

The Book of Roofs, #0001: Tracajá

Julia P. Herzberg

Josely Carvalho regards her entire body of work as a diary of images, a visual counterpart of a written diary or a journal. The diary consists of many separate chapters, each of which explores a specific theme. The most recent chapter is *The Book of Roofs*, an ongoing multimedia project, that features tiles as pages. Conceptually the exhibition *The Book of Roofs, #0001: Tracajá* represents one of the tiles or pages. It consists of an edition of forty prints, each featuring an original image, a series of five digital prints with video and sound, an installation of three hundred paper-cast roof tiles, and a website.

The artist has distinguished herself for her innovative use of printmaking techniques in artist's books, hand-printed sculptural objects, and installation art. More recently Carvalho has developed an Internet project which is drawing new critical recognition. Her work addresses secular, religious, sociopolitical, and mythological subjects. *The Book of Roofs* began, as many projects do, by accident. Walking along a beach in Bahia, Brazil, the artist came across hundreds of clay roof tiles arranged in a concentric circle on the sand, creating an artistic pattern of material and form. Carvalho began to think about the ways in which roof tiles have been used through the centuries in Brazil to provide, in the most literal way, a roof over one's head. The roof tiles prompted a sequence of thoughts around the issues of shelter and the consequences faced by people who are deprived of it. Carvalho decided to do an installation with roof tiles as material, subject, and process in an exhibition in São Paulo (1997). That exhibition, her first "essay" in *The Book of Roofs*, was conceived as a form of book art with 3,000 clay tiles arranged in repetitive spiral patterns on the museum floor; each tile symbolized a page in the book. The artist projected fifteen distinctive video images over a section of the tiles, representing fifteen pages. At the end of the exhibition, the roof tiles were donated to a local housing project. Having left the actual tiles in São Paulo, the artist returned to New York and began work on an interactive website, *The Book of Roofs*.

Aside from the challenge of learning a new language, web art allowed Carvalho to continue adapting the montage, which she had so compellingly exploited in other mediums. Her website, as the viewer in this exhibition will experience, overlays sound, images, and texts. It is navigated by a turtle, a leitmotif in the artist's work. The turtle - both metaphor and alter ego - carries its shelter on its back as it migrates from place to place both on land and in the water. It is also a vehicle for questioning her own hybrid identity, as she negotiates the cultural shifts of Brazil and the United States. In Brazil, the small Amazon tracajá / turtle is an endangered species.

At the Des Lee Gallery in St Louis, *The Book of Roofs*, #0001: Tracajá, Carvalho exhibits three hundred hand-cast paper tiles. The notion of the tile as a subject and a material has evolved over time - from the original tiles on the beach, to those donated in the São Paulo exhibition, to the virtual tiles of the Internet where users become tilemakers. And here the hand-cast paper tiles (still conceived as pages) are personal references to the artist's lifetime work in printmaking. The twelve elaborate prints in the edition of forty were printed on handmade paper of kozo fiber using a complex process of digital image manipulation, photolithos, createx, woodcut, collagraph, handcoloring, and rhoplex. Each print overlays images of architectural motifs and high-relief sculpture from Indian temples with the image of the skeleton of the tracajá (turtle). The scenes present fragments of goddesses, as in Tracajá 14, and erotic love scenes, as in Tracajá 8 and Tracajá 10. The five digital prints incorporate similar imagery. The video, however, superimposes images taken in India and Nepal featuring Hindus performing their daily rituals in the Ganges in Varanasi (India), a cremation in Nepal and a chicken sacrifice to Kali, goddess of creation and destruction in Nepal. The poetic texts in the video are fragments of myths on the turtle and provide another layer of sensorial richness. "As the feminine power of the waters, the turtle was an emblem of Aphrodite/Venus." "For the Hindus, the land on which they lived was the back of a huge Mother turtle floating in a vast primal sea." "The Creeks, a North American indigenous tribe thought that box turtles caused droughts and floods, they would kill them on sight."

Carvalho's residency as a visiting artist at Wildwood Press in St. Louis provided an extraordinary opportunity for her. She returned to making prints, which has always been an integral part of her repertoire of artistic mediums. She benefited from the ambitious experimentation of the press, which pushes printmaking beyond the expected. Under the guidance of the master printer Maryanne E. Simmons, Carvalho became a member of a larger fellowship of artists whose work continues to expand the parameters of printmaking in contemporary art.

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