

Frieze

Opinion /



BY EVAN MOFFITT

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With Brazil in Crisis, the 33rd São Paulo Biennial Sidesteps Tough Political Questions

Handing authorship of the biennial to a diverse group of artists is a democratic gesture but conveniently deflects and disperses blame



It began with a fire. While technicians were still installing the temporary walls of the 33rd Bienal de São Paulo in its curvaceous, white pavilion in Ibirapuera Park, a blaze consumed Brazil's National Museum, the most important historical and anthropological collection in Latin America, housed in the former Portuguese royal palace in Rio de Janeiro.

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Tanya Leighton

Millennia of history were suddenly incinerated, the last records of entire languages forever lost. The museum's smouldering shell soon became a symbol for the country's political crisis, which (on the eve of the last biennial) saw the 2016 impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff by her right-wing Vice President, Michel Temer. The frontrunner in the upcoming election, former leftist President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, has recently been jailed on fraud charges; left-wing activists have been murdered. The arts, too, have been under constant attack by right-wing politicians and evangelicals, who have successfully shuttered exhibitions and threatened public institutions with funding cuts.

All this put Gabriel Perez-Barreiro, the biennial's chief curator, in a uniquely vulnerable yet empowered position: push back against right-wing revanchism and face a mob of religious fanatics; yet send a message directly to the President. It's safe to say that Pérez-Barreiro has passed on that opportunity, instead inviting seven artist curators – Mamma Andersson, Antonio Ballester Moreno, Sofia Borges, Waltércio Caldas, Alejandro Cesarco, Claudia Fontes and Wura-Natasha Ogunji – to each mount their own distinct exhibition within the whole. The overall result, 'Affective Affinities', is a biennial whose sum is no greater than its parts, and whose parts vary greatly in quality. Affinities between the seven shows are hard to glean, even if most of them overindulge in formalist similitude.

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Antonio Ballester
Moreno-curated
'common/sense',
33rd Bienal de São
Paulo, installation
view, Cicillo
Matarazzo Pavilion,
São Paulo, Brazil.
Courtesy: © Pedro
Ivo Trasferetti /
Fundação Bienal de
São Paulo



This biennial's most consistent feature is open space, and there's plenty of it on the ground floor, where it begins with Antonio Ballester Moreno's 'common/sense'. Large acrylic paintings on jute and a floor mandala of small clay mushrooms from Ballester Moreno's own series 'Vivan los campos libres' (Long live the free fields, 2018) occupy one half of this floor. The mostly abstract geometric paintings of yellow suns and leafy trees are fairly anodyne, though the fungi – hand-sculpted by public school children from São Paulo – seem almost phosphorescent in the sunlight that flows through the ample windows of Oscar Niemeyer's design. The installation is a fitting accompaniment to a nearby presentation of children's toys and mathematical games by the early 19th century pedagogical theorist Friedrich Fröbel, who first conceived of 'kindergarten' and argued that children have unique cognitive capabilities. Some of the more geometric games resemble neo-concrete compositions by Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica, offering a tantalizing link between the utopian aspirations of Brazilian modernism and the promise of an enlightened 'children's garden'.