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Maria Martins: Singular and Plural¹

Abstract: This article analyses two approaches to the work of Brazilian artist Maria Martins on the basis of texts by Brazilian art critic Mário Pedrosa and French surrealist poet Benjamin Péret dealing specifically with her production. The context of this two different approaches is the artist's return to Brazil and her first exhibitions in the country in the early 1950s. While Pedrosa, from a reading based on the conceptions of modernism at the time, takes a critical stance towards Maria Martins, Péret defends surrealist principles, adopting a stance favorable to the artist's work. The analysis of this two different approaches points out the relationship of the artist with Brazilian popular culture and the artistic *avant-gardes* of the first half of the 20th century, especially Martins' approach to the surrealist movement.

Keywords: Maria Martins; Surrealism; Mário Pedrosa; Benjamin Péret.

Maria advances with her eyes closed and without looking at the signs.
Mário Pedrosa

Maria's sculptures herald a world that does not yet exist.
Benjamin Péret

The purpose of this article is to reflect upon the reception of the work of sculptor Maria Martins based mainly on the text *Maria, the sculptor* (*Maria, a escultora*) by art critic Mário Pedrosa, and the text by surrealist poet Benjamin Péret written for Maria Martins' retrospective exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro in 1956. Based on these readings, we shall analyze the particularities of Martins' trajectory, the insertion of her work in the art circuit, the scope of these two texts,

¹ This article is part of the research *Benjamin Péret: tensionamentos entre estética, política, antropologia*, with researchers from Universidade Federal Rural do Rio de Janeiro, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, who work in cooperation with the Museu de Arte do Rio (MAR). This research, in turn, is comprised in the CAPES-COFEUB project entitled *Estética contemporânea: diálogos de culturas*, coordinated by professors Rodrigo Duarte (Federal University of Minas Gerais) and Jacinto Lageira (Université Paris 1 – Panthéon-Sorbonne).

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leaving open to what extent each one contributes to the debate today.

As a result of her marriage to ambassador Carlos Martins, in 1926, Maria Martins spent much of her adult life outside Brazil. Fully connected with the international art circuit, particularly from the late 1930s, she had her first experiences as a sculptor in Quito and Tokyo, places where she lived for some time, using materials such as ceramics, terracotta and wood. Nevertheless, it was in Brussels and New York that she built the foundations of her artistic production, which owes much to learning from Oscar Jespers (1887–1970) and the lessons on bronze casting with sculptor Jacques Lipchitz (1891–1973). Maria's large social circle was also fundamental to her formation, as she met and dialogued with artists such as Piet Mondrian, Marcel Duchamp, Brancusi, René Magritte, Ives Tanguy, Max Ernst, André Masson, Benjamin Péret and André Breton. Although the latter considered her as part of the surrealist movement, Maria was not so sure of this affiliation, always expressing doubt regarding her alignment with one tendency.

During World War II, Maria Martins produced a great deal and held many exhibitions. Her first solo exhibition, at the Corcoran Gallery in 1941, was followed by four expositions in New York, at the Valentine Gallery, in 1942, 1943, 1944 and 1946. In the following year, before moving house to Paris, she held a further solo exposition, this time at the Julien Levy Gallery, whose catalogue text was signed by André Breton. In the same year, she also took part in the group exhibition *Le Surréalisme*, at the Galerie Maeght, in Paris.

In many of her works, there is an evocation of the exuberant nature of Brazil, in tune with its popular culture and mythology, especially in those works shown at the Valentine Gallery, in New York, in 1943. Six sculptures of the *Amazonia* series were shown in this exhibition, and the full series was shown in the following year in the *Amazonia by Maria* exhibition, together with her texts about the characters shown in them, such as Yara, Aiocá, Iacy, Boto, Yemanjá, Boiuna and Cobra Grande, which belong to Amazonian legend. In this series, the body, presented as a foundation, maintains a symbiotic relationship with vegetables, animals, transposing the hierarchy of beings characteristic of the structure of mythical thinking. Verônica Stigger, curator of the exhibition *Maria Martins: metamorfoses*, held in the Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo (MAM-SP) in 2013, points out that this exhibition marks a turning point Martins' work:

If, in her two previous exhibitions, in 1941 and 1942, her pieces tended towards a more traditional representation of the human figure, with well-defined contours, even when already exploring Brazilian themes such as samba, macumba and Yara, now her characters, although still recognizable, merge with a tangle of leaves and branches that sometimes look like the rainforest.²

² Verônica Stigger, "Maria Martins: metamorfoses," in *Maria Martins: metamorfoses*. São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna, 2013 (Catalogue of the exhibition, July 10 – September 15, 2013, MAM-SP), 13.

