

ARTFORUM

By Sergio Martins April 2013

Fernanda Gomes

CASA DE CULTURA LAURA ALVIM

It may be surprising to learn that Fernanda Gomes's career began in the late 1980s, when in Brazil, as elsewhere, the artistic scene was dominated by neo-expressionist painting. Some of her objects may be handmade, and even handpainted, but there is nothing demonstrative about them. Instead of flaunting an ostensive physicality, they evoke intimacy—a line of white cotton thread patiently wrapped around two tiny nails—and draw one's attention to the prolonged and delicate processes both of their making and of their placement alongside each other. One is reminded of Susan Stewart's observation that the "laboriously handmade object" is not "an accumulation of materiality but rather an accumulation of transformations made in time." Even the found objects Gomes appropriates have the passing of time stamped on them, in the form of material dilapidation. Old suitcases, well-worn chairs, broken chinaware, a set of wooden drawers from a discarded fitted wardrobe—an oblique sign of Rio de Janeiro's real-estate boom—all attest to the artist's interest in, as she puts it, "the bone of things."

In her recent exhibition, Gomes occupied the architecturally eclectic (and awkward) gallery of the Casa de Cultura Laura Alvim, singularly located on the Ipanema beachfront. She not only refrained from treating it as a neutral space but actually opened the gallery's front window in order to embrace the hustle and bustle of street and beach, the sounds of which grew gradually subdued as one headed toward the more secluded back areas. The artist handled the placement of her objects accordingly: Whereas the front room displayed some ordinary plastic bags—either hanging or laid loosely on the floor, which got increasingly scuffed over the weeks—and a tattered white kite, which dangled as the hot wind blew from the outside, the back rooms, with their accumulations of things, sometimes recalled a moldy storage area or a workshop, thus heightening the show's aura of provisionality. The passage of time was also felt as dust and sea spray gradually settled on top of everything: A clear acrylic box became increasingly opaque, while the portion of marble floor it protected remained pristine, in contrast with its dirtier surroundings. At one point, the artist herself swept the floor so as to create a corner piece of dust and soot.

Gomes has been prolific over the past year or so, exhibiting at other challenging venues such as the Museu de Arte Moderna in Rio in 2011 and at the São Paulo Bienal in 2012. What's become clear is the flexibility of her approach to working with diverse spaces. At stake here are not simply the individual qualities of this or that object, but rather their different ways of gathering things around us. Most of those things lead a day-to-day existence as domestic clutter in the artist's home, where some of them, such as stools and drinking glasses, even remain useful. Each new exhibition temporarily wrests them away from their mutual intimacy, to which most of them will eventually return. Their spatial relations change with each new occasion, but their objecthood remains physically and conceptually tenuous. As they court invisibility, we are reminded of how difficult it has become to conceive of a meaningful artwork in a world where objects have become utterly colonized by utilitarianism and fetishism. It's a warning that may be implicitly inscribed in one of the many subtle but thought-provoking pieces in the show: a carpenter's rule whose numbers have been gently veiled by a thin layer of white paint.