

## Antonio Sergio Moreira

Born in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, in 1963. This self-taught artist works in drawing, painting, sculpture and installation. He exhibited at the Lasar Segall Museum and attended the Oswald de Andrade Cultural Workshop, in São Paulo. He lives between Belo Horizonte and Paris, where he works on cultural management projects.



In November 2021, he received the XI Prize “ZUMBI de Cultura” by Cia Baobá Minas - Center for Africanity and Afro-Brazilian Resistance (CENARAB) of Minas Gerais State in Brazil. He also received the Prize “ANCESTRAL KNOWLEDGE” grant from Aldir Branc Art Law to CULTURAL AGENTS AND COLLECTIVES of Brazil.

The main institutional collections in which the artist has works are the AMBA Association (London, United Kingdom), Bayer Collection (São Paulo, Brazil), Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (Lisboa, Portugal), Celma Albuquerque Gallery (Belo Horizonte, Brazil), Cérés Franco Museum (Montolieu, France), Gilberto Chateaubriand Collection (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), Jean Boghici Gallery (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), Ricardo Fernandes Gallery (Paris, France), Ricardo Camargo Gallery (São Paulo, Brazil) and the Pretos Novos Research Institute (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil).

## REENSAQUES

The hand of the black is part of the history of Brazil, in the industrial base, in commerce and in the construction of the national identity. There were more than ten million enslaved blacks:

The blacks from Nigeria and the Slave Coast<sup>1</sup> mastered the techniques of mining and metal casting; the Bantu, agriculture; others served for all types of manual labor. Slave labor yielded, in this way, fortunes for the farmers during the colonial period and, later, for the emerging Brazilian businessmen.

With abolition in 1888, begins the end of a legacy of labor without pay. Therefore, the Brazilian entrepreneurs begin absorbing this same African and African-descendant labor force at an extremely low wage, without any proposals or plans of integration or social insertion.

In the end, it became easier to swap the African laborers for European immigrants who were jobless in their home countries and had arrived to start a new life in the tropics. The government of that time offered many benefits to the Europeans, while not offering any type of help to the slaves freed through the Aúrea Decree, except for the erasing of the history of their origins. They became even more marginalized and excluded from the privileged white society.

***In the universe of the beater, he will always manage the whip. A.S.M., 2010***

The project or ideology of the whitening of the population of Brazil and Latin America, was the principal foundation of the construction of structural racism in Latin America. In Brazil, the disregard of the identities, cultural and religious values of the black people continued for decades, perpetuating the most diverse forms of prejudices and relating to the treatment of people of color, associating everything that was negative to the black color.

***(...) Negate the black African presence in any Latin American country is to whiten memory, to dilute the values of identity and to incite prejudice and the extermination of the black body. Brazil wasn't the only country of Latin America to receive part of the African Diaspora – blacks arrived in Argentina around 1770. The census of 1778 in Argentina showed that 7,236 of the 24,363 residents of Buenos Aires were black (30% of the local population), however, in 1887 the number had fallen to 1.8%, to the point where they weren't even counted in the census. A.S.M., 2013***

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<sup>1</sup> The Slave Coast was comprised of the region of Guinea Gulf where a large part of the slaves destined to the Americas were boarded. Its territory includes the coastal regions of the present countries of Ghana, Togo, Benin and Nigeria. Wikipedia

Since the XVII century there had already been quilombos (Maroon communities) in Brazil. The blacks Ganga Zumba<sup>2</sup> and Zumbi<sup>3</sup> dos Palmares were leaders of these communities that harbored the black slaves that had run away from the plantations; countless quilombos were built throughout the country.

In addition, the places we call religious “terreiros” – temples of African origin, recreated by Africans and Afrodescendants between the colonial and post-colonial periods, also has its value as a type of “quilombo”. They are important as guardians of tradition and wisdom, and places of resistance of black folk.

The urban quilombos, commonly known as “favelas” – are born at the moment that the black population, through the necessity of adaptation and occupation of vital spaces, go to live on the hilltops on the outskirts of the cities.

In the slaves’ quarters occurred the miscegenation of the African peoples; in the favela also occurred a mixture of afro-descendants, their experiences, knowledge, religious beliefs, and cultures.

A few of the artists of these communities of the African Diaspora, began to have their artistic expertise appreciated, once these same communities had become also a space for resistance and a source for the research of several white artists of the social elite. Coincidentally, with the arrival of the Modernist Movement in Brazil, the country gradually searched for a national identity.

