

Brazil, Water, and Artists Who Do it All

By Erin Treacy

Colourful balloons and ribbons, repetitious forms, well wishes, active participation, and lots of story telling. No, I am not describing my plans for my next birthday party, rather the excitement I experience when viewing the work of Janaina Tschape and Rivane Neuenschwander. I came upon these two artists at very different places and times in recent years, the former in 2008 at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) in Dublin and the later in 2010 at The New Museum in New York City. Immediately upon experiencing Neuenschwander's large (mid-career) exhibition and noticing her Brazilian background, I was reminded of Tschape's ten-year survey two years prior. Their Brazilian/Germanic background struck a cord in my mind each time (Tschape born in Germany, raised in Brazil by a German and a Brazilian parent. Neuenschwander born and raised in Brazil, but her Germanic surname jumped out at me- leading me to discover she is of Swiss, Portuguese and Amerindian descent.) The work of these women is very different formally, yet the similarities are striking: the creation of 'other-worlds' and a keen eye for formal reduction despite conceptual complexity. It was with great humor, I soon found yet another linkage between the two artists; "Rivane Neuenschwander : A Day Like Any Other" was curated by Richard Flood, Chief Curator at the New Museum. Yet, the exhibition is organized by the New Museum in collaboration with the Irish Museum of Modern Art. Thus Neuenschwander's exhibition just came down from its IMMA installation in January 2012. Water and circular forms permeate within both artist body of work; they utilize water visually and literally in their various mediums. (Neuenschwander and Tschape participated in the group exhibition "Water, Water Everywhere..." at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, Arizona, USA in 2005- also traveled to the Center for Contemporary Art in Virginia, USA).



Janaina Tschape, Big Blue, 2011

To begin this journey I go back to 2008 when I entered IMMA, walked up the stairs unknowing of the treat that awaited me. As I reached the top I was embraced by several large paintings of organic abstractions- referencing both water and flora. Having, myself, recently moved to the west coast of Ireland to research this very topic- I was thrilled. The colorful pictorial expansions allowed me to imagine each painting referencing a new world. I encountered a fictional space where I felt both warm-comfort and excitement. Having not known this exhibition was on display, as I navigated through the adjoining rooms that supported her exhibition, I was impressed with her ability to move between mediums to create cohesive narration. Using Painting, photography, and film Tschape created fantastical characters, mystical scenes, and storylines-often referencing water and its magical qualities. Her layered paintings create environments. In her line-drawings we learn of plant life that may live in such environments, and in her photographs we see curious creatures come to life.



Janaina Tschape, Melantropics Dreams Veratrum Bulbosus 2006

In *Melantropics I Series* we see how her crisp photographs have paint like quality and clear command of color theory. In particular, *Melantropics I Series: Glandulitera Maris*, 2005 gives the viewer a dynamic asymmetrical composition with dramatic lighting that references Dutch romanticism. Her 'costume' is plush and organic and coral tentacles jump off the lush green

background. Tschape worlds are often informed from literature, fairy tales from Brazil and abroad, with great aquatic life and the mermaid protagonist; we are reminded of Hans Christian Anderson's *The Little Mermaid* (1837).

In her video *He Drowned in Her Eyes as She Called Him to Follow (Medusa)*, 2000) the struggle of the little mermaid comes to mind as one watches a woman seemingly struggle to breathe in and out of a bubble, while out of water. The struggle to be in two worlds is smoothly projected in the subtle drama. Likewise the series *A Botanist's Dream*, 2006 draws from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Charles Lutwidge Dodgson aka Lewis Carroll, 1865) with literally interpretations of proportions and that same control of dramatic light.



Janaina Tschape, *Melantropics*

As the main protagonist, Tschape becomes her art through the use of costumes that turn her into her sea creatures amongst the lush gardens of otherworldly fauna and flora. Her costume of inflated balloons and expanding pantyhose, distort the body- at once disgusting yet voluminous. The manipulation adds portions and shapes that create extra limbs and/or undulating forms, reminiscent of some of Eva Hesse's forms, yet somehow more poetic. Disturbing, grotesque, inviting, and romantic, Tschape work is best seen as a whole. The

mediums compliment one another in this exhibition and unite for a charming affect where the viewer is exited to have been invited to participate in a journey to another place where the protagonist is hero, and thus has some obstacle that it must overcome to achieve victory.

So two years later, I have moved back to New York City after living in Ireland and walking through the exhibition of Neuenschwander at the New Museum one may not automatically have thought of Tschape, but the meaningfully storytelling and the perceived sincerity of the work connected the two for me. No matter what the consisting formal components were, each artist achieves a thoughtful consideration that provoked inquisitiveness.

