

VISUAL ARTS

Hues that run through the veins of Brazil

Celebrating the year she became an octogenarian, Marlene Almeida from Paraíba is preparing a book about the colors of the earth

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Artist Marlene Almeida, from Paraíba, who turned 80 years old on May 7th of the previous year, continues to be active in her work. On the occasion, she, accompanied by her family, carried out the Seridó-Sertão-Araripe-Cariri expedition, revisiting a site with colored argillites in the Cariri region of Ceará, where she had collected clays more than five decades ago. Alongside producing a series of paintings, she has also been dedicating herself to the reorganization and expansion of the collection resulting from her research into Brazilian soils, pigments, and plant resins. Additionally, she is writing a book on the colors of the earth, which she plans to publish by the end of this year, and is participating in the exhibition *Brasilidade Pós-Modernismo*, which is currently at the Banco do Brasil Cultural Center in Brasília and will then travel to Belo Horizonte (MG).

“How do I feel at 80? Continuing. Resisting. With an intense sense of human fragility, and more than before, understanding that time doesn’t pass slowly, but runs so wildly that it’s impossible to hold onto,” she theorized. “A few days ago, while rummaging through papers in a drawer, I found two newspaper clippings from Paraíba. One mentioned that I was celebrating

my 70th birthday, inaugurating a solo exhibition at the Brazilian Museum of Sculpture in São Paulo. The other, an older one, also linked my work to my age and had the headline: ‘Marlene Almeida. At 50, with a continuous state of being an artist.’ In fact, this was the theme of a series of works and exhibitions of mine, at the beginning of this century, titled *Tempo*, *Passatempo*, and *Tempo para o Destino*,” the artist recalled.

Referring to what she considers a “careful reorganization and expansion” of the collection resulting from her research on Brazilian soils, pigments, and plant resins, Marlene Almeida shared that this work began in the late 1970s with support from the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) and the Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB). The goals were to map the colors of the earth, create sample books, and produce non-toxic and natural artistic materials. “Today, I already have soils from hundreds of Brazilian municipalities, pigments from all regions, as well as plant resins. I am also writing a book about the colors of the earth, my long research, techniques, and a bit of the history of artistic materials, which I plan to publish later this year. My next project is to complete the data, the photographic documentary, and finalize the organization of the collection of thousands of samples of earth colors, clays, pigments, minerals, and rocks, which I now call the *Museum of Brazilian*



Fotos: Acervo Pessoal

Soils,” the visual artist said.

Regarding the collective exhibition *Brasilidade Pós-Modernismo*, which brings together 51 artists from various generations, aiming to celebrate the centenary of the Week of Modern Art in São Paulo in 2022, Marlene Almeida participates with the work *Terra tão só*, an installation based on a fragment of the poem *Terra e Lua* (Earth and Moon), authored by Spanish poet and playwright Federico García Lorca (1898-1936). It was created in the artist’s studio, installed in her house in João Pessoa, during the social isolation that resulted as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 pandemic. This piece consists of a long table five meters in length, on which there is raw earth, prepared pigments, natural resins, and sample books of earth colors from some states such as Paraíba, Rio Grande do Norte, Pernambuco, Ceará, Minas Gerais, and Brasília. “In this show, which comments on part of the history of Brazilian art, I am happy to be in the company of great artists, including my son, José Rufino,” she emphasized.

The artist from Paraíba also spoke about sharing her living space with her son, José Rufino, who is a visual artist. “I often repeat that we are a team when I refer to my small family: myself, my son, and my husband. Both Antonio and José are my solid base, and at the same time, a ramp for my bolder flights. As for José Rufino, the influences are mutual. Perhaps, initially, the fact that we lived in a space with canvases, brushes, and paints attracted him to the field of art. But certainly, his generous and daring way of handling artistic production has influenced and continues to influence me much more. And to expand this ongoing exchange, his scientific side, as a geologist and paleontologist, also provides essential support for my material research. An example of our artistic/cultural/political/loving coexistence is the Seridó-Sertão-Araripe-Cariri expedition that the three of us undertook to celebrate my 80th birthday,

revisiting a site with colorful argillites in the Cariri region of Ceará where I had collected clays more than 50 years ago. A precious and unforgettable experience. My creative process has been intense. The location of my studio, adjacent to my home, facilitates access to my two poles, which in a way amplifies the sense of unity and, most importantly, establishes continuity in the creative process that develops with greater temporal and physical freedom,” she commented.

