

## **The country and folk art of Juraci Dórea: A utopia?**

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I have been following the work of Juraci Dórea since about 1980/81, when I taught a course in Latin American art in Salvador which he attended. Around that time, I was given a little news daily he and his friends were printing out in Feira de Santana, discussing art-related stuff and their own work. Even then, I was impressed by his effort to bring his art to heartland Bahia.

Later on, in 1982, I was in the jury for an art project contest held by Fundação Cultural da Bahia, by way of the Museum of Modern Art, and we picked out his “Terra - canção n° 7,” which he had developed with talent and rectitude – results aren’t always up to expectations in these contests. There’s a lot of chicanery going on, especially when it comes to so-called “experimental art.”

More recently, I got the chance to applaud the latest developments of his work at art salons in Belo Horizonte and in São Paulo’s Messianic Foundation, where saw him compete with Daniel Senise of Rio de Janeiro for the prize – a trip to Japan.

I have been insistently championing the decentralization of Brazilian art, in articles, essays, catalogue presentations, symposia, and during my two stints at the National Fine Arts Commission. In fact, I have been of this opinion since the 60s, for I advocated (GAM magazine, #17, 1968), on occasion of the Bahia Biennale, an unfulfilled dream that left the generation that birthed it frustrated: the unavoidable need to convey the Brazilian cultural process to different areas within the country. When I suggested that the National Fine Arts Commission feature, in a special hall at the National Salon, a survey of prizes involving trips to Brazil, my intention was to underscore the efforts of artists in decades past who not only discovered new themes but helped change the course of Brazilian art as they went to the regional capitals. Not only did the likes of Almeida Júnior, Djanira, Tarsila do Amaral, and the members of Núcleo Bernardelli usher in a rediscovery of the country, they also averted academic canons and Europeanized art standards.

Likewise, when I suggested that the National Salon jury travel to the different regions of the country, or that an “Art and Region” seminar be held, what I was espousing was a stimulus to artmaking in those regions, and not necessarily regional art – which, however, I do not oppose. It has always seemed utterly relevant to me that important artists such as Sérvulo Esmeraldo (Ceará), João Câmara, Samico, Francisco Brennand and José Cláudio (Pernambuco), Sante Scaldaferri and Francisco Liberato (Bahia), Humberto Espíndola (Mato Grosso), Siron Franco and Antônio Poteiro (Goiás), Amílcar de Castro (Minas Gerais), Jair Jacquemont (Amazonas) or Vera Chaves Barcellos (Rio Grande do Sul) chose to stay in their native cities, some of them after spending a long time abroad, because it means that their creative work is rooted in local and national culture, and that is a major stimulus to the emergence of new artists. Just look at the case of Mato Grosso, where the admirable work done by Humberto Espíndola and Aline Figueiredo for the best part of two decades enabled a formidable generation of painters to come forward, among them Adir Sodré and Gervane de Paula.

Modern art began to make its way to the countryside in the 40s, with exhibits in Belo Horizonte, Salvador and Porto Alegre, and the establishment of societies, clubs, and collective studios in Fortaleza, Recife (Ateliê Coletivo, or Collective Studio) and Porto Alegre (Clube de Gravura, the Engravings Club). Now, we’re witnessing a second stage where this movement is flowing over from regional capitals and into small country towns. In the last ten or fifteen years, significant cultural and creative activity has taken place in the interior of Rio Grande do Sul (Caxias do Sul, Pelotas, Santa Maria), Santa Catarina (Vale do Itajaí), São Paulo (the metro area’s ‘ABC’ cities, Piracicaba, Ribeirão Preto, etc.), Minas Gerais (Juiz de Fora, Cataguases, Ouro Preto), and Rio de Janeiro (Vale do Paraíba). This movement was fueled by the emergence of new media and supports such as photocopying, mail art, video, etc. In other words, artists realized that by staying in their own cities, they could participate in Brazilian and even international art. And while, say, Sérvulo Esmeraldo was able to do an aesthetical repurposing of water tanks in Fortaleza by working in tandem with local and out-of-state artists, Bené Fonteles roams the country employing photocopying to delve into local traditions.

It is in light of this diversification and decentralization of current Brazilian art that we must look into the admirable work of Juraci Dórea in Feira de Santana and the whole Bahia backlands.