In this phase, the artist makes a connection between her dearest issues, linked to female desire and sexuality, and popular culture and nature. For this reason, according to the curator, it was this metamorphosis between humanity and nature that deeply impressed Breton. Coincidentally, in this same year three remarkable events within the orbit of surrealism occurred in New York: on February 20, Elsie Houston committed suicide; in May, Breton published Péret's text on the myths of the Americas, with the title *La parole est à Péret*, in New York, and, finally, the exhibition on surrealism *First Papers of Surrealism* was inaugurated.

When she returned to Brazil, in the early 1950s, Maria Martins already had a consolidated career and an international recognition: her works were part of important collections, such as the MoMA's, apart from other prestigious institutions and private collections. However, the visibility of her work and the understanding of her place in the history of Brazilian art were – and still is – small. Perhaps two factors have contributed for her discreet presence: the little tradition of sculpture in Brazilian modern art and the reception of her work by critics.

In this context, it should be noted that the artist, having started her career far from Brazil, sought, in the 1943 exhibition, to reconnect with the country by resorting to the myths of the Amazon region – even though she had not gone to the area personally – as a form of elaborating Brazilian imagery. Although as we will show in connection with Benjamin Péret, the surrealists in the 1940's were particularly interested in mythology, Martins' aesthetic proposal did not fit in with the modernist canon being generated around abstract art in the post-war period. In 1944, critic Clement Greenberg referred to the artist's work in the magazine *The Nation* as follows: “the impulse is baroque, not modern, and is given by Latin colonial décor and tropical luxuriance.”³

Maria Martins had a prominent performance after returning to Brazil, taking part in the First Biennial of São Paulo, in 1951, (in addition to working for its realization by acting as a mediator to enable the coming of important international artworks). However, in the field of arts in Brazil at that time, mainly as a result of the formation of groups *Ruptura*, in São Paulo, and *Frente*, in Rio de Janeiro, a concretism tendency was consolidated, expressing the modernizing and industrial ideology prevailing at the time, contrasting with the views of Martins, a reader of Nietzsche and critical of Western rationalism.

Mário Pedrosa, the most influential art critic in Brazil at that time, did not show interest and enthusiasm for Martins' work, to which he devoted only one short text, extremely polemical and laced with ambiguities. It is important to highlight these ambiguities because it is a mistake to attribute to Pedrosa's aesthetic judgements about Maria's work reasons that go beyond the formal questions indicated in his text or admit that his judgements confirm a fidelity to a *tendency*. Pedrosa recognizes the uniqueness of the sculptor's work, but admits that it is “necessary to overcome certain

³ As quoted in Raul Antelo, “Disciplina clericalis: desdobramentos Pedrosa-Péret,” in *Annals of the 38th Congress of CBHA* (Florianópolis, 2018), 20.

prejudices to approach it.”⁴ Surely, the critic himself recognized this need. His statement is a warning to the readers of his article and those interested in studying Martins’ work. In the beginning of his text Pedrosa speaks of the difficult relationship between Maria and the art world in her early career, attributing it to the fact that she, a wife of an ambassador and coming from the milieu of “*snob high society*” and the “rich bourgeoisie”, was a strange body amidst “authentic bohemians or austere artisans and professionals.”⁵ However, Pedrosa considers that Maria Martins gradually overcame the mistrust and hostility of the milieu and that her recognition in the art world and in the history of art is legitimate.