Ideology as Part of the Work

Marlene Almeida recalled how she first got involved with art: “I became involved with art at a very young age, still a secondary school student. During that time, I interacted with poets, artists, and writers from the 1958 Generation. My home, in the Róger neighborhood, was a meeting point for this group of young intellectuals to meet, debate, and read. However, I consider that my artistic trajectory really began to take shape after the cultural pause caused by the 1964 coup, when I finished my Philosophy course and was starting my Didactics course. Like many university students of that era, I participated in protests and projects created by the political ferment of the country, which was organizing to expand workers’ rights, fight illiteracy, and establish a fairer era. This ideology, which excited us and aimed for collective well-being, was harshly attacked by those who usurped power for so many years. Certainly, this period of exception influenced my life and my artistic production. My ideology was and continues to be part of my work,” said the artist, originally from the city of Bananeiras, located in the Brejo region of the state.

The artist admitted that in such a varied and long context, it is difficult to highlight specific moments in her career. “Even because I consider, like the legendary Native American, that all things are connected. Art must be the result of all the facets of a life, in my case, my ecological, political, and cultural militancy.

As early as 1979, when little was said about the environment and the vital need for its preservation, I was already presenting, in a collective exhibition, sculptures titled *O Risco* (The Risk) and *A Peste* (The Plague), which denounced the possible degradation of the forest with the government’s oil exploration project in the Amazon,” she affirmed.

Another key point in Marlene Almeida’s trajectory was the creation of the *Centro de Artes Visuais Tambiá* (Tambiá Visual Arts Center) in 1994. “An idea proposed by Rufino, with the goal of promoting and deepening contemporary art issues. At that time, the Federal University of Paraíba only offered a course in Artistic Education, and there was a demand for courses that trained professional artists. The Cavt, for ten years, filled this gap with courses in drawing, painting, woodcut, screen printing, ceramics, and sculpture. At the same time, it developed an international exchange project with the Freie Kunstschule Berlin, organizing exhibitions and courses for artists from other nationalities in Paraíba and taking Brazilian students and invited artists to participate in courses and exhibitions in Germany. The work carried out may have contributed to a greater understanding of contemporary art and the training of many Paraíba artists, former Cavt students,” the artist recounted.

“Art and life are inseparable. I go back to the statement I gave to journalist Chico Noronha in 1992, when I was 50, and it still holds true today: Art does not hide life. It is not the result of a static contemplation by someone who intermittently surrenders to a project. A human being may or may not be an artist. If they are a painter, there is such an intimate relationship between the hand that paints and the one that feeds that it would be impossible to dissociate one action from the other. There is no way to go and return. There is no door to open and close. The state of ‘being an artist’ is continuous; the work is the result of one’s experiences, dreams,



Marlene Almeida criando a obra 'Terra tão só' para a exposição coletiva 'Brasilidade Pós-Modernismo' (acima), e na recente expedição (abaixo), revisitando o sítio do Cariri cearense, onde havia coletado argilas há mais de 50 anos

anxieties, and discoveries. The paintings, drawings, and sculptures are fragments of life. One does not make art for the love of art, but art for the love of life.”

She also shared her thoughts on living through the global health crisis caused by COVID-19: “The pandemic was, and still is, a source of immense anguish. Fragility gained unimaginable contours. I saw the world downcast, masked, and hidden. And Brazil, disoriented, guided by selfish interests and fascist ideas. But, like almost everything, it has two sides. I also had a long period of concentration and intense work in the studio. A time to open files, review texts written over the past decades, organize photographs, compile field notebooks and poetics. In short, it was a time of self-archaeology and rebirth,” Marlene Almeida concluded.

Translated from original Portuguese