

RIO DE JANEIRO

Abraham Palatnik

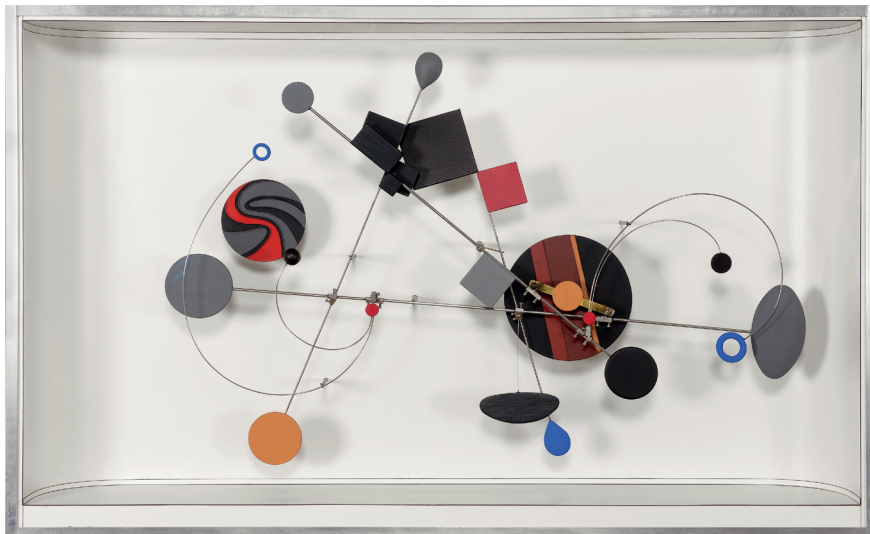
CENTRO CULTURAL BANCO DO BRASIL

Eighteen years have passed since octogenarian Abraham Palatnik's last retrospective. In the meantime, the burgeoning historiography of mid-century Brazilian geometric and constructive abstraction has left his role relatively unexamined. Indeed, as Palatnik himself recognizes, his interest in kineticism distanced him from the debates that raged around Concretism and Neo-Concretism throughout the 1950s and ultimately defined the critical reception of the art of the period. Curated by Felipe Scovino and Pieter Tjabbes, the eighty-six works in "*Abraham Palatnik— a reinvenção da pintura*" (Abraham Palatnik: The Reinvention of Painting) offered a concise but meaningful contribution to the important task of further fleshing out Palatnik's historical significance—an effort begun in the exhibition's richly illustrated catalogue with new essays by Scovino and art historian Michael Asbury.

In the opening room, viewers were introduced to Palatnik's trajectory and to an array of works produced in the 1940s, mostly during the period the artist studied in Tel Aviv (1943–47). One portrait, painted in gouache, exemplified the consolidation of Palatnik's palette, as the naturalism of the beginning of the Tel Aviv period morphs into an expressionist juxtaposition of complementaries, with the work's orange and green duality heightening the subject's moody expression. This same palette recurs both in the trademark kinetic works he started devising in 1949 and in later abstract paintings he composed by alternating very slender, vertical wooden slats. In these works, the organic patterns of both the wood veins and the fluid layers of paint coating the matrixes are submitted to a rhythmic, positive/negative progression. After initial experiences with sawn wood, Palatnik subsequently applied this same technique to other materials, including metal, cardboard, and laser-cut acrylic.

The exhibition also highlighted Palatnik's experience in the Pedro II Psychiatric Hospital, in the Rio de Janeiro suburb of Engenho de Dentro, where he joined fellow artists Almir Mavignier and Ivan Serpa in leading a painting workshop that, surprisingly, became one of the birthplaces of geometric abstraction in Brazil in the late 1940s. The inclusion of works by patients Emygdio de Barros and Raphael Domingues is helpful: The latter's drawings and Palatnik's "*Objetos Cinéticos*" (Kinetic Objects), 1964–, share a special interest in the line, which suggests forms while never allowing them to coalesce completely. In the

Abraham Palatnik,
Objeto Cinético KK - 9°
(Kinetic Object
KK - 9°), 1966/2009,
wood, Formica,
steel, motor, 24 ×
38½ × 6½". From the
series "*Objetos*
Cinéticos" (Kinetic
Objects), 1964–.



