

south of the future

Leila Danziger

curator | Raphael Fonseca

Museu Lasar Segall, São Paulo | September 15 – November 12

In 1941 Austrian writer Stefan Zweig (1881-1942) published *Brazil, land of the future*. The book expresses the author's fascination with the tropics during his time of exile, when World War II was going on. A few years before the publishing of the book, in 1935, the Danzigers had arrived at Rio de Janeiro, also in search for refuge from Nazi anti-Semitism. A decade earlier, in 1923, the artist Lasar Segall had established his residency in São Paulo.

Seventy years after Zweig's words, Brazil still awaits for the moment to arrive at its dreamed future; at south of Europe (and Eurocentrism), we have learned that to live the present may be the best answer to the futuristic aspiration of Modernism – especially in the young Brazilian democracy. What Leila Danziger proposes in her research as a visual artist and a poet is to invite one's skeptical look, the result of historical traumas that have brought us to the present. To achieve that, it is necessary to have one foot in now (present) and the other in then (past).

The narratives about the migration process, not only of her family, but of thousands of German-Jews, who then saw Brazil as the territory for a new beginning, are central in this exhibition. Graphic pieces are the material and theme of the gathered works – appointment books, didactic and fiction books – and they make us reflect on the affective sphere once attached to them. The stains on the papers are essential for us to remember of the temporal accumulation and to perceive its contaminations by bodily fluids and places of storage. The furniture of the living room and the office of a family might become the drawers of a historic archive.

Bildung (“cultural formation” in German), the installation in the first room, is constituted by German books brought by her paternal grandparents. Goethe, Lessing, among other authors, were transported to the South of the globe both as study objects and as souvenirs from a North to which returning was uncertain. The arrival at the country placed the immigrants between the attempt to preserve a language and the encounter with Portuguese. To such transatlantic library didactic books on the “history of Brazil” were added, a result from the artist’s mother and maternal grandmother’s profession, both teachers. Many were printed during the military dictatorship of the Estado Novo (“New State”), and it is not uncommon to find an appeal to the abstract notion of “homeland” on their covers. They spaced from the radical German nationalism and soon these bodies collided with waves of repression from tropical nationalisms.

The juxtaposition of images is a recurrent method in the artist’s production and can be seen not only in these images with an informative imprint, but also in the series in which blank appointment books are sewn or sustained by magnets. Books collected during the remodeling of the library at the Association Scholem Aleichem (Rio de Janeiro) are also sewn, allowing a glimpse of the Yiddish on their surfaces. To sew up these papers is to give them weight and to invite us to reflect both on the emptiness of the blank spaces reserved for annotations, and to the silencing of the Yiddish, a language composed by the sewing from the appropriation of other languages.

A careful look at these works will reveal the presence of stamps that refer to some emblematic images. At the entrance a stamp is reproduced, which was used in the series of works that name the exhibition; it is a quote from *The Sea of Ice* (1823-1824), painted by the German Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840). In the original image two ships are wrecked in the middle of blocks of ice. During the immigrations that had Brazil as their point of arrival, many lives were wrecked, both physically and existentially. The blocks of ice melted due to the solar power of the South, but the uncertain yearning for

those who remained at the freezing North installed in some of the new Brazilians the same possibility of action of Friedrich's ships. Some call that phenomenon melancholy.

Leila Danziger's research touches on some issues very important to Lasar Segall, once a resident in the house which is now this museum. It makes sense to establish these relations from the standpoint of Judaism, and that sets up a safer dialogue. We like, however, to observe his images and reflect on his interest in representing scenes of teaching moments and letters from the Hebrew alphabet. And, of course, to appreciate his complacent gaze at human figures in the situation of emigration – as his own biography is of an immigrant.

If today Lasar Segall is an essential reference for the history of art in Brazil, let us not forget that in his youth he was the name of a passenger in a boat to the South of the future – as it yet happens to so many people whose names keep disappearing in the Atlantic.

Raphael Fonseca

<http://gabinