

A contemporary approach to landscape

Artworks from the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art's collection

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Abstract. This paper conducts a brief contextualization of the tradition of landscape painting, mainly in western art, towards the rupture with its notion of “panoramic view”, in which the observer is detached from the context of the landscape, emphasizing contemporary artworks in which the body takes on a position of protagonist. To illustrate this change, we searched the collection of the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art, in Brazil, and chose three artworks, all of which suggest bodily involvement with landscape: André Cypriano’s photo *Pai & filho* [Father & Son], from the series *Rocinha Project (1999-2002)*; Sandra Cinto’s photo *Untitled (1997)*; and Sara Ramo’s video *Oceano possível* [Possible Ocean] (2002).

Keywords. History of Art, landscape painting, body, São Paulo Museum of Modern Art.

1. Introduction

This paper starts with a brief contextualization of the tradition of landscape painting, mainly in western art, towards the rupture with the traditional notions of landscape by contemporary artists, emphasizing the centrality of the body in their works. To illustrate this change, we searched the collection of the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art (MAM), in Brazil, and chose three artworks: André Cypriano’s photo *Pai & filho* [Father & Son], from the series *Rocinha Project (1999-2002)*; Sandra Cinto’s photo *Untitled (1997)*; and Sara Ramo’s video *Oceano possível* [Possible Ocean] (2002).

2. Research Methods

This paper is a result of bibliographic research in books and scientific papers related to the theme of landscape painting, mainly in western art, and documental research in the digital archive of the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art (MAM), as part of a broader research on the museum’s collection. The search for the artworks was conducted through MAM’s website, www.mam.org.br, in which the artworks are catalogued.

3. Discussion

Landscape painting has been made since Antiquity. Greeks and romans, for example, painted garden and nature scenes to adorn spaces destined to celebrate rituals and cults. As an example, we can cite what came to be known as the *Spring Fresco*, situated in Akrotiri, on the Isle of Santorini, in Greece, which dates from the Bronze Age, associated to a festival of celebration of spring [1].

In China, landscape painting is a millenary tradition, beginning in the Tang Dynasty (618-907), mainly with the *shanshui* paintings: monochromatic and sparse landscapes with the purpose not of reproducing mimetically the appearance of nature, but of capturing “an emotion or atmosphere so as to catch the ‘rhythm’ of nature” [2].

In western tradition, during the Renaissance, as art was still centered on the representation of biblical, mythological, and historical themes, landscape painting appeared as scenery for these narratives. It is important to note, however, how the mathematical studies developed at the time revolutionized the way landscapes were represented, based on a more profound understanding of elements such as perspective and proportion [3].

The term “landscape” derives from the Dutch word *landschap*, which means “region, piece of

land”, but that gained an artistic connotation on the beginning of the sixteenth century, when it came to depict the representation of a scenery or territory [3]. Also, according to Besse [4], landscape can be defined as a visual spectacle obtained from an “elevation”, such as a panorama (p. 244).

The development of the term in the Netherlands, in the sixteenth century, is due to the popularity of landscape painting in that region, which is related to the search, by the emergent protestant middle class, of a kind of secular art to decorate their houses, a need fulfilled by this kind of painting [3].

In the seventeenth century, landscape becomes a subject of representation of its own and is legitimized as a genre in the context of art academies. However, for a long time, it appeared on the bottom of its hierarchy. We can see the protagonism of landscape in the works of artists such as Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorrain, which came to be known as classical landscapes, as they evoked Greek and Roman landscapes, in a highly stylized manner, which sought to represent an ideal and harmonious scenery, amidst nature. At the same time, some Dutch painters, such as Jacob van Ruysdael, were developing a more naturalistic approach in the representation of landscape [5].

In the nineteenth century, landscape painting gains prominence beyond the limitations imposed by the academies, due to the rise of Romanticism, when, among other manifestations, landscape is used by artists as a means to express their emotions, achieving a personal and self-reflexive character. In the canon of Art History, romantic landscape paintings are divided between the ideas of the Sublime and the Picturesque. Burke [6] defined the Sublime in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. He explains that:

‘Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling’ (p. 58-59).

