

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Ria Hopkinson, 'From the horse's mouth: interview with José Damasceno', *The Art Newspaper*, October 16, 2014

Readers are sharing Holborn Library with Letraset characters and a horse called Pascal, courtesy of Artangel's latest commission



José Damasceno with the equestrian painting he bought in Copacabana, part of his show at Holborn Library. Photo: © Tom Oldham

José Damasceno's site-specific installation "Plot", commissioned by Artangel, is one of the city's major draws during Frieze week—and unsuspecting users of Holborn Library have found themselves at the centre of the action after the Brazilian artist took over the central London space.

Families of Letraset characters hang upside down from the ceiling in the spartan 1960s reading room, while a 300kg "monster" comprising slabs of clay sprawls over a table in the Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre upstairs. In what was previously a dusty, disused auditorium on the fourth floor, pink neon shines from a projector room onto a series of small stages made from burnished, softly lit wood.

The artist has used a wide range of materials (including clay, marble, wood and a 1960 edition of the 24-volume Encyclopaedia Britannica), and his eclectic influences are apparent in an accompanying book, which features quotations from William Harvey, the first person to describe blood circulation, and a short "Hammer Horror"-style script.

Damasceno, 46, was born in Rio de Janeiro, where he lives and works. He abandoned a degree in architecture to become an artist, and is represented by Thomas Dane Gallery and Galeria Fortes Vilaça. "Plot", which mirrors the library's function of creating an imaginative realm, draws on the artist's recurring themes of shifting perspectives and transforming the everyday.

***The Art Newspaper*: Holborn Library, which opened in 1960, was the first large, multi-functional library to open in London after the Second World War. Why did you choose this space?**

José Damasceno: Since I received the commission, around four years ago, we've been trying to find a place to host my proposal, which changed during that time. The important thing is that, little by little,

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I perceived the possibilities that this space holds, and I realised that it's much more interesting to extract something from the unexpected than something that is obvious.

During your research, you drew on influences ranging from “Monty Python” to Jonathan Swift. What impact did they have?

Having disparate influences doesn't mean that you cannot establish a relationship. “Complexity” is not a fashionable word, but I like to make associations. English humour is unique, and “Monty Python” is important; not exactly irony or sarcasm, but a different way of interpreting things. The sense of scale in Swift's adventures is very well known, and as a sculptor, that is vital to me.

You've filled the stairwell's window frames with tiny—you could say Lilliputian—footprints cut out of newspapers.

Another influence is *Une Semaine de Bonté*, a piece by Max Ernst that blows my mind. It's a work from 1934, comprising magazines printed with the days of the week, and the elements are really strong.

Tell us about the horse on the fourth floor.

One block from my studio in Copacabana, Rio de Janeiro, there's a peculiar space full of antiques shops, and I've been looking at an equestrian painting in one of them for two years. It has no signature and no date. I had it in mind to use this horse, because he's very peculiar; he's a [Blaise] Pascal-ian horse. He doesn't know where he comes from or where he's going to, and now he's here in London. There's a big marble sphere from Scotland [in the same room] for him to play with.

Does he have a name?

No. [Thinks] Pascal. I've also been using Letraset characters, installed upside down on the ceiling; they come from the 1970s, when we didn't have computers. They're subtle, but once you notice them: “Whaaat? Huh?!”

You discovered a disused auditorium with a projector room, and you've created a number of small stages there—an alternative space.

We didn't expect to find a projector room; it's a jewel. The stages were a challenge, but fascinating too. We're respecting the history of the space, but this isn't nostalgia—we're moving it forward. My background in architecture means that I'm interested in the leaps between the initial project and the final results.

Do you expect the audience to react differently to the people who see your work in galleries and museums?

I believe that there's a certain commitment to establish a relationship between this audience and what we suppose to be things that interest us regarding art. I hope that they will be intrigued. They may experience a way to look differently and ask about the nature of things.

So they can interpret the work however they like?

It's absolutely free.

Why is the show called “Plot”?

Titles are very important to me. They are switches that turn things on. And it's important for me to

listen. This title was suggested to me, and it was very welcome.