***Zumbi, guerilla commander Ogunhê, captain head blacksmith of the Captaincy of my head sent the manumission to my heart.***

***Gilberto Gil and Waly Salomão.<sup>4</sup>***

The resonance of African cultural heritage penetrated in a permanent way in Brazilian art from the XVIII century.

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<sup>2</sup> Ganga Zumba (1638, Gongo – 1679, Quilombo dos Palmares) was born in the Kingdom of Kongo. He was the son of Princess Aqualtune, of the Nianza Dynasty. He was brought by the Portuguese as a slave to the northeast of Brazil. He became King of the Quilombo dos Palmares and reigned from 1670 - 1678

<sup>3</sup> Zumbi (1655, Alagoas Brazil – 1695, Quilombo dos Palmares) also known as Zumbi dos Palmares, was a Brazilian Quilombo leader and last of the leaders of the Quilombo dos Palmares, the largest of the quilombos of the colonial period. Zumbi was born in Pernambuco Captaincy, in a region now in União dos Palmares in Alagoas State. Wikipedia

<sup>4</sup> Gilberto Gil and Waly Salomão. “Zumbi (The Happiness of the Warrior)”.

The afro-descendant artists, by way of resistance, always shaped and contributed to Brazilian culture in the different arts, while still enduring the process of cultural erasure that the black corporeity suffered. So much so, that many of them, to this day, are only now being discovered in the Brazilian historiographic records.

*(...)Since the XVII century, art produced by blacks and mestizos began appearing, with Antonio Francisco Lisboa – “Aleijadinho” (1730-1814, Minas Gerais). The works made by this master stood out in the architectural projects of churches, religious ornamentation, statues of Saints for retables and chapels, for which he was commissioned. Valentim da Fonseca e Silva (1759-1813, Minas Gerais), “Mestre Valentim” devoted himself to rococo-style religious decorative carvings. Antonio Joaquim Franco Velasco (1780-1822, Minas Gerais), is considered one of the most important Brazilian painters. The painters Manoel da Costa Athaide (1762-1830, Minas Gerais), Manuel da Cunha (1727-1809, Rio de Janeiro), José Teófilo de Jesus (1758-1847, Bahia) Leandro Joaquim (1738-1798, Rio de Janeiro), painter/scenographer and architect, Father Jesuíno do Monte Caermelo (1764-1819, São Paulo), Estevão Silva (1845-1891, Rio de Janeiro) Emmanuel Zamor (1840-1917, Bahia), Antonio Firmo Monteiro (1855-1888, Rio de Janeiro), Antonio Parreiras (1860-1937, Rio de Janeiro), Antonio Rafael Pinto Bandeira (1863-1896, Rio de Janeiro), known as one of the greatest landscape and seascape painters of the XIX century, João Timóteo da Costa (1879-1932, Rio de Janeiro), and his brother Artur Timóteo da Costa (1892-1922, Rio de Janeiro). All of these artists shaped their life story and left their works which vanquished time. With the abolition of slavery, blacks started to express themselves more freely, but, the established model for art came from the European school and persisted in the art schools and in the craft.<sup>5</sup> A.S.M., 2007.*

In 1922, Brazil celebrated the centenary of its independence from Portugal and several events were organized to showcase the national evolution. In the city of São Paulo, the organizers envisioned an exposition that could discuss and provoke the São Paulo society on the direction of modern theory in the arts. So, the elite business community of São Paulo sponsored an exposition of the young artists that aligned with the Brazilian Modernist Movement. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of February of 1922, in the Municipal Theatre of the capital, the “Modern Art Week” (“The Week of 22”) was inaugurated. The movement ruptured – or announced the future rupture – with the traditional rules and opened space for varied segments of the arts.

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<sup>5</sup> Text from the catalogue of the exposition “Replica and Rebelliousness: Artists of Angola, Cape Verde and Mozambique”, organized by the Camões Institute of Lisbon, Portugal in 2006-2007. General curatorship by António Pinto Ribeiro and António Sergio as assistant curator. Title: “Resonances and Confluences in (Afro-) Brazilian Art”. António Sergio Moreira addresses the construction and subjectivity of Afro-Brazilian art.

The texts written, up until now, in books on Brazilian art legitimize this narrative, but there is one question which shouts out and demands an answer:

Where were the black artists? This event in São Paulo did not offer a single look at the cultural diversity of the period.

