

A narrative of impermanence

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Josely Carvalho is a devourer of myths. Throughout her thirty year career, she has constructed an important cartography of images, allowing her work to become contaminated by lived experiences from around the world. Throughout this process, the artist has performed a very specific kind of cannibalism, one that is unattached from compromises to or searches for identity, the better to allow the infiltration of myriad paths, embracing the full spectrum of life's great questions in all their generalities and complexities.

A citizen of the world, Josely spent her childhood and adolescence in Brazil, studied architecture in the United States (Washington University, in St. Louis. MO.), taught in Mexico (at the Universidad Nacional de Mexico/UNAM) and then returned to the U.S., where she lives to this day, alternating her life there with increasingly longer sojourns in Brazil.

The artist's work is nourished by personal experience and she deals with the relationship between time and space in a continuous spiral by assimilating images, sounds, memories and smells drawn from her own everyday life and travels and the life (hi)stories of people she has encountered around the world.

Her work is not made only to be seen by the eye. It requires multi-sensorial involvement and its raw material is the dense complexity of memory. In this sense, Carvalho ought not to be considered within the context of either the modernist or concretist traditions of Brazilian art.

Contrary to concrete art (which flourished in Brazil during the first São Paulo art biennials of the 1950s and preached a universalistic, synthetic, geometric form of abstraction, directing us to maturity through the elimination of excess and narrative), from the start Josely Carvalho's work has been woven together from socio-historical accumulations, layers, tones and nuances.

Carvalho studied printmaking with Marcelo Grassman and Darel in São Paulo and with Munakata Shiko in St. Louis, Missouri. Her artistic career began in the United States, during the 1970s, with grassroots community projects that integrated art, politics and sociology. At that moment, the ideal support for creating works was silk-screening, with the breadth and ease of its power of multiplying images. Murals, posters, banners, and flags were created at *The Silkscreen Project* (at the parish of St Marks Church in-the-Bowery, in New York's Lower East Side), where the images were at the service of socio-political commentary. Within this context, the work underlined many of the important issues of the 1970s and 1980s, nuclear disarmament among them. Within that context, Josely participated in the United Nations Mid-Decade

International Women's Conference in Copenhagen and in work with the Catholic base Christian communities of Brazil.

The artist's work takes shape through inclusion. The unmarried, South American mother of a boy uses mediums such as silkscreen, painting and installations to tell not only her own story but the stories of many other women. In Josely Carvalho's powerful work, conceptions of what is public and what is private as well as her own self are transformed into multiple images of women the world over: rape victims, pregnant women, women who have suffered the loss of their loved ones in wars.

North American policy in the Third World, abortion rights, domestic violence against women and children, conflicts between the East and the West that have made terrorism the great post-modern narrative; these are the subjects and frameworks of Josely Carvalho's life-work. The artist is contaminated by the things of this world creating a great web, the threads of which interpenetrate and intercept one another endlessly. Traveling the world and becoming involved with its problems, telling the stories of women, of all beings with their potentialities and hardships, over time Carvalho has transformed her work into a *Diary of Images*.

To be sure, a diary presupposes intimacy and it is in this form, by reducing them to the miniaturized dimension of everyday human existence, that the artist tackles the complex, epic questions of the world. Josely's work always materializes within the play of dimensions, times and spaces.

French thinker Edgar Morin's theory of complexity explains the contemporary world in terms of the ideological replacement of partisan policies by a complex, fragmentary system that produce the proliferation of personal politics; that is, the micro-politics which include a variety of aspects that affect human life, such as environmental policies, the problem of violence, of labor exploitation, and of social and civil inequality. Even before the end of the Cold War being played out as the background to this process, even as it destabilized the apparent organization of the world into bi-partisan policies, Josely Carvalho moved from a discourse against totalitarian North American policies to a gaze and a sensibility directed towards the universe of women, children (*Diary of Images: Cirandas*), indians (the *Xetá*), animals (the symbol of the *tracajá* turtle) and ethnic minorities (the Gulf War, the *Armenian Memorial*). Printmaking, photographs, installations, paintings, videos, the Internet – all the supports used by the artist expand and take form like the subjects and meanings that flow within the spaces of these stories.

During the Gulf War, Josely Carvalho's work began to include images of mourning in which self-portraits of the artist become metonymies of pain. In her *Cirandas*, the artist enumerates the number of victims of violence in Brazil and in the US; this wheel-shaped installation includes phrases and poems written by the children themselves. In the *Armenian Memorial*, constructed for the subway station of the same name in São Paulo, she used glass and ceramics to render a deeply affecting poetic tribute to the Armenian massacre of 1915

Josely Carvalho's *Diary of Images* is constructed from an intimacy with the body itself. Her artist's body is a pulsating one whose skin and pores absorb sensations from the world. One slowly realizes that this diary is the body itself and that the body is a shelter – the first shelter.

An artist and a woman who is always moving from one place to another sees no shelter in the idea of a homeland. Her country is her body, which she carries with her as she embraces life, in the manner of the endangered *tracajá* turtle which stands as an emblem for her entire work, which expands and becomes an infinite promise of shelters, havens of affection, protection and safety.

In hypertext, Josely Carvalho has found a perfect medium for the infinite proliferation of developments of her *Diary-book of images* about the problem of shelter. These interconnected stories make it possible for the artist to tackle the idea of impermanence and the mutability of identity, to mix subjects and images such as those of the *tracajá* with a Tantric Hindu temple.

Josely Carvalho's hybrid canvas encompasses myriad allusions, a *mélange* of meanings, as attested by Salman Rushdie's defense of his own writing (which has stirred controversy and persecution and led the Iranian writer to exile in England):

The Satanic Verses celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. *Mélange*, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is *how newness enters the world*. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world, and I have tried to embrace it. *The Satanic Verses* is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining. It is a love-song to our mongrel selves.¹

In its own way, Josely Carvalho's work is a love song to life and its mixtures. It refers to the infinite shedding of skins that enfold a single body-shelter – the virtualized transformations of a phoenix that allow it retain layers of skin and life, transforming them into a voracious, incisive, poetic, mutant memory that echoes the world's very vibrations.

¹ Salman Rushdie. *Imaginary homelands*. London: Granta Books, 1991, p. 394.