Who suggested it?

Rob Bowman [Artangel's head of programmes and production].

Rob Bowman: Leave me out of it [laughs]. We spent a lot of time searching for the resonances of the work with particular forms of language, and this was one of the words that we were throwing around.

Damasceo: Nowadays there's an urge towards narratives, to justify everything. The plot is vague but it has some aspects that [the visitor] should contribute—which plot is it, what's it about? It's there, but it's not totally given. You must work. That's one thing a piece of art should ask for. You have to engage.

You've made a number of site-specific installations during your career. Is this your favourite way of working?

I've done many different things, but what you mention is something that is absolutely vital to me—to deal with space. We can say that to think is to create space. For me, it's completely out of the question to propose something without considering all the features, the surroundings, the possibilities.

How long did you study architecture for?

I didn't finish my course. I couldn't find a rhythm and it was a hard time. All of the small but concrete experiences I had with art were, for me, real life. I reached a point where I couldn't stand it any more and I moved completely towards art. I took a few courses at the Visual Arts School of Parque Lage in Rio, but I'm self-taught.

What are you doing next?

I'm making new work for a forthcoming exhibition at the Casa França-Brasil in Rio. And I have another big challenge—the publication [by Ridinghouse] of my monograph, comprising 25 years of work, later this year. This is so important to me; it's a way to understand what I've been doing and to try to create a certain distance to look at things.

Have you enjoyed working in London?

I've been visiting and working and showing in the UK since 2006, and there's something really strong and unique here. One of the things that impresses me about Artangel is the relationship this organisation has with the city. It makes things so alive.

Why we chose José

James Lingwood, co-director, Artangel

“I first came across José's work in a city-wide exhibition in Porto called ‘Squatters’, back in 2001. He'd made a site-specific sculpture that literally squatted on a full-size billiard table. It was like a strange apparition; a sculptural play of lightness and hardness, complexity and simplicity. After that, I enjoyed occasional encounters with his sculpture—the feeling of improvisation combined with their formal resolution. Then, a few years ago, Rob Bowman, Artangel's head of programmes and production, suggested that we might approach José about making a project for Artangel in London. After considering a wide range of possible sites, they finally came across Holborn Library. It's a regular working library, a place for discovery and reverie. It seems like a perfect instrument with which José can play.”

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“Plot”, Holborn Library, London, until 23 November. For details of related events, visit www.artangel.org.uk/plot

Space invader: three of the artist’s previous site-specific works

1. Damasceno created his first significant site-specific installation in the Solar Grandjean de Montigny building at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro in 1990. The artist drilled holes in the corners of a small metal plate and inserted matchsticks to hold it up; he then made a table—*Mesa-Maquete (mock-up table)*, 1990—using measurements that corresponded to both his model and the dimensions of the room. Damasceno took a similar approach for “Plot”; he stretched a rope around the perimeter of Holborn Library’s auditorium, then used it to mark out the size and shape of the stages he planned to build.

2. In 2004, Damasceno became the first artist to create a site-specific installation for the Fundação Eva Klabin, a house museum in Rio de Janeiro. For “Cinematograma”, the artist created new works that responded to the museum’s building as well as its collection; for example, he used string and cobblestones to reproduce the floorplan of a room for *Interface Planar*, 2004. “The dramatic nature of the space was important; I couldn’t just put new pieces there,” Damasceno says. “I had to make the space work for me.”

3. The Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, asked Damasceno to create the first project to occupy the museum’s public areas, rather than its exhibition space, in 2008. The artist made nine works for “Co-ordinates and Apparitions”, responding to the dimensions of the museum’s Jean Nouvel-designed extension while planning a giant ceramic cup and saucer (*Crash of a Prop*, 2008). “Those past experiences are here [in Holborn],” he says, “but I’m trying to move forward, to clarify things. This corresponds to Artangel’s aims—to try to see space differently.”



Dancing on the ceiling: the artist’s Letraset characters in the reading room at Holborn Library. Photo: © Will Eckersley

<http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/From-the-horses-mouth-interview-with-Jos-Damasceno/35962>