In analysis of Martins’ artist-work relationship, Pedrosa indicates that the chief negative trait of the sculptor is her *excess of personality*, the meaning of which is unclear in the text, but, as its consequences in Martins’ work are identified as serious, we can raise a number of hypotheses about its meaning. Would it be the primacy of personal interests over material and linguistic requirements of the work? Would it be the relationship of the artist with the subject matter that denies or does not take into account its natural potentialities? An excess of subjectivism? If we speculate further, we find an approximation between Pedrosa’s criticism of the artist and Mário de Andrade’s criticism of the prevailing character in the production of modern and contemporary art. The central argument in Andrade’s text “The artist and the artisan” is telling in this respect:

There is certainly in all contemporary artists a desperate, uncontrolled will to get it right. However, the inflation of individualism, the inflation of experimental aesthetics, the inflation of psychologism, have misdirected the true object of art. Nowadays the object of art is no longer the work of art, but the artist. And there cannot be greater mistake.⁶

There is a relationship between de Andrade’s statement and Pedrosa’s criticism expressed in the text “Maria, a escultora” (Maria, the sculptor), since Pedrosa describes as *monumental* a work that lives by itself, that is capable of turning its back on its own creator, thereby asserting itself as a true and authentic work of art. Nevertheless, in Pedrosa’s evaluation, even Martins’ best-executed pieces never detach themselves from her, so that the artist’s excessive personality, understood by de Andrade as typical of contemporary artists, explains the absence of monumentality and a “lack of high sense of form” in her work.

The problem of form would not have been resolved because Martins, in her attempt to compensate for its lack, gets lost in details to represent the themes, allowing “a profusion of ambiguous images generated by the process of associations of ideas

⁴ Mário Pedrosa, “Maria, a escultora,” in Mário Pedrosa. *Dos murais de Portinari aos espaços de Brasília* (São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1981), 87.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 87–88.

⁶ Mário Andrade, “O Artista e o artesão,” in Mário Andrade, *O Baile das quatro artes* (São Paulo, Brasília: Livraria Martins Editora, Instituto Nacional do Livro, 1975), 32.

at the plane of literary poetical inspiration, particularly surrealist.”⁷ The question, in this case, would be a submission of the plastic creative impulse to the discursive one, which operates from a literary conception. In other words, an unsuccessful attempt to transpose to visual plastic language the *écriture automatique* explored by surrealists.

The technical difficulty identified in Martins’ work, seen as a result of her excess of personality, at bottom is an expression of a “certain unconscious exhibitionism, a fruit of an unsurpassed psychic infantilism or total naivety.”⁸ After these comments, Pedrosa surprisingly does not condemn her work, leaving open the possibility that Martins’ procedures might be a quality, not a defect. The ambiguity pervading Pedrosa’s text is evident at times: at the same time that he points out the inconsistencies, the fixations, the whims, the lack of order, the cruel and vulgar evocations in Martins’ work, Pedrosa concludes by saying that “Maria, the sculptor, exists and is to be reckoned with.”⁹

In addition to countless references to psychological aspects – which is unusual in Pedrosa’s work – his text contains startling combinations, such as *very personal bad taste, sublime shamelessness, exhibitionism and sincerity* and *rotten wood consistency*. At the height of so many tensions, the artist appears as courageous and inconsequential at the same time: “Maria advances with her eyes closed and without looking at the signs. A dangerous driver.”¹⁰ The force of this image shows somehow Pedrosa’s affliction in the face of what he finds to be a threatening risk for the existence of the work itself, for he considered that if an artist, as in the case of Maria Martins, is capable of exposing herself to dangers of this order, he/her would be certainly strong enough to receive a severe criticism and not to be let down.

There is a radical disagreement between Pedrosa’s evaluation of Martins’ work and that of surrealists, Breton and Benjamin Péret in particular. As well argued by Raul Antelo,¹¹ Maria Martins is a point of contention of friends Pedrosa and Péret, whose ties were close both in political affiliation and in the family sphere: Péret was married to Elsie Houston, sister of Mary Houston Pedrosa, Mário’s wife.

As discussed, Pedrosa’s criticisms of the artist embody in some respects the more general criticism regarding the difficulties of plastic and pictorial expression of surrealist principles, since “automatism” is, above all, a literary procedure. Largely, *Le surrealisme et la peinture*, launched by Breton in 1928, is a great attempt to provide an answer to these questions. As if this were not enough, the penetration of surrealism in the 1940s and 50s in the USA and Latin America seems to be out of tune of the evolution of artistic modernism at that time, already far from the *choc* promoted by European *avant-gardes* of the 1920s. Painters such as Remedios Varo and Roberto Matta, for example, suffered from the label of *late surrealism*.

⁷ Pedrosa, “Maria, a escultora,” 88.

