tools and parts in the most varied stores and garages, he seeks out objects that can intuitively comprise and formulate what he calls art. In this prospecting, the artist also first creates mental, photographic and physical files on these objects and forms that he finds. The selection of awnings even emerged from this everyday exercise of unpretentious photography. Next, they are consciously grouped through work.

All that is needed to understand this artistic process is to look at the sculpture resting in the auroras library as an example. It is the second unique intervention in this context of an exhibition. As he has usually done in recent productions, he composes a piece with concrete rings, links, and prefab items used in major infrastructure works by cities and that are normally not seen, because they serve as

service pipes in the city's equipment and buildings. The work *Alliance V* (2022) is therefore similar to a series of works designed as *Public Sculptures*, always with some sign/term placed in parentheses in the title and that contrasts with the condition of the concrete ring. The sculpture installed in the house is built using two concrete links, one larger and the other smaller, as well as an even smaller ring of polished tin. Placed upright and diagonally, the three elements (in order of size) define a ringed integration where the circles are tangents and are inscribed one upon the other. Their monolithic and balanced presence creates a type of aura around them, which captures the attention of visitors to the library. If the eye had been drawn by the sides of the bookshelves, it is now seduced by the centrally and diagonally placed sculpture.

This transitory nature that Alexandre da Cunha's art promotes, by dislocating constructive elements in relation to their function, use and recognized meanings, is therefore surely the representation of the concept of art espoused by Robert Morris (1931-2018), one of the major American artists of the late twentieth century, who used to say: "everything that is used as art should be defined as art." In other words, Duchamp's dislocation of an industrial object in 1910 was considered a vital operation in the field of art, leading artists to intervene and make use of industrial production lines to build objects. Unlike the minimalists, a group that Morris was part of, the Brazilian artist does not just designate a new identification with his dislocations and appropriations of ordinary artifacts; he also performs and operation that is, above all, semantic, at the level of language. He makes shrewd use of what the barter market system, obsolescence and disposability has to offer him.

For this reason, based on the artist's transitory action, where meanings and signs are tangled, a series of questions open up to the spectator-visitor. The unaware may hastily ask: what are awnings doing attached to a pool? It is as if they found a supposed loss of value in the use of the objects, now presented in another context. So are objects only relevant if they have some sort of material value for use? Others, however, may ask: but were these awnings collected or were they made for this installation? To better understand, it is fundamental to move closer to find clues that will give us some semantic value in this representation. Further on, we may also ask: is there any direct relation with what we see in the city, in our immediate reality? The sense of enigma that the work holds is therefore amplified while a sort of narrowing of this art is built with the living space that surrounds us.

Alexandre da Cunha has lived and worked in London (United Kingdom) for over two decades, but he frequently works with an attentive eye to the Brazilian context. The artist is always passing through São Paulo, bringing a visual and constructive repertory of these two cities in permanent cycles of construction and destruction, stopping and restarting. Knowing this, paying attention to the name of the installation is important.

Quebrada is a word rich in meaning in the day-to-day language of Brazil. While there is an implied verbal action, as derived from the verb "*quebrar*" [to break] - its nominal participle, there is also its use as a noun to indicate a small property, a service space, a small group of houses, a market in a public square. At the same time, it could also be a kind of hillside, slope, inclined plane, something that alludes to the nature of an awning. Moreover, the broader meaning immediately recalls a specific condition in the urban environment: in São Paulo and in the other major cities of Brazil, *quebrada* is a far-flung place, usually on the outskirts, which has a neighborly feel. In addition, it can be a space for negotiation where there is less government control, with space for resistance by disadvantaged

populations. It is similar to the idea of a ghetto, a place not only of identification, but of survival as well.

From this rapid derivation of signs that we have seen, a dislocation can be made in meaning toward the value that the artist has given the installation. Name and work gain an intrinsic combination. The signifier and the signified are tangled together, which starts with the appropriation and disarticulation of an inclined functional object that provides protection from sunlight and drains away rainwater and which, when installed, creates a shady space, a transitory place between public and private, and vice versa. The very presence of a group of awnings, turned toward an interior space, provides of sense of a group, a condensation of spaces, but now without their architectural and functional utility playing the leading role. The very repetition of form, side by side or transversally, designates a specific place.

Alexandre da Cunha even outlines a parallel with the idea of *impluvium*: a Latin word used to identify an architectural device used to centrally collect rainwater in enclosed spaces and internal patios since the immemorial architecture of Greco-Roman times. Ironically, the cycle of signs (meanings and signifiers) made possible by the work returns to the start, to the simple awning, an object with the same functionality that is acquired and adapted to the parapets of the homogenous architecture of large cities. Once again, the *clear enigma* is provided, a permanent exercise in contradiction of the senses in the artwork.

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The work of Alexandre da Cunha raises other equally relevant questions: the stress on the physical and formal property of the different synthetic materials that make them up and, as a consequence, the protagonism of the colors impregnated in them. The forms provided by the color are therefore hubs of visual attraction. The canvas of each awning selected has vivid and strong colors, whether it is a single color or in two-tone and three-tone compositions, in addition, obviously, to the weathering they show. The arrangement in the pool, suggesting a presence that is analogous to the impluvium, considers the rhythmic composition of bands of color, with warm and vibrant colors standing out.

The observer who had before, from the street, looked upward from below, upon identifying the place by the lettering stickered or painted onto the awning, is looking downward from above at auroras. One must even travel around the entire rectangular space of the pool to identify tiny remnants of their original lettering. The front flap of the awning, which is generally the first identifying element, becomes secondary and residual information in the work. When going around the garden through the back side of the pool, for example, we see the text “Bar e Lanches Escritório.” Once again, there is an approximation with the ambiguity of the *clear enigma*, a factor that seems decisive to me in the artist’s poetic production.

The strength of color as form gains even more prominence when we reach the third work shown by the artist in the exhibit: a two-dimensional structure called *Quebrada I* (2023). Literally a sawed-off part of an awning that was later flattened, it is installed in one of the house’s upstairs rooms, in dialog in terms of scale with the window in this area. As is the habit in Modernist homes, the more private

rooms are spaced in a specific section of the building, usually on the top floor. This is what we find in this house, designed by Gian Carlo Gasperini (1926-2020) in 1957.

The room's window, looking out onto the internal patio, provides a generous top view of the *Quebrada* installation. This strategic placement suggests a visual approximation between the compositions installed at different levels and in different vistas. The two smaller sides of the rectangular room have two openings, a doorway and a window. While the lateral walls are filled with two artworks: in this case, face-to-face contact between the artist's two-dimensional work and one of the expanded paintings of Sarah Crowner, which we discussed earlier.

Consequently, *Blues with red margin* (2022) by Crowner and *Quebrada I* (2023) formulate, in opposition, a dialog of color and form, while at the same time installed with an actual window between them, creating a landscape triptych. In a clockwise direction for those arriving in the room, we see the yellow bordered by the vertical magenta of Da Cunha's work, the horizon bordered by the window pane, and Crowner's blues bordered by red.

Bathed in natural light, both works corroborate the idea that color gains primacy through its form. The clear bands of color on the Alexandre da Cunha's grouped canvases are in contrast and opposition to Sarah Crowner's canvas of blue curves. If the former has a vertical magenta border, the latter has a horizontal red border that jumps out. Moreover, if that fragment of awning highlights the homogenous texture and magenta of the canvas, the blue nuances in the fabric appear in the curvy scraps of the canvas. Color in form - an essential factor of connection and contrast between the artists' works - is the foremost reason for the poetic interweaving found there. This is, after all, refinement of the eye through the colors of art, its materials, and formal arrangements.

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