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Di Liscia, Valentina: Ernesto Neto Stimulates Bodies and Minds at MALBA

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Visitors inside Ernesto Neto's "Nave voadora " (1999) at MALBA (photo by Alejandro Guyot, courtesy of MALBA)

In the mid-1990s, Ernesto Neto began using synthetic fiber to build inhabitable environments suspended from the ceiling, such as "Nave voadora" (1999), currently on view in his exhibition *Soplo* at the Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (MALBA). I slipped off my shoes and stepped inside the tunnel-like structure, pressing against its gauzy walls as I walked, deforming its shape with my body, feeling securely embraced by what had looked from the outside to be a rather tenuous support. Other visitors entered after me, their initial trepidation similarly giving in to impish delight. Although no sign or guard had asked us to do so, I noticed those waiting in line were whispering, as if we had all silently agreed to respect each others' slow, intimate passages through this curious membrane.



Installation view of Soplo at MALBA (photo by Pablo Jantus, courtesy of MALBA)

In this retrospective of the famed Brazilian artist, originally co-curated by Valeria Piccoli and Jochen Volz for the Pinacoteca de São Paulo and comprising works from the 1980s through the present, the freedom to play does not preclude serious contemplation. Insofar as the experience of visual art generally requires looking, Neto's practice also asks that we feel, touch, and roam, melding the pleasures of sight to the sensuality of material.

Before studying sculpture at the Escola de Artes Visuais do Parque Lage in Rio de Janeiro, Neto had trained as a ceramicist. But sifting through the street markets in the Saara District near his studio led to the discovery of what would become his idiosyncratic medium: the sheer nylon stocking. Neto stretches these humble garments into slinky ropes that drip from the ceiling like stalagmites in a cave, or fills them with cloves, lead, and sand to form dense bundles that counterweight his magnificent aerial sculptures.



Ernesto Neto, "Copulônia" (1989/2009), polyamide and lead spheres, 157.48 x 317 x 346.5 inches
(photo by Pablo Jantus, courtesy of MALBA)

The formal elements Neto values above all others — balance, transparency, elasticity, biomorph — were already present in "Copulônia" (1989/2009), a quintessential early work that foreshadowed later experiments and anchors the rest of the exhibition. Unlike other sculptural environments by the artist, this one is only to be seen, not felt. Each tubular sculpture is constructed of two individual polyamide stockings pulled taut from floor to ceiling and jointed by a node of lead spheres, their sinewy hourglass shape reminiscent of Ruth Asawa's lobed mobiles.



Installation view of Soplo at MALBA (photo by Pablo Jantus, courtesy of MALBA)

Neto's extraordinary transformations of ordinary textiles inspire awe. This is not to say that there isn't a conceptual rigor to his work — the sculptures, photographs, and installations on view speak to our shared and individual experiences of space; to collectivity and community; ritual and healing — but Neto's material resourcefulness strikes us first, perhaps because it stimulates such intrinsically human desires: to be swaddled and held. Toward the end of the 2010s Neto introduced crochet into his practice. In contrast to the earlier nylon environment "Nave voadora," the crochet medium facilitated his construction of sturdier structures that contain our bodies rather than collapse under them, such as his massive crocheted hammocks "Velejando entre nós" (2012 -13) also on view at MALBA.

This final gallery also highlights works Neto produced in his ongoing collaborations with spiritual leaders of the Huni Kuin nations, the largest indigenous population in the Brazilian state of Acre, from whom he has gleaned a holistic vision of nature, spirituality, and the self. "O Sagrado é Amor" (2017) is a tree-like structure whose crocheted branches, suspended from its trunk in teardrop shapes evocative of his polyamide sculptures, are filled with bundles of clove, bay leaves, and therapeutic crystals. Visitors are invited to sit together on a circular bench in order to restore their energy and reconnect with the sacred, which Neto wants us to understand "in a universal rather than a religious sense," according to a wall text.

Perhaps this was outside the scope of a wide-ranging survey show, but more specific context related to Neto's work with the Huni Kuin, beyond the sparse wall texts, could have deepened my experiences with these pieces. (In 2015, Neto mounted an entire exhibition conceived with Huni Kuin artists and *pajés* (shamans) at Kunsthalle Krems and

TBA21-Augarten.)



Installation view of Ernesto Neto, "O Sagrado é Amor" (2017) at MALBA (photo by Alejandro Guyot, courtesy of MALBA)

Despite its insistence on the interactive potential of art, *Soplo* does not paint a picture of Neto's oeuvre as whimsical or lighthearted. In a series of self-portraits from 1994 titled "M.E.D.I.T. Metamorfose espiritual do inconsciente topológico," the artist sequentially winds a piece of string around his head, creating a tightly spun web across his face and distorting his features into foreign patches of pillowy skin. It's striking how much these photographs activate other readings of the surrounding sculptures, distilling sensations of discomfort and entrapment.



Ernesto Neto, "M.E.D.I.T. Metamorphose espiritual do inconsciente topológico" (1994), seven black and white photographs, 25.6 x 21.6 inches each (courtesy of MALBA)

In English, the word "ludic" is not one we hear very often. In contrast, *lúdico* is fairly common in both Spanish and Portuguese, and appears frequently in writing about Neto's work. The Latin root *ludere* is chameleonic: it has given us "ludicrous," "allude," and "illusion," and an entry in Joan Coromina's etymological dictionary even cites a sultry acceptance of the Spanish verb *ludir*, "to romp amorously." Its many forms and

evolutions echo the infinities of play contained in Neto's work, from the tactile joy of brushing our bare skin against fabric to the discovery of new architecture that yields to our touch.

Soplo continues at the Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (Av. Figueroa Alcorta 3415, Buenos Aires) through February 16.