⁸ Ibid, 88.

⁹ Ibid, 89.

¹⁰ Ibid, 88

¹¹ Antelo, “Disciplina clericalis: desdobramentos Pedrosa-Péret,” 10.

To understand Péret's praise of Martins' exhibition in 1956,¹² one should consider two aspects: on the one hand, a poetical conception of the Myth; on the other, as pointed out by Antelo, the reference to Remedios Varo's painting.

In 1942 Péret wrote a first version of the preface to his *Anthologie des Mythes et Légendes d'Amérique* (Anthology of America's Myths and Popular Legends and Tales) in Mexico, where he lived as an exile from 1941 to 1947, before finishing it in 1955, in São Paulo. There he developed a poetical conception of the myth, seeing in it the origin of all knowledge, inspired largely by Friedrich Schlegel, who, in opposition to the dominance of reason in Europe, considered that poetry should return to being lively and social. In line with German Romanticism, Péret considers poetry as an expression of freedom, joining the aesthetic utopia that poetry would flourish in a society without oppression. In this connection, Michel Löwy¹³ does not fail to point out the unique character of surrealists' "romantic Marxism" which approximates two theoretical conceptions, which are contradictory in principle: materialism and idealism, the latter a philosophical tendency to which Romanticism was linked.

Regarding the influence of Remedios Varo, it should be pointed out that the work of Péret's second wife, with whom he lived in his Mexican exile in the 1940's, has unequivocal approximations with Martins' work: Varo also felt both uncomfortable with the label of *surrealist* and out of place in connection with Mexican artistic modernism. On the other hand, in the work of both artists the "metamorphic" relationship between women and nature is present.

Although surrealism is a mostly male movement, the issue of women is central therein. Péret's conceptions in this regard are quite close to those of Breton, inasmuch as they subvert a stereotype by appreciating and emphasizing positively some features attributed to women, which infantilize them, such as irrationality, intuition and primitiveness. For this very reason, Pedrosa's statements¹⁴ about Martins, attributing to her an "unsurpassed psychic infantilism" or recognizing that "There is a lack of order in the imagination of this woman" are at odds with surrealists' evaluation. Commenting on Martins' work in the catalogue of her exhibition held in Paris in 1947, Breton refers in a positive manner to the relationship between the psychological and the cosmological because:

It is the perpetual resort to nature's vital forces (of both the spirit as well as the body) that it imposed, it is her constant concern with placing the psychological over the cosmological, opposing the generally prevailing contrary tendency, which leads mankind to a path of increasingly dangerous sophistry.¹⁵

¹² For this article, we used both the French original, published in the complete works of Benjamin Péret (*Œuvres complètes – Tome 6*, 349–50, and Benjamin Péret, "Maria Martins: os eternos começos do mundo," 323, the Portuguese text included in Maria Martins' catalogue of the exhibition held in the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro in 1956.

¹³ Michel Löwy, *A Estrela da Manhã. Surrealismo e Marxism* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2002).

¹⁴ Pedrosa, "Maria, a escultora," 89.

¹⁵ Rita L. de Freitas Bittencourt, "A poética surrealista-barroca de Maria Martins e a Amazônia," *Organon* 35, 70 (2020): 10.

The male/female comparisons in Breton and Péret always highlight the superiority of the feminine. In his work *Arcano 17*, Breton says: “The moment has come to assert women’s ideas to the detriment of those of men, whose failure is perpetuated quite tumultuously nowadays.”¹⁶ The artist must make the most of everything concerning the female system of the world, as opposed to the male system; he must incorporate women’s faculties and appropriate them.

Identified with these ideas, Péret appreciates Martins’ creation processes because he does not see them as a passive simulation of natural processes, but provocations, transgressions and an evocation of myths shaking the foundations of a male dominated culture. The erotic character of these provocations acquires a liberating role. In the preface to the “Anthology of Sublime Love” (*Anthologie de l’amour sublime*), titled “The nucleus of the comet” (*Le noyau de la comète*), Péret attributes to women a fundamental role in the experience leading to liberation when he admits that: “A great number of men show themselves incapable of loving. Such impotence appears to be so exceptional in women that have the right not to consider them.”¹⁷ He questions the thesis that economic motivation guides human actions throughout history and states that: “at all times, love, even when considered in its more elementary aspect, has always been the axis of human life.”¹⁸

