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SÃO PAULO

Marepe

PINACOTECA DE SÃO PAULO

The Brazilian artist Marepe has been called a regional Surrealist and a Bahian Duchamp. He draws on a range of Surrealist strategies to produce his ready-made-based works, or “*necessaires*,” as he calls them. Dislocation, condensation, repetition, transposition, and puns both visual and linguistic are all part of his process. The thirty-three pieces on view in the large-scale solo exhibition “*Marepe: estranhamente comum*” (Marepe: Oddly Common) included assemblage, sculpture, video, photography, drawing, and painting, but installations predominated, often combining natural materials such as wood and clay with mass-produced plastic, metal, and rubber. While the smaller works were typically fleeting and ludic, the concatenations of wordplay and form in Marepe’s haunting installations rendered the complexities of Brazil’s sociocultural landscape with sly lucidity.

Take, for example, the installation *Periquitos* (Parakeets), 2005. A multicolored acrylic screen, divided into four wide vertical bands of yellow, red, green, and blue, filled the opening in the front wall of a large white booth. Behind it, life-size cutouts—all showing the same black-and-white photograph of a small boy (the artist as a child)—hung suspended from nylon cords and moved slowly up and down, powered by a motor. The screen’s bright colors were festive, as was the carnivalesque red beak on the boy’s face, but the coveralls that he wears in the photograph resemble a work uniform. The figure of the child, reiterated as if he’d been cloned or mass-produced, plus the automated, mechanistic aspect of the installation and the slight grating sound made by the motion of the cords, added a spectral effect, evoking child labor—still an urgent social problem in Brazil—as well as industry per se. The resulting aura was ambivalent: upbeat yet eerie.

Marepe’s work is steeped in Brazilian popular culture and history, with many references particular to his native state of Bahia and to the commercial region known as the Recôncavo Baiano. Although his puns are often linguistic-visual compounds, the artist’s material transpositions alone are enough to create an effect of the uncanny. Underlying Marepe’s practice is what the art historian

Marepe, *Satélite baldio* (Vacant Satellite), 2006–2007, buckets, screws, 118 1/4 × 118 1/4 × 118 1/4".



Susan Laxton in her book *Surrealism at Play* (2019) calls “ludic insubordination”: a sense that “irrationality—the play of meaning—[is] essential to social change.” Marepe reanimates Duchampian gamesmanship by infusing it with folkloric references and socioeconomic urgency. He sees his praxis as inseparable from his environment and is known for such actions as sending a piece of a commercial wall from his hometown, Santo Antônio de Jesus, to the São Paulo Bienal in 2012.

“All my work is about poverty,” Marepe has said. His primary strategy in taking on social issues is irony. This approach is inherent in works such as *Satélite baldio* (Vacant Satellite), 2006–2007, a nearly ten-foot-high sphere formed of empty plastic buckets whose colors—yellow, blue, and green—are those of the Brazilian flag. A humble, ubiquitous domestic object has been transposed into the galactic realm, turned into the stuff of science fiction. But the buckets are empty, and the title hints at inutility and failure. Marepe plays on the double meaning of the word *satélite*, which also refers to the satellite towns that spring up around big cities, some of which, such as those around Brasília, are the result of failed urban policies that push vulnerable populations out to resource-starved peripheries. *Satélite baldio* refers not only to an interplanetary ambition gone bust but also to the hope for a more humble form of social mobility. It is a poignant joke on the fragility of the Brazilian dream.

—Ela Bittencourt