

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Revely-Calder, Cal. 'A Brazilian National Symbol Is Under Threat (and That's a Good Thing)'. *Garage Magazine* Online. 22 March 2018

# GARAGE

GARAGE Magazine



View of José Damasceno, *RE: PÚBLICA*, Thomas Dane Gallery, London. Photo: Luke A. Walker

## A Brazilian National Symbol Is Under Threat (and That's a Good Thing)

**José Damasceno portrays Brazil's República as a haunted figure.**

National personifications have always been highly idealized. The archetype for modern democracy was Marianne, the French protector of *liberté*, *égalité*, and *fraternité*. Among her many daughters are the Statue of Liberty and the Brazilian Efigie da República—or, more simply, “República”—the face on billions of *centavos* and *reals*. But after three years in which Brazil has been wracked by protests, artist José Damasceno has turned that heroine into a vulnerable mortal. For his new show *RE: PÚBLICA*, at Thomas Dane Gallery in London, Damasceno made a printed triptych of República faces, and added pupils to her blank stone eyes. The images have been inflated to nearly ten feet by seven, the size of billboards on the London Tube. They tell the story of a woman besieged: at first she stares impassively, but soon she becomes anxious, even suspicious. She’s frozen in her sculpted pose, and only her eyes can hint at a world in flux.

11 DUKE STREET, ST JAMES'S, LONDON SW1Y 6BN

TEL: +44 (0)20 7925 2505 FAX: +44 (0)20 7925 2506 [info@thomasdanegallery.com](mailto:info@thomasdanegallery.com)

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY



View of *José Damasceno, RE: PÚBLICA*, Thomas Dane Gallery, London. Photo: Luke A. Walker

Damasceno spent 2017 traveling through urban Brazil: Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Belo Horizonte. By his estimation, he pasted “hundreds” of these triptychs, in the form of smaller posters, around each city. But no two nations are quite alike, and *meu público não é seu publico*. London’s St. James’s district is five thousand miles from the streets of Brazil in both literal and cultural terms. One thing I felt, entering Thomas Dane, was a little embarrassed; *I’m hardly the revolutionary República needs*. Compare Edel Rodriguez, who decapitated Lady Liberty for a *Der Spiegel* cover last year, and put her head in Donald Trump’s hand. It was a clarion call to Western liberals: resist the decay, punch the Nazis back! But few visitors to *RE: PÚBLICA* will be Brazilian—or even realize that this woman is South American, not a cousin from the North, or from the Old World over the sea.

Damasceno told GARAGE he doesn’t mind. Apparently, he “didn’t think of the politics” when he put the installation together, and he hopes that República’s three faces will bemuse, not enlist. It’s their “strangeness,” he said, that should strike you; she’s the size of a “monster,” after all, and she’s looking not only at you, but at a sixties image of Twiggy on an adjacent wall. *RE: PÚBLICA* is full of strange elements like this, which seem like bits of an allegory, but don’t quite add up. *The Horse and the Dog*, for instance, is a pair of small bronze figurines, one standing on the wall and one on the floor. Their gazes almost cross. What world are they meant to be sharing? Then there’s *The Hedgehog, the Tunnel and the Cake*, in which a marble porcupine stares at a narrow glass passage. But isn’t it too fat to get through? Besides, the cast-iron dessert that it wants to snaffle is already within its reach.

By cutting up these sub-plots, Damasceno wants to deter us from drawing an easy conclusion, but he’s ended up doing the opposite. Disorder can be seen as a form of resistance: it fights against control. And the public aren’t *tabulae rasae*; they’re conditioned in a thousand ways. This show has invented its own oddball nation—a state symbol with neurosis, little animals who can’t ever touch—but we don’t just shrug and walk off, happy not to understand. As Damasceno once put it, his spectators “have to engage.” As República looks for her public, her new eyes tell us she doesn’t know who she’ll find; they meet the eyes of the viewers, who aren’t sure what she represents. Damasceno’s show is about liberty under threat—and, conversely, as a regenerative force.

11 DUKE STREET, ST JAMES’S, LONDON SW1Y 6BN

TEL: +44 (0)20 7925 2505 FAX: +44 (0)20 7925 2506 info@thomasdanegallery.com

THOMAS DANE GALLERY



View of *José Damasceno, RE: PÚBLICA*, Thomas Dane Gallery, London. Photo: Luke A. Walker

[https://garage.vice.com/en\\_us/article/mbxax3/national-symbols-are-under-threat-and-thats-a-good-thing](https://garage.vice.com/en_us/article/mbxax3/national-symbols-are-under-threat-and-thats-a-good-thing)

11 DUKE STREET, ST JAMES'S, LONDON SW1Y 6BN

TEL: +44 (0)20 7925 2505 FAX: +44 (0)20 7925 2506 [info@thomasdanegallery.com](mailto:info@thomasdanegallery.com)