

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Alexandre Melo, 'Alexandre da Cunha – Galeria Luisa Strina, Art Forum, September 2015

Walking along Rua Padre João Manuel, in São Paulo's Jardins District, one notes the solidity and order of the buildings that line the street, their almost exact symmetry and their geometric design. Recently, anyone glancing into the windows of the gallery that occupies the ground floor of number 775 might have thought the space contained an exhibition of abstract paintings, works as geometric and patterned as the surrounding buildings outside. But things are not always what they seem, even, or perhaps especially, in an exhibition titled "Real."

The exhibition was advertised by a poster with a photo of a bare-chested man leaning on a tire—a clue as to one of the unexpected realities evoked by Alexandre da Cunha, whose work directly confronts the questions and paradoxes surrounding our contemporary imagination of the "real." What from a distance looked like abstract paintings are, in fact, subtly three-dimensional constructions: canvases of raw linen over which colored strings are stretched, crossing in the center. Part of each string is wrapped in tinted fabric extracted from cleaning mops, creating a colored circle in the middle of the canvas. This series is titled "Mandala," 2013–, referring to the ritual circle employed for the concentration of energy, balance, and harmony. But are these spiritual symbols or simple combinations of string and mop elements on canvas? The artist seems to imply that not only art but also access to spirituality can be achieved through processes that, in the end, may not be what they initially seem.

The show also included several sculptures, some mimicking real-world structures: *Real (Aruanda)* (all works 2015), for example, is a stack of six tires cast in concrete that resembles a traditional column. Yet there are imaginary and spiritual references here, too—*Aruanda* refers to a utopian tropical location in certain Afro-Brazilian mythologies. Farther on, one encountered *Real (Ventania)* (Real [Gale]), two more tires, one in concrete and the other in bronze, leaning balanced against each other. *Louro* (Blond) is an elegant golden vertical cast in bronze from a rubber plunger whose handle has been extended. Finding in common objects both an abstract purity of form and an endless potential for transfiguration and reconfiguration is the essence of the artist's working process—he shifts from the "concrete real" to the "abstract artistic form" to then return to the existent evidence of the "real work of art."

Two more pieces should be mentioned. These were situated at opposite ends of a corridor, facing each other: a white bicycle saddle on a white circle (*Comédia I*) and a black bicycle saddle on a black circle (*Comédia III*). To interpret these pieces, we could choose from a broad range of references in the history of modern art (Picasso, the monochrome, etc.) or focus on the sexual bipolarity resulting from the saddles being placed in opposite positions (the wider part turned upward or downward) in each of the works. Perhaps these sly allusions to the human body (see the poster) and to its scale—and the ways in which it can be continually transfigured—were the key to the entire exhibition.

—Alexandre Melo Translated from Portuguese by Clifford E. Landes