"*Objetos Cinéticos*" series, of course, automated movement is crucial: The work's animation constantly shifts the linear arrangement and moves colored discs around against the backdrop of square or triangular bases that conceal the mechanism. In wall-mounted works, in particular, such underpinnings operate as surrogates of the frame common around whose limits the wire lines and painted discs keep testing. It is easy to understand why Palatnik would draw the attention of critic Mário Pedrosa, a champion of Alexander Calder's works in Brazil. Pedrosa reportedly presented Palatnik with a book by mathematician Norbert Wiener that became instrumental to Palatnik's turn to kineticism. More important, Palatnik's recurrent use of motion as a means of probing formal emergence and dissolution resonates with Pedrosa's work on Gestalt theory, developed amid constant visits of the critic to the workshop at the hospital.

Conservation concerns meant that the "*Objetos Cinéticos*" and "*Aparelhos Cinecromáticos*" (Kinechromatic Devices), 1949–83, could operate only for limited periods of time; unfortunately, this unplanned inertness neutralizes their dynamic formal dialectic. And the decision to exhibit the "*Aparelhos Cinecromáticos*" brings up the thorny problem of replacing the original colored bulbs with newer ones while preserving their original chromatic relations—indeed, Palatnik himself only rarely authorizes such replacements. An explicit discussion of such issues would have added a layer of critical interest to the exhibition. Still, the inclusion of Palatnik's furniture designs and of the "*Objetos Lúdicos*" (Playful Objects), 1959–2005, created as toys for the artist's children, highlighted his inventive take on the relation between fine and applied arts that fascinated the artists of his generation. Here, as elsewhere, Palatnik's unique viewpoint on a pervasive concern remains remarkable.

—Sérgio B. Martins

NEW DELHI

"Evidence Room"

KHOJ INTERNATIONAL ARTISTS' ASSOCIATION

Over the past decade, timely art festivals such as "48°C Public.Art. Ecology" (2008) and the "Yamuna-Elbe Project" (2011) have highlighted some of New Delhi's most pressing environmental issues, including rising temperatures, toxic water supplies, and a growing population. Among these initiatives, nonprofit organization Khoj International Artists' Association stands out for its consistent and long-term approach to public-art, community-oriented, and ecology-based programs in India. One such program, "Negotiating Routes: Ecologies of the Byways" (2010–14), combined these three interest areas and supported nineteen projects in remote regions across the country to produce an alternative mapping of the nation's development, one inclusive of local ecologies, mythologies, and epistemologies. Back in its institutional space in Khirkee, one of the capital's urban villages, Khoj's exhibition "Evidence Room" represented twelve of these nineteen projects in the form of archival documents and installation artworks. The audience was asked to consider whether these works could be positioned as evidence or testimony, and if so, the ways in which they contributed to specific truths or wider observations made by witnesses and collaborators.

A strong example of artist-as-advocate was Sunandita Mehrotra, with her project *Revisiting the Chipko Andolan*, 2013/2017, a retelling of her enriching time in the village of Rampur in Uttarakhand in 2013 with Sushesha Devi, one of the leaders of the Chipko movement of the 1970s. In the form of an accessible, takeaway pamphlet, Mehrotra's black-and-white drawings shed light on a subnarrative: Though the movement was centered on the conservation of forests, it was also



Priya Ravish Mehra, *Making the Invisible Visible* (detail), 2012/2017, wood, darned textiles, sound. Installation view. From "Evidence Room."

heavily interconnected with women's empowerment. In Devi's case, having fought back against societal norms and domestic violence, she successfully blocked contractors from cutting down trees by organizing women to shield them with their bodies. Mehrotra's project acknowledged such women, who, she says, have not been given their due but continue to influence the fields of ecological activism, farming, and education.

Similarly bringing recognition to an overlooked community, in this case the *rafoogars* (darners) of Najibabad in Uttar Pradesh, was Priya Ravish Mehra's *Making the Invisible Visible*, 2012/2017. Though Mehra cites the Mughal roots of the historical practice of *rafoogari* (the complex craft of repairing or restoring old or antique textiles), the *rafoogars* have remained out of sight, and so, as she says, out of mind. Her restaged 2012 project included framed fragments of cloth

visibly darned together to depict maps of the economically impoverished town of Najibabad with the *rafoogars*' signatures on them, showing the validity, agency, and pride of this socially undervalued community.

