

max willà morais (1993/ Rio de Janeiro, BR) – profile by bernardo mosqueira

The first time I had contact with max willà morais' work was in the beginning of the year of 2019. Me and Bernardo José de Souza, a Brazilian curator based in Madrid, were developing a research for an exhibition that would take place at Solar dos Abacaxis, an alternative art and education institution that I run in Rio de Janeiro since 2015. Solar was founded by me and other 4 collaborators to host experimental art and to support radical and queer artists. One of Solar's missions is to catalyze the encounter of individuals and collectives who are committed to the invention of new ways of being in the world, healthier, fairer, more beautiful, and pleasant. The moment that de Souza showed me max's portfolio, I knew there was a great artist. The exhibition we did at Solar was called Beleza e Devastação: ou o eterno retorno (Havoc and Allure: or the eternal return, 2019) and it was based on a radical fiction essay written by me and de Souza between 2018 and 2019. According to that narrative, a magical underground water source at Solar, after feeding on the dreams and joys of the visitors of the house, would have exploded and gushed like a whirlwind, spreading traces of the past and the future of that house through the exhibition space. willà took part in this show with two works. The first was a couple of banners from the series Tratados em Ocasão (Treaty on occasion, 2017-2018) created in collaboration with Diable (aka Daniel Santiso). The artists were doing a residency together at Despina, another alternative space in Rio, dedicated to art and activism. For this series, they developed a number of urban interventions that consisted of two black people walking slowly on the pedestrian crossing raising banners with expressions taken from manifestos of 20th century political or artistic vanguards. At Solar, we exhibited the pair OUTRA ESCALA / OUTRA PERSPECTIVA (Another scale / Another perspective, 2018). The second work by max present in the show was a 3-piece sculpture called Constelações (Constellations, 2019) from the series Curvas (Curves, 2015-2020). Those were 3 broken eggshells tied with thin metal lines, creating little fragile and powerful celestial vaults.

max willà morais was born in 1993 in Santíssimo, a relatively precarious and semirural neighborhood, 30 miles from downtown in Rio de Janeiro. She is the first person in her family to get an education degree. She studied Visual Arts in the Rio de Janeiro State University (2016) and is currently a graduate student in the Education School of the Rio de Janeiro Federal University (2021). Both the universities selected her through the national law of social and racial quotas for affirmative actions. It is important to say that in order to acknowledge how powerful this law is as a vector of cultural and social transformation in Brazil. The experience of the huge Brazilian social inequality is necessarily formative to max's work. The use of the eggshells, for

example, started in 2012 when she was studying drawing, could not easily have access to papers and experimented drawing on the eggshells. As it is common in Brazil, her family didn't have financial conditions to regularly buy other sources of animal protein. Because of that, she was able to use the big number of eggshells they discarded daily. This series is called *Curvas* (Curves) from the fact that every line drawn on an eggshell is in fact a curve. At the same time, the curve, as the egg, can be a symbol of the outbreak of a novelty, of derivation, change, etc.

max knows intimately the conditions of being far from normativity. Speaking from her situated knowledge, she was able to develop a complex practice with works that deals with queerness and social issues both subtly and aggressively. Her perspective, her voice, the density of her proposals and the unique formal solutions that she develops make her work absolutely powerful for changing the principles of the elitist art system and for rethinking the structures of the contemporary society in general. An example of this was in 2018, when max did a residency at the Zenkoji Monastery, in Morro da Vargem. Hearing one of the monks saying that they spiritually seek to “find the center, go towards the center, build the center” within themselves, she responded by proposing a conceptual and political procedure for distributing the center (*Distribuir o Centro*, 2019). Coming from a situation in which she didn't have space to work at home to a situation in the monastery in which she had a big furnished bedroom for herself, she decided to clear the room completely and start her experimentations from the empty space. She did several ephemeral objects, little installations, and actions. All we have access to now are the analog photos taken on these days. In one of those images, a cloth is hanging over a door. On the cloth, it is written “*Distribuir o centro*” (Distribute the center). We see the door from inside: having the outside as our destiny. The words are written in a way, that we can find the expressions *CUIR* (queer) and *RUIR* (collapse) in the middle of the full expression. The processes of spreading or distributing are recurrent in max's trajectory: there are others of her works in which she refers to distributing the gold, or the wealth. Whether in the most uncomfortable performances or in the simplest drawings, max's practice is constantly marked by the contestation (negotiating, political) of the edges.

One of the manifestations of her interest on playing with the edges is her investigation about the tongue. In Portuguese, the word for tongue (*língua*) means at the same time tongue and language. When she was studying English for the first time, she noticed that she had developed also other languages (*língua-tongue*) to talk to people with different positionalities and privileges. Since then, she started to experiment different approaches to the tongue in drawing, photos, and performances. In the work *Língua de boi de vaca* (tongue of bull of cow, 2019), she used a cow's tongue in her mouth as a hypertrophied organ. In the residency in the monastery, max did other

two works called *Lingua dourada* (Golden tongue, 2019), and *Língua preta* (Black tongue, 2019). The tongue, as the part of the body responsible for what comes in (as feeding) and for what comes out (as language), can generate powerful images for an investigation about the edges.

The last time I spoke to max, we did a zoom meeting: I was in Red Hook, NY, and she was in the house of her family in Santíssimo, RJ. I was in the 6th week of social distancing; she was in her 4th week. I was inviting her to participate in the project *Para Nossos Vizinhos de Sonhos*, an online initiative by Solar dos Abacaxis, that invited artists to create images, prefigurations of a better world created directly from the isolation during the pandemic. One of the effects of the present covid-19 crisis is revealing the malleability of the power relations and of our ways of living. If a virus managed to radically slow down the voracity of the financial capitalist system, distributing the center is more possible than we previously thought. This is time to create images that bring us together and move us towards another form of living. The work by max is very propitious and powerful in that sense.

May 2020