

ArtReview

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Fernanda Gomes



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The Rio-based artist blurs the line between
raw material and finished art object, calling on the
viewer to form a closer relationship with both

by Oliver Basciano Photography by Pat Kilgore



Just outside a window of Fernanda Gomes's sixth-floor flat in the Copacabana district of Rio de Janeiro is a piece of fine wire piping, stretched out like a fishing rod. At its end hangs a feather, which, as twilight descends on the city, bobs to and fro in the warm evening breeze. This gentle interaction between the ad hoc mobile and its surroundings, combined with the elegant simplicity of its construction, makes it, and Gomes's work in general, a beautiful thing.

Despite being made by the artist's hand, this is not an object that will end up in a gallery exhibition. It's unlikely to be bought or documented (this article aside) or incorporated into any of the official systems that validate something as 'an artwork'. It is simply an object that the artist made for herself. She and the few visitors she invites into her apartment are its only intended audience.

To understand Gomes's work is to understand the importance of her authorial hand in the validation of her work – which can perhaps be perceived as a self-portrait, charting her relationship with the material as she manipulates it into a sculptural object – a modernist perspective at odds with the more contemporary notion that it is the beholding subject who dictates the semantics of a work.

I first met Gomes in London – a month prior to visiting the artist in her apartment – during her spring exhibition at Alison Jacques Gallery. Despite her renown in Latin America (she emerged as part of the generation of Rio-born artists that also includes Beatriz Milhazes, Ernesto Neto and Adriana Varejão), this exhibition was the first in the British capital since her solo outing at the Chisenhale Gallery, in 1997. At Jacques, a

profusion of slight objects colonised the floor and walls of the space – an installation that is characteristic of Gomes's practice, though she does not exclusively work on such a small scale. Despite their number, the delicate nature of the works meant that the gallery space never felt crowded.

All untitled (as they always are), the objects were made from cheap, prosaic materials – frequently, but not exclusively, wood – either found in the street or bought from basic hardware or artist-supply stores. Among them were two strips of MDF nailed to form a perfect right angle; a wall-mounted cardboard box mysteriously covered with tissue paper; a linen thread from which hung a dozen or so half-burnt sheets of cigarette paper; and on the floor, a small rock. Approximately half the objects displayed were materials in their 'natural' state without any physical alteration by the artist – a 20cm offcut of a wood floorboard placed on the gallery floor, for example. She had simply transported them to the gallery space and then requested that we give them attention. Some of the materials were left unpainted; others had a rough white matt finish. Other works were delicate and precarious forms of bricolage, their elements loosely attached to each other. In one corner five 12-sq-cm wood blocks were piled up, the top two painted

entirely white; the bottom three only partially, in a manner that highlighted the grain of the material. Another example: two lengths of bamboo attached to each other with cotton. Installed upright in the middle of the gallery, the thin totem bows slightly under its own weight, a curve that gives the eye a break from the straight lines and geometric constructions that surround it. Gomes's interplay with the architecture of the exhibition space is even more apparent when she works on a bigger scale. Part of her installation at last year's São Paulo Bienal used much larger pieces of found building plaster and rough wood frames that created barriers and subtly controlled the viewer's passage through the space.

Back at the artist's apartment the mobile is not the only work in evidence. While there is a small room to the rear of the building that could be referred to as a studio, it is apparent that Gomes effects no separation within her working and living environments. The sitting room is almost entirely taken over by her own art, either carefully installed with the same attention she might give a gallery show, or otherwise stacked to one side. Or perhaps the stuff stacked is still just materials, and only the formally installed objects are finished *work*. It's far from clear. The same situation can be found throughout her home – the kitchen, hallway and her bedroom all incorporate a similar level of restrained bricolage.

This friction between raw material and finished art object is one that Gomes encourages. Sitting in her lounge – the remaining light of the day playing off a length of bamboo wedged between the floor and ceiling – the

artist is talking about how she has no need for a studio, and doesn't desire a separation between her professional work and the rest of her life. She could be talking about the products of this multipurpose space too. Gomes's perspective on the status of the things she exhibits disdains that art cliché about the 'alchemy' of the readymade. There's no mental or conceptual transformation that occurs in the transportation of an object from general life to the gallery. Her installation at the São Paulo Bienal also included a stem from a bunch of grapes, installed protruding from the gallery wall. One could imagine the stem was sourced from the artist's lunch, or perhaps that of one of the technicians, or maybe it was just found in a public place sometime prior to its installation. Whatever its origin, the grape stalk is both food waste and artwork simultaneously: for the viewer, the waste nature of the materials catalyses a subtle quashing of the hierarchies between art space and street space.

If it is obvious that, like the mobile, the works installed in the artist's home have been made for Gomes to enjoy personally, one is left wondering whether all her works, wherever they are shown, have the same primary aim. I ask her why, when she applies paint to an object, it is only ever white. She tells me how she started doing it (continued on page 84)



above Fernanda Gomes, 2013 (installation view, Alison Jacques Gallery, London).
Photo: Michael Brzezinski