Regarding the Picturesque, it is evoked in the writings of Gilpin, such as in his *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape (1792)* and is based on the observation of the English landscape, which will influence the artists’ composition. According to Gilpin, as cited by Diener [7]:

‘We seek [the picturesque] among all the ingredients of landscape - trees - rocks - broken-grounds - woods - rivers - lakes - plains - valleys - mountains - and distances. These objects in themselves produce infinite variety. No two rocks, or trees are exactly the

same. They are varied, a second time, by combination; and almost as much, a third time, by different lights, and shades, and other aerial effects. Sometimes we find among them the exhibition of a whole; but oftener we find only beautiful parts’ (p. 5).

Also, Price [8] identifies the Picturesque as associated with the qualities of ‘roughness, and of sudden variation, joined to that of irregularity’ (p. 82). In the face of these concepts, Diener [7] underlines the emergence of the “picturesque tourism”, when travelers embark on journeys to remote places, searching for new landscapes. ‘The picturesque becomes a way of assimilating this experience, of taming the unknown, of organizing the unstructured’ [p. 290].

In Brazil, the representation of landscapes starts, practically, with the activities of traveling artists, mainly Europeans, that portray the landscapes and the populations they encounter. We can cite, as examples, Albert Eckhout (1612-1665) and Frans Post (1612-1680), Dutchmen that have been to the countries’ Northeast region in the seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century, with the arrival of the French Artistic Mission in Brazil and the foundation of the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts, in Rio de Janeiro, we have the development of fine arts and the consolidation of the academic genres of painting in the country. Among the main artists from the period are Nicolas Antoine Taunay (1755-1830) and Jean-Baptiste Debret (1768-1848).

Throughout the nineteenth century, according to Coelho [9], different ways of representing the landscape coexisted, such as academic painting, tied to the development of a national identity, as well as the representation by the traveling artists, who often adopted a naturalistic look, and, therefore, sought to represent the landscape in the most accurate way possible. Many of these images would come to compose traveling albums, which described the places, the flora, the fauna and the inhabitants of the territories represented, all of which were accentuated by the artists’ search for the picturesque and the “exotic” [9]. Also, due to the lack of maps representing most of the Brazilian cities, these panoramic representations of landscape contributed to a general vision of the territories.

Back in Europe, in the nineteenth century, landscape painting begins to go through other important transformations, becoming one of the main mediums for artistic experimentation. According to Auricchio [10], some of the most important tendencies in the development of modern art, such as the rupture with illusionism and the emphasis in the materiality of painting, emerged from the experiments with landscape paintings on this era.

In this regard, we point out the activities of the Barbizon painters, who made naturalistic

observations of the environment, leaving their studios to paint *en plein air* (open-air). Among them were Charles-François Daubigny and Théodore Rousseau. The next generation of artists that experimented with landscape painting, the impressionist, such as Monet, Renoir and others, utilized *en plein air* painting to capture scenes of modern life in urban and suburban contexts.

Among the many changes brought by these modern artists, it is important to mention the rupture with the notion of “finish”, present in academic painting and disregarded by the impressionists. These artists also abandoned traditional concepts such as perspective and techniques like the *chiaroscuro* and the observation of live models, in order to register their experiences in the most direct way possible, usually in contact with nature.

If, with modern art, we see a rupture with the mimetic representation of landscapes, a context in which we can also mention important movements such as fauvism, expressionism and cubism, in the sixties, an even more radical change occurs, concerning art's traditional mediums. Thus, there was a radical change concerning the relation of the artists with art's traditional genres and forms, such as painting and sculpture, and that consists of the constant transgression of its limits.

On the second half of the twentieth century, the definition of landscape was once more challenged and tensioned, in order to include concepts like urban, cultural and industrial landscapes, as well experiences such as land art and site-specific works. More and more, artists used less traditional medias to create works related to landscapes.