Concerning specifically the text on Martins, it is necessary to consider that it was written under influence of the three journeys Péret undertook to the interior of Brazil in his second visit to the country in 1955-56.¹⁹ Initially, he went from Manaus to Salvador, researching popular art from the north and northeast of the country, and then two trips to the central west, where he contacted indigenous peoples such as the *Xavantes* and the *Carajás*. In her doctoral dissertation *Benjamin Péret et le Brésil*, Leonor Lourenço de Abreu correlates the references in the texts on Maria Martins – which are the basis of the central idea of the artist’s “eternal beginnings of the world” – to the flight over the Amazon, and the references to this experience in “Visit to the Indians” (*Visite aux indiens*), an essay in which Péret describes his travels in 1956.²⁰ Abreu stresses the feeling of the poet who, leaving urban centers by plane, in a few hours was displaced in space and time. Somehow, the expression of this feeling reveals the “dialectics” moving the developmental context at that time in the Brazilian central west, which culminates with the inauguration of Brasília, in 1960, whose pilot plan expresses metaphorically the modernizing idea of a plane landing in the middle of nowhere. However, for a European traveler in Brazil in the 1950s extremely impressed with the exuberance of the Amazonian landscape, he prefers to see in the untouched nature the promise of a “new beginning”, of which Martins’ sculpture is the expression.

¹⁶ André Breton, *Arcano 17* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1986), 47.

¹⁷ Benjamin Péret, *Amor sublime: Ensaio e poesia*, ed. by Jean Puyade (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1985), 98.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 15.

¹⁹ In his first stay in Brazil, after his marriage with singer Elsie Houston, Péret remained in the country between 1929 and 1931.

²⁰ Maria Leonor Lourenço de Abreu, “Benjamin Péret et le Brésil,” PhD dissertation on French literature (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3. Paris, 2012), 416.

The French poet emphasizes an organic element in the sculptor's work, which covers unexpected forms, provided with a violence coming from the unconscious, breaking with the images of harmony and candor that many times characterize both nature and women. For this reason, Péret begins his text as follows:

Nothing, as much as Maria's work, evokes so much the images of nature; not that between one or the other one could impose a direct affiliation, but rather because she acts upon the matter a little as nature itself.²¹

Now, at first it is possible to consider Péret is going back to the old problem of the relationship between nature and culture, in which the latter, thanks to the human touch, is going to try and transform the former, but, instead, he says the artist "acts upon the matter a little as nature itself", i.e., the artist does not impose a *form* on nature, but establishes a relationship of *metamorphosis*.

[...] the insect limits itself to simulate a plant, as Charlie Chaplin, in one of his early films, would transform himself into a chandelier, adopting a passive defensive attitude. Maria, on the contrary, tends to provoke nature, to stimulate new metamorphosis in it, crossing the vine with the legendary monster from which it came, the stone with the fossil bird that evades from it.²²

Thus, if Péret identifies the appearance of the myth in Martins' sculpture, this does not occur to take out from it an anthropomorphic element, because she tends to amalgamate mythical figures with the natural from which they come so that they are placed in an organic process. Thus, Maria Martins does not *in-form* the matter in the sense of figuring a fixed archetype, but instead seeks the continuous movement of life, that is, a process of *trans-formation*. Martins' sculpture does not "mimic" nature, but attempts to reproduce its own movement, by working with the sculptural material, bronze in this case. That this movement is violent, this must be understood as a force of fertilization, in the poet's words. Thus, instead of accentuating a "baroque" style of form, Péret identifies in this movement a Nietzschean element of life potentiation, which manifests itself in Martins' trajectory, marked by a multiplicity of interests, in her capacity to conciliate many different activities as a sculptor, ambassadress, poet and writer. This plurality justifies the manner in which the artist's daughter, Nora Martins, defined her: "Maria was actually many persons".²³

Translation into English by Nicholas Davies

²¹ Benjamin Péret, "Maria Martins: eternos começos do mundo," in *Surrealismo e Novo Mundo*, ed. by Robert Ponge (Porto Alegre: Ed. Universidade/UFRGS, 1999), 323.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ Raul Antelo, *Maria com Marcel: Duchamp nos trópicos* (Belo Horizonte: Editora da UFMG, 2010), 117.

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