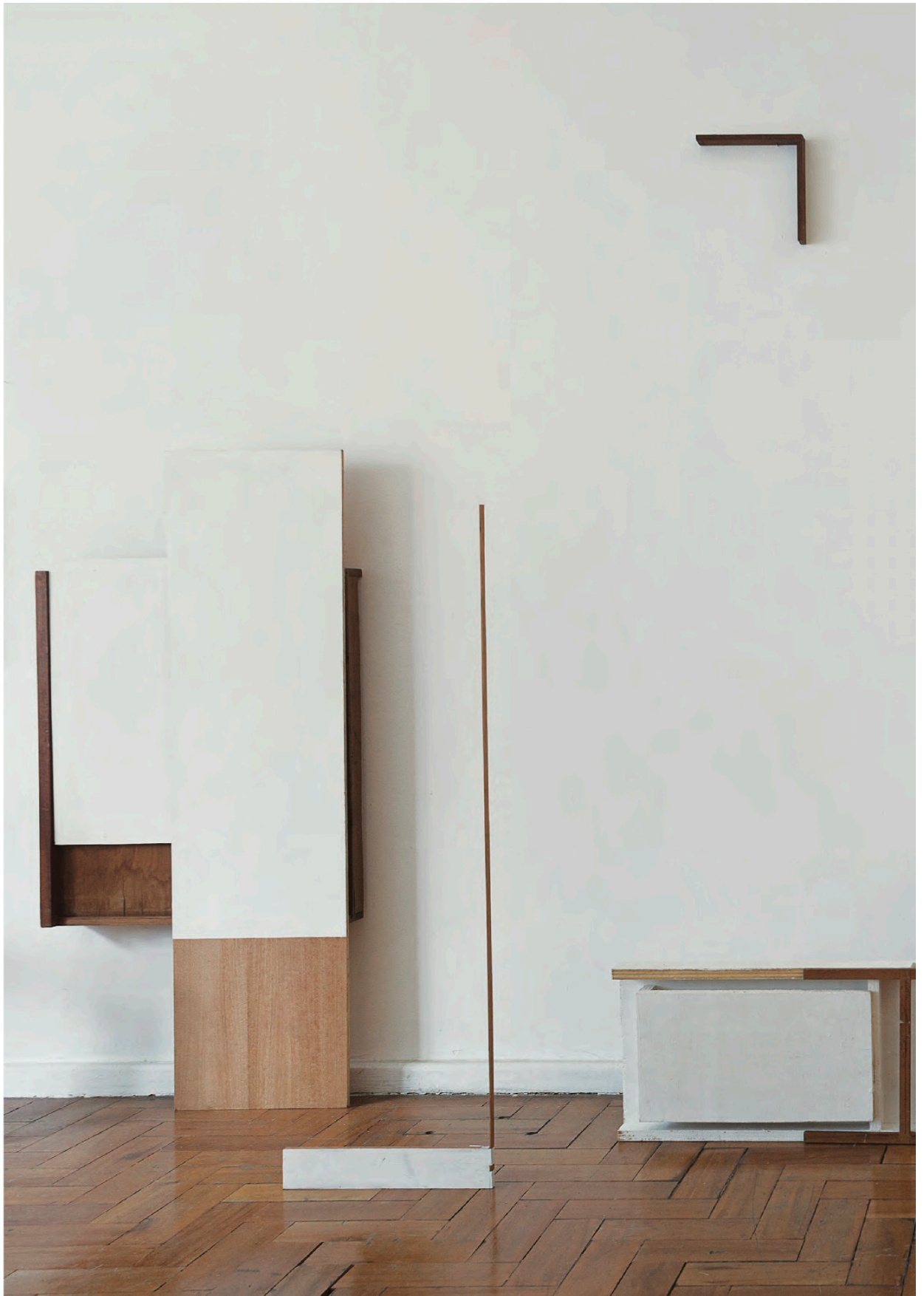
facing page Interior of the artist's Rio de Janeiro apartment. Photo: Pat Kilgore



Untitled, 2012 (installation view, São Paulo Bienal). Photo: Pat Kilgore



Untitled, 2012, wood, brick, plaster, 29 × 8 × 8 cm.
Photo: Michael Brzezinski. © the artist. Courtesy Alison Jacques Gallery, London





during the mid-1980s, and how she appreciates it as a “receptive colour” that will highlight subtle changes in the light levels of the environment around the installation. The installation at the São Paulo Bienal was completed by little pools of dappled natural light coming in through from the glass walls of the Oscar Niemeyer-designed Bienal Pavilion in Ibirapuera Park – glinting off two nails hammered into a block of wood that lay on a narrow shelf, or partially illuminating sections of crumpled translucent white paper pinned to the wall.

In Rio, Gomes – wearing a white flowing dress (she frequently makes her own clothes) – carefully places a plate of pale wheat snacks down on the table in front of me before pouring tea from a pale tea set. She tells me she is interested in the fact that white is what the eye sees when all the wavelengths of the visible spectrum hit it at once. She’s interested in the colour’s all-encompassing nature. Her use of white throughout her work (in the apartment, the lampshades, which she designed herself because she couldn’t find any that she liked, are white too; as are the walls and much of the furniture) seems an analogous reflection of this optical all-inclusivity. The artist immerses and invests herself

in her surroundings – be it the apartment, the gallery or the street – and the viewer is encouraged to look as the artist looks, to take in the world as she does, from minute changes in light to the close observation of the smallest but perhaps overlooked things. “The other day I came across an interesting-looking screw,” she says by way of explanation, knowing, one presumes, that to most people one screw is just like the next.

She goes on to describe how she recently met a man on the beach who was weaving hats for tourists from palm leaves. Gomes asked him to teach her how to do it, because she wanted to understand the

process – she wanted to initiate a deeper understanding of and a closer relationship to the object; to be somehow invested in it, rather than simply to consume it. And it’s this desire – to privilege the relationship between the ‘I’ and the world around it – that lies at the heart of Gomes’s sculptures. For the viewer, then, there is an encouragement to erase traditional distinctions between subject and object, to suggest that there can be no consciousness without it being consciousness of an object – an argument for a particular notion of being in the world. ar



preceding pages and above Interior views of the artist’s Rio de Janeiro apartment. Photos: Pat Kilgore