Besse [4] emphasizes how the concept of landscape went on to integrate universes that are not solely related to the art sphere but are situated in the articulation between aesthetics and other dimensions, such as science, religion and politics (p. 242). The author also stresses how the traditional notions of landscape are linked to an action of detachment by the observer, which is an act of putting oneself in an exterior position in relation to the world that appears in front of their eyes (p. 244). In contrast, Besse [4] suggests a bodily involvement with landscape, which presupposes the placement of the body as its central element. According to him, landscape corresponds to our involvement in the world, which means it is not far from us, on the horizon, but on the contrary, it is around and involves us, in a way that a physical experience forms landscape (p. 246).

Based on the subversion of the traditional concepts of landscape painting, we searched the collection of the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art, in Brazil, for contemporary artworks that express the idea of “reinvention of landscape”, using medias such as photography and video. Informed by the notions

discussed by Besse, we propose the category of “body-landscape” to guide our search: the artworks under this category represent the occupation of the body as a central character in the landscape, as opposed to the “panoramic view” and the detachment that traditionally characterized landscape representation in many moments of Art History.

We chose three artworks to represent the notion of “body-landscape”: André Cypriano's photo *Pai & filho* [Father & Son], from the series *Rocinha Project* (1999-2002); Sandra Cinto's photo *Untitled* (1997); and Sara Ramo's video *Oceano possível* [Possible Ocean] (2002).

Cypriano's work, *Pai & filho* [Father & Son], is part of a series of photos that document the lifestyles of different communities around the world, such as the daily life of Rocinha's residents, in Rio de Janeiro, considered the largest slum (favela) in Brazil. In the black and white photo [figure 1], we see a baby standing on his father's shoulders, both contemplating the view of the Rocinha community. Although it presents a “panoramic view”, this landscape has this father and his son as its central characters, or protagonists, in a bodily involvement with the space.



Fig. 1 - André Cypriano, *Pai & filho* [Father & Son], from the series *Rocinha Project* (1999-2002). Black and white photography, 50.4x40.5 cm. São Paulo Museum of Modern Art Collection.

In the case of Cinto's photo (figure 2), the landscape is intrinsic to the body, as it is directly drawn on it: in the image, we see a forearm filled with a whimsical scenery of trees, rocks, and chandeliers. In this case, the body literally contains the landscape.

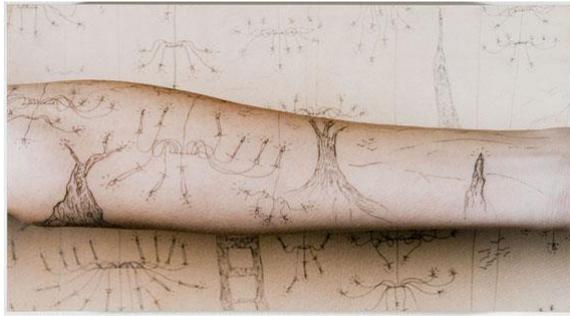


Fig. 1 – Sandra Cinto, *Untitled*, 1997. Photography on paper, 70x127cm. São Paulo Museum of Modern Art Collection.

In *Oceano possível* [Possible Ocean], Ramo appears in a domestic space, bathing from water that she takes from blue, green and white basins and buckets that surround her. The artist creates her own oceanic landscape, a possible landscape within the limitations of that space, and in which her body is the protagonist.



Fig. 1 – Sara Ramo, *Oceano possível* [Possible Ocean] (2002), video (4 min). São Paulo Museum of Modern Art Collection.

4. Conclusions

During this research, it was possible to go through a brief contextualization of the concept of landscape painting and its institutionalization as a genre in the context of art academies, as well as to explore further changes in the representation of landscape, by modern and, later, contemporary artists. We emphasized how landscape painting was traditionally grounded on a “panoramic” representation of space, which involved a detachment by the observer. By using examples of three artworks present in the São Paulo Museum of Modern

Art’s collection, we were able to emphasize a concern by some contemporary artists, and as theorized by Besse, to introduce a bodily involvement with landscape, integrating it with a physical experience.

5. References

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