If you were lucky to have seen Neuenschwander mid-career survey at one of its stops over the years, what most frequently sticks out in the minds of many are her large-scale installations. The Internet is flooded with images of the popular installation, *I Wish Your Wish* (2003). Here we find all those colorful satin ribbons adorning the walls of the installation, reminding me of Tschape's own playful approach to repetition and color. This one piece highlights much of Neuenschwander work- audience participation, formal repetition, social relevance, and the link between one component of the installation acting singularly as well as communally. Here the audience is enticed into the simple action of taking a ribbon that bears a wish and wearing it until it falls off. Inspired by the ribbons tied to gates surrounding the church of Nosso Senhor do Bonfim (Our Lord of the Good Ends) in Bahia, Brazil, *I Wish Your Wish* conceptually forms a whole by having viewers "take" a wish as well as "leave" a wish. Here we see one single ribbon united with the others to create a whole, a rainbow, and then the idea dissipates with each ribbon becoming a single action and a single work of art.



Rivane Neuenschwander, *Rain Rain*, 2002

This cycle of renewal is evident in much of her work, which calls to mind all of those earth science diagrams where we see The Water Cycle transpire through the demonstration of a natural watershed system. This water cycle is then literally depicted for us her installation *Rain Rain* (2002) where we enter a room filled with tin buckets hanging from the ceiling as well as sitting on the floor. In this system there is a fun wonder within the buckets, they are formally inviting, ranging in length of drop. Circles are repeated in the buckets, the raindrops, and the rain spillage. These characteristics echo the uneven and changing rhythms of rain. The sound is the most active sense in this piece, we hear, and then see drops of water falling from the buckets above while being collected in the buckets below. It is the sound that settles me in this

room, as I am reminded of falling asleep under a tin roof in the Dominican Republic. The audience is the viewer in this installation but now the artist engages a new participant: the museum attendant; they watch to see when the buckets fill and then promptly pick them up, climb a ladder, and refill the hanging buckets to allow for the cycle to begin again.

Much of Neuenschwander art is informed from literature (and film). She is never illustrating books, but rather use the literary theme as a conceptual starting point in which she further explores similar ideas through various mediums. In *Nights* (2008) we find a collection of small “drawings” - really collages, where bits of punched-out paper are arranged into various constellations and cosmos. Each one reminds me of making a wish on a star or the childlike stargazing that spurs imaginative dreaming in the night to come. Here Neuenschwander is inspired from the famous tale of *One Thousand and One Nights* (*Arabian Nights*) and yet again, as we saw in *I Wish Your Wish*, the artist relies on a melancholy hopefulness to pull attention.

We see the influence of water, repetition, and activated spaces in all of these dynamic pieces, but what will surprise you is how she approaches the medium of paint. You come across her paintings in a unique manner in this exhibition. Tucked into a corner or behind an installation; her paintings play a supportive role in her body of work, but an important supportive role nonetheless.



Rivane Neuenschwander, *After the Storm 2*

In the series *After the Storm* (2010), Neuenschwander takes New York State County maps and exposes them to the elements of Brazil during rainy season. By leaving the paper out in the rain the county lines become warped- raising questions of shifting boundaries and borders. By allowing the water to manipulate the forms, she then engages with nature and then returns to these maps with the paintbrush. Each piece is approached in a unique way- some become colorful abstractions where the map only peaks through, while others maintain many of their original characteristics. These paintings are exhibited on the walls that surround the *Rain Rain* installation of cycling water through the tin buckets. Thus a new space is created, a new land graphed, which allows Neuenschwander and Tschape to share in the title of inventor.



Rivane Neuenschwander, *At a Certain Distance*

Her other series of paintings *At a Certain Distance* (2010) are her most successful, as she manages to do with paint, what her installations continuously demand: actively engage. Rounding a corner of the gallery I find myself on an orange-carpeted corner of a room with a row of small paintings. Each composition acts like a stage, empty and waiting for the actors to arrive. Another possibility is that they serve as a still background for future film sets. Yet rather than the large work/installations these paintings are 9" x 15", neatly lined up as if waiting their turn to shine. The action of these pieces is singular and as you enter the two-dimensional space with your imagination, rather than your body, you see that the artist has created a stage for your thoughts. Though viewed in the public space, I became aware of a more personal relationship being formed between the painting platform and myself. This may call for more patience than some can afford but for me this helped to balance her body of work, where so much emphasis had been put on the literal interaction between art and body. These two distinctions in approach are bridged in her piece *First Love* (2005), inspired by Samuel Beckett's novella of the same title, where we see memory and imagination united as the viewer/participant is encouraged to reflect on their first love and then answer questions to guide a forensics artist through a drawing for their first love. Each of these drawings then hung in a grid like form in the gallery. Constant engagement and reflection allow Neuenschwander to move from one medium to the next with fluidly and grace.

Finding these two artists and becoming newly introduced to their work is one of my favorite parts about travel. The unknown surprise, the love of the overlap, and the interconnectedness that is apparently inevitable, occurs in all facets of life, most notable (and maybe most obviously) in art.

All images courtesy of Galeria Fortes Vilaça, Brazil

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