The “Week of 22” happened thirty-four years after the abolition of slavery, however, we must remember that the black corporeity in the arts – literature, music, visual arts – already existed in different regions and in Brazilian culture.

In reality, the event legitimized the eurocentrism of the cultural axis in Brazilian art. It had been organized by a majority of white artists and men of the São Paulo elite. How, for example, do we revere the painter Di Cavalcanti, quite possibly the sole representative of the totality of the black artists of that time, a fact which reinforces the concept of whiteness.

The almost non-existent feminine presence in the exposition also shows that there was no space for the black woman. Was Francisca Edwiges Neves Gonzaga, musicologist and abolitionist, better known as Chiquinha Gonzaga (1847-1935, Rio de Janeiro) remembered?

Chiquinha Gonzaga was one of the most important women for our culture: the first Afro-descendant woman to conduct an Orchestra in Brazil.

Certainly, some of the artists were heirs of slave-owning families, an elite always present in the Brazilian art world. The erasing of the black body is explicit in the context of an exposition labelled as a rupture of concepts.

Surprisingly, the musician from Rio de Janeiro, Pixinguinha (1897-1973, Rio de Janeiro) and Donga (1890-1974, Rio de Janeiro) weren’t among the artists of the “Week of 22”; although both of them and another five members of the musical group “Oito Batutas”, in the same month of February went to Paris for a tourney of six months<sup>6</sup>, such was the international interest for Brazilian music.

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<sup>6</sup>.EBC – *Specials* – MEC Radio, a series dedicated to the centenary of the Modern Art Week of 1922. Podcast original episode aired in February, 2022. <https://open.spotify.com/show/2cukCIIwx9IIMAE2rpZAKW>

In other states of Brazil there were movements that aligned with the vanguard of Europe, through artistic manifestations, but these historiographic documents also suffered from the cultural erasure.

Before the Modern Art Week of 1922, in São Paulo, the Modernist Movement in Europe had already created repercussions in other parts of the world and a few of the artists who participated in the exposition had travelled European cities at the time. The Modern Art Week event in 1922 contributed to a new vision of creating Brazilian art, in a tentative to rupture with the European school of art but was led astray by the seduction of structural racism.

It was, therefore, the manifesto of the Art Week of 22 that made possible a view into the art of the outskirts of the cities, into the art made by artists from the masses, sons of miscegenation of African peoples, mainly without any academic formation and absent from the “nobler” cultural events. The musicologists already circulated at the sources of the knowledge of the hillside slums, of the Afro-Temples and of the streets of the cities; remembering, for example, that the composition *Candomblé*, by Chiquinha Gonzaga, for piano and choral, was from 1888.

***There is no force more powerful than a woman determined to rise. W.E.B. Du Bois.***

The realization of the Brazilian art exhibitions post Art Week 1922 helped discover more black artists and to consolidate a few others. It's worth it, however, to stress that the concept of Afro-Brazilian art is very recent. In reality, the work of these artists is Brazilian, however, in a nation made up of 54% Afro-descendants, in the art scene, it was somehow necessary to create this label: Afro-Brazilian Art. In the scenario of a nation formed by more than 54% of Afro-descendants we might imagine that term is unimportant, but it was necessary to give visibility to black artists, even though their art is thoroughly Brazilian.

The afro-Amerindian resonance, culturally imprinted on some segments of the arts, was always revisited by artists with new perceptions of interpretation and dialogues of approximation and of interculture.

It should be understood, however, that the concept of black, mestizo and Native American memory erasure existed and still exists. The assumption was to label all of the art made by blacks and poor people – that not produced by an academic elite – as “primitive”. Of course, these barriers meant that many artists gave up on their careers.

**(...) Where there is power, there's resistance. Foucault.**

**The real time is the time of difference, present/past/future. We Amerindians talk about our art of codes, of syntax and at every moment we manage to surprise with the way we work our resonances. The invisibility of artworks, produced by black artists (erasure), or in which the image of blackness is directly linked to the main concept, makes them the target of countless prejudices and socio-cultural inequalities. A.S.M., 2007.**

The cultural whitening of Afrodescendants always existed. It's a common practice to call Afrodescendants “dark” or “brown” or “darky”. These are forms of address used to facilitate the coexistence with a black person. In the area of the visual arts there hasn't been seen an opening for cultural hybridism. This area continues as a space for white artists.

In the eighty's decade, the art scene lived a moment of cultural and market effervescence. Many art galleries opened featuring art of the “Eighties Generation” in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo.