The exhibition made it clear that through the study of various environments, projects such as Mehrotra's and Mehra's are ultimately enmeshed in people and their indigenous knowledge systems. Often in danger of being erased, forgotten, or simply dismissed in the name of progress (and thanks to urban migration), these histories of cyclical microeconomies and traditionally regenerative cultures still hold contemporary relevance. Rooted in sustainable, and in many cases ongoing, projects, the works and documents shown here registered as evidence of both truths and gaps in the record. In that respect, it was important to bring such public and rural interventions back into an institutional and urban space, reminding the metropolitan public that those unseen or unheard in India's growth story are often the ones most in need of ethical representation and social justice.

—Jyoti Dhar

MELBOURNE

Patricia Piccinini

TOLARNO GALLERIES

Two decades ago, model making commanded considerable attention in the art world. Patricia Piccinini, along with Ron Mueck, Ricky Swallow, Sam Durant, and many others, went further than just making to-scale, postmodern simulacra of consumer objects and cardboard boxes. Each of them constructed labor-intensive, trompe l'oeil models of scenes or characters from imaginary worlds in place of the archiving and documenting that in other artists' hands became the more familiar hallmark of contemporary art. Their painfully perfect works, marked by a spectacular degree of skill and effort, teetered on the edge of uncanny sentimentality.

Still today, Piccinini's art is distinguished by her production of monstrous folds of alien flesh and soft carapaces, embodying imaginary evolutionary leaps and bizarre mutations in fiberglass and silicone. Her

recent exhibition "No fear unmingled with hope" featured hyperreal, perfect renditions of not-so-slightly altered young women (or, less frequently, boys) set loose in the gallery like awkwardly vulnerable doppelgängers. Her grotesque creatures also fairly matter-of-factly inhabit a child's or adolescent's dreamworld. In *Teenage Metamorphosis*, 2016, the fleshy object lounging uncomfortably on a beach towel, Kafka paperback moved just out of reach, is male, at least according to the pronouns in the artist's statement that accompanied this exhibition. But the young, not at all sleepy, androgynous mutant is also anxiously positioned for a gendered gaze, recapitulating the pose and mise-en-scène of a Cindy Sherman centerfold.

Not all of Piccinini's works replay the kinds of cinematic psychological tropes that Sherman famously invoked, although almost all feature figures who attend to the viewer's gaze. In *Unfurled*, 2016, a young girl in a simple blue dress perches on a bright-yellow chair, keeping an alert but unruffled eye on the viewer. She has a companion, an equally vigilant and quite marvelous owl balanced on her shoulder. By contrast, *The Naturalist*, 2017, is a nude of indeterminate species and age staring warily sideways. All of these works employ the highly contrived vocabulary of fashion and product photography, brightly lit and seamless, to depict animal-humans that even when free of troubling mutations or furry pelts—the young woman of *Unfurled* looks almost normal—appear to have emerged from a laboratory. Both glossy-haired girl and owl look equally artificial and equally indebted to technology.

Looking at these works, it was often far from clear, even after inspecting the gallery checklist, what had been sculpted and what were found objects grafted into place. Piccinini seemed to be reworking an uncomfortable but carefully calibrated technique of hyperrealism, that still slightly unfashionable late-1960s movement in painting and sculpture that reached an unexpected critical apotheosis alongside now-canonical Conceptualism at Harald Szeemann's Documenta 5 in 1972. But just what is it that makes today's hyperrealism so different, so appealing? The answer may be an almost scandalous ingenuousness that would have been unthinkable back in 1972. In her artist's statement, Piccinini explains that *Unfurled* is "a work that attempts to imagine a different sort of relationship between people and nature; one that is more equitable and with a more shared outlook. It is a work that refuses to acknowledge the impossible naïveté of such optimism." The artist brings her apparent invocation of creepy narratives from science fiction into coincidence with a genuinely felt, premodern anthropomorphism. She puts all of these elements together to reconcile the realms of future and past with utter—and utterly surprising—sincerity.

—Charles Green

Patricia Piccinini, *Teenage Metamorphosis*, 2016, silicone, fiberglass, human hair, found objects, 9 7/8 x 53 7/8 x 29 1/2".