His work extends beyond the cultural province to present itself as rural, sertanejo art. The emphasis is not on the author's subjectivity, but rather in the objectivity of his relationship with local populations. It is not inner demons that he looks to exorcize, but the vices of an art intended for an urban cultural elite, as regional as its themes may be. His art is indeed regional, not only in the subject matters and models that it deals with, but also in the materials it employs – leather, wood. His country stories hark back to the illustrations of cordel literature and to a kind of rural graffiti. In his paintings and murals, stories of cowboys, troubadours, leather-clad characters, dragons, animals, cangaceiro bandits, and villagers, told in deliberately rude, crude, restrainedly expressive drawings, framed up by friezes reminiscent of an abstract type of popular décor found throughout the Northeast – in houses, circuses, variety stalls, quilts, etc.

And yet the supreme originality of Juraci Dórea, as I mentioned earlier, does not reside in the subjects he addresses or the materials he employs. In Brazilian art, there are other artists mining the same thematic veins. Artists come to mind like Samico and Miguel Santos, in their exploration of sertanejo imagery, just like the armorial Brennand captures, in fruits and objects, the sensuality of Pernambuco's Zona da Mata area. Or else Scaldaferrri, Antônio Maia and Aderson Medeiros, with varying approaches, appropriating ex-votos, or Rubem Valentim, pulling Candomblé signs out of houses of worship to make them universal through his constructive language. Or Humberto Espíndola, who's been exploring but one topic – livestock farming – for 20 years now. Speaking of which, this is the artist Juraci Dórea has the most in common with, not the least because, in his early work, Espíndola employed knives and barbed wire, set up altars with bull horns, carved the insignias and emblems of livestock farming into his own leather, and later on isolated and monumentalized the mark of the prize-winning ox, a symbol of rural power. He even exhibited at agricultural fairs, and once confided in me that he envisioned showcasing his paintings to cattle in the Pantanal area.

The problem is that this thematically regional output invariably ends up in the mainstream art scene, i.e. the artwork gets shown in galleries and museums, discussed by critics on newspapers and magazines, purchased by collectors or the nouveau riche to decorate their apartments and offices. In other words, artists and buyers alike act a bit like hunters who, after slaughtering prey in its habitat, head out to the big city to show off their trophies – a cultural zoo.

Dórea takes a different approach; he wants to reverse that process, “to make art devoid of urban references and then show it in the very setting that inspired it: the backlands.” That is, he intends to go against the grain of art history.

Curiously, however, in acting this way, he is solving, or at least situating, in those rural settings, issues that have long plagued the makers and ideologues of an essentially urban art. It is worth noting that this art made elsewhere than the Rio-São Paulo axis ultimately reads as a critique of the avant-garde, of sophisticated artmaking that imports international trends.

By showing his work at free fairs, hanging it on clotheslines under the shade of leafy umbu trees, “like so many uncanny outdoors amid goats, skinny ox and xique-xique cacti,” or painting his murals onto old adobe walls or the such in some lost corner of the backlands, in his own way, Juraci Dórea is making “public art, bringing to fruition an old dream of museologists – the “outdoor museum” – as well as partaking, in his own space, of the new muralist wave, currently a worldwide phenomenon. And just like the Mexicans of the past and the chicanos of our time, he uses murals to address things pertaining to the reality that surrounds local populations, their traditions, customs, myths and legends. And in taking statements from locals and passersby about his work, he provides precious elements to an anthropology and a sociology of Brazilian art, to the extent that these statements reveal the sertanejo people's concept of art.

On the other hand, with his raw leather and wood sculptures, which he lays down at crossroads, open fields, nature reserves, and which function as a kind of totems or solitary landmarks of great visual impact, on land formerly trodden by Lampião and Antônio Conselheiro, Dórea also flirts with highly

current propositions. It wouldn't be altogether absurd to term this as sertanejo concept or process art, or earth or land-art, and as povera art, to the extent that he employs "poor" materials, seeks "identification with the region's culture and landscape," or that his "structures," set in open, unprotected spaces, undergo semantic interference from the weather and from people. Situated where they are, his sculptures hark back to projects such as Mathias Goeritz's in Mexico (the satellite city towers or the "Ruta de la amistad," featuring sculptures by artists from 15 different countries and five continents encircling the Olympic venue), or "road art" experiments in Venezuela and Colombia.

Indeed, Juraci Dórea wouldn't be far from utopias like the ones envisioned by Otto Freundlich and the aforementioned Goeritz, among others, who imagined occupying entire continents with artworks, to show men the way to peace and fraternity. For the utopia of a sertanejo folk art put forth by Juraci Dórea is ultimately a bid to recover art's unifying role, art at the service of man, of his imagination, serving as a link between man and nature, between heaven and earth, between daily life and magic, between reality and magic. Art, not as luxury or décor, but as a tool for social cohesion, just like in tribal and religious societies.