However, in my city, Belo Horizonte, capital of Minas Gerais state, the only space for black artists was that labelled “primitivist”. That was the motive that prompted me to live between São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro from 1986 to 1998.

In São Paulo, I perceived early on that space also did not exist there: “white” art prevailed in the galleries – created by white artists and also commercialized by whites. In the end, the art scene was completely white. The role of Afrodescendants was in cleaning, set-up and maintenance of the commercial spaces.

To survive and carry on, I went to work in a gallery as an art assistant. In this survival process, I developed a practice of organizing and cataloguing the collections of artists and of art collectors.

That is how I managed in the ateliers of the artists Ivald Granato (1949-2016) and of the Spaniard José Zaragoza (1930-2017), and, after that, working on the collection of Kim Esteve from 1991 to 1998.

Through these self-taught experiences in the field of epistemology, in 1995, I was invited to be one of the coordinators of the installation of special exhibits in the space dedicated to museology of the 23<sup>rd</sup> São Paulo Biennial in 1996.

During all of this time, I perceived that, on the national scene, very few black artists were inserted into these venues nor into the market.

So, I went back, permanently, to my hometown, not because I had quit, but because I needed to develop new concepts and strategies and the way would be starting on the inside moving outward. I had to fight for a space on the Brazilian national stage.

The collection – with more than two thousand art works – of the couple Delcir and Regina da Costa was the last one which I catalogued from 1999 to 2001, completing a cycle of research and artistic training. The curatorship practice closely followed, opening for me new dialogues and experiences:

- Coordination and curatorship in the 2003, 2006, 2007, and 2013 International Festival of Black Art in Belo Horizonte (FAN BH);
- Assistant curatorship in Brazil of the international show *Réplica e Rebelião: Artistas de Angola, Brasil, Cabo Verde e Moçambique*, organized by the Camões Institute of Portugal, with the general curatorship of António Pinto Ribeiro;
- The exposition and installation *ressonâncias@rtesnegr(as)* exhibited in the Forum of the Arts 2007: Winter Festival of Ouro Preto and Mariana.

All of these events were important for my line of research and the concept that demonstrated the invisibility of black art in Brazilian art.

Consequently, my works transmit all of the dialogue and coexistence with artists, art curators and gallery owners; through my art and resistance I address the meanders of invisibility.

Does racism exist in Brazil? And the extermination of the black youth? The answer is in the medias with countless cases of racial and religious intolerance.

The Afro descendants of the African Diaspora still suffer from racism and racial and social indifference. Nevertheless, these heirs of traditions create a mixed-raced and timeless art rooted in the ancestral and connected to contemporaneous values. The resistance and the daily practice of the “terreiros” where traditions are formed, continued, and preserved through the peoples living experience.

***The “terreiros” (Afro-Brazilian temples) of Candomblé, institutions of the people that resist affronts, can teach us to negotiate differences. Muniz Sodré<sup>7</sup>, 2022.***

The “terreiros” assume the task, therefore, of safeguarding culture and ancestral heritage. These are spaces for information exchange – the base for the formation of ancestral knowledge. All are welcome in the terreiros of Brazil.

Following the guidelines of the National Council of Education, the Brazilian government passed laws 10.639/03 and 11.645/08 dealing with education and ethno-racial relations, making it compulsory to include the teaching of Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Amerindian history and culture in schools. These victories, fruit of confronting racism and the success of Affirmative Action programs in the Brazilian universities that promote racial equality and confrontation of racism.

As long as there are social inequalities, there will be quotas!

We must still rewrite the history on the use of black labor in the mining and steel industries, in construction, and in the different sectors of a racist society and not only in the arts. The contributions of black corporeity in the construction of the country are immeasurable. Some businessmen and families from class A and B, in this XXI century, still coexist with working conditions comparable to slavery, exploiting poor and black human beings, victims of social vulnerability.

These were the different processes of imprisonment and compliance constructed by the colonizers, echoing inside a racist society, that at this moment denounces racism and

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.geledes.org.br/muniz-sodre-sofreu-com-uma-covid-grave-completa-80-anos-fazendo-carate-e-defende-a-sabedoria-do-candomble-para-combater-o-odio/>

intolerance in Brazil and in other American countries, such as the United States. The shout of Afro-North Americans “I can’t breathe!”<sup>8</sup> was heard in Brazil, but most of the zinging stray bullets are for the bodies of poor blacks from the cities’ outskirts. Who hears them in the world?

Every day in Brazil a *George Floyd* dies, but this type of headline in the principal communication channels of Brazil has become commonplace.

***When we revolt, it is not because of a specific culture. We revolt simply because, for many reasons, we cannot breathe anymore. Frantz Fanon.***

So, is everything alright? This is the reality in the communities on the outskirts of urban Brazil. The children are silenced on their way to school, some of them during recess. Why does society remain silent with regard to these headlines? Why do the images of blacks occupying cultural spaces in the media annoy this society so much?

Black lives matter!

***We ask that the stray bullets keep away from our direction and do not make our bodies or our children, the targets. Conceição Evaristo***

The discussions, actions and reflections on the history and the importance of the Brazilian Modernist Movement are in question and therefore should address the history of the Black and Native American Diaspora so that the historical and cultural erasure doesn’t continue anymore.

Rebuild the knowledge, the wisdom – education is the vehicle for constructing a new nation. In the villages and the quilombos – when connected to the internet – their habitants discover that the world is much bigger than they had thought and imagined and now realize their own importance to the universe.

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<sup>8</sup> “I can’t breathe” is the slogan associated with the Black Lives Matter in the United States. The words come from Eric Garner and George Floyd, two African-Americans that both died suffocated during their arrests in 2014 and 2020 due to the use of excessive force from White policemen. The phrase is used in protests against police brutality in the United States. The phrase inspired the song “I Can’t Breathe” by the R&B artists H.E.R. as a form of protest of treatment inflicted upon African Americans. Wikipedia.

One of the principal elements that link us to the resistance is the way that we write our story. The cultural values should be translated by us in the eyes of the “other”. The transmission of our knowledge can seem a pantomime, but it is in this way that dichotomies are created in narratives. We must be vigilant, protecting the traditions and the knowledge of the traditional matrixes, for a revolutionary use.

We can take the Afro Brazil Museum<sup>9</sup> of the city of São Paulo as an example. It was inaugurated in 2004, having as a base the private collection of the artist curator and director from Bahia, Emanuel Araújo (1940-2022): the museum preserves the memory of the African Diaspora and the resonance of the Afro-Brazilian cultural identity and the curator managed, during his career, to create dialogues of resistance with the São Paulo society. Through his curatorship, various Afro-Brazilian artists became well-known and remembered by the public. This was the object of the collection, based on historical and artistic values.

“This shame is not mine” – Lídia Lisboa responded in 2019, when questioned about why her name never was on the list of artists participating in important expositions. This same erasure was already addressed for years in her works: identity, prejudice, racism, and resistance.

Our names are still nor remembered in expositions that address current themes in the Brazilian visual arts. I understand Lídia Lisboa’s phrase is a protest against absences, racisms, Eurocentrism, marketing ploys and memory erasures of artistic Afro-descendants and against the motives that make the curators refrain from including our names and careers.

These and other various reflections are present in my works in my first series of paintings entitled “REENSAQUES” (RE-SACKED), produced on the medium of bags for the repackaging of cement. The theme treats prejudices and racism against the black body, religion and culture. The second series created during my social and artistic isolation in the time of the pandemic treats cultural de-colonialization and the resistance. During

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<sup>9</sup> The Afro Brazil Museum is a public institution. Located in the Padre Manoel da Nóbrega Pavillion, in the most famous park of São Paulo – the Ibirapuera Park, the museum conserves, in 11,000 m<sup>2</sup> a collection of more than 8,000 pieces, including paintings, sculptures, etchings, photographs, documents and ethnological pieces from both Brazilian and foreign authors, covering themes such as religion, labor, art, slavery, among other themes, the museum has preserved the registry and historic trajectory and the influences of Africans in the make-up of Brazilian Society. <http://www.museuafrobrasil.org.br/o-museu/apresentacao>

my process of resiliency, I witnessed the suffering of Afro descendants from the virus and/or from hunger.

Once more the black population was exposed to their social fragility: black women were assaulted by their spouses, black children suffered with the home confinement.

All of this makes me reflect on and return to the “REENSAQUES” project, art works that represent in a metaphoric form reutilization: changing wrappers so that they continue to exist, ripping open bags, re-packaging products and assuring that each one maintains its function. The works “REENSAQUES” (RE-SACKED) translate the Brazilian structural racism over the black corporeity. Personal marks and knowledge that are present in my creative visual art process, experiences revealed in the form of art and resistance, where my shout is:

“I am!”

**Antônio Sergio Moreira, 2022**

**Translation: Alex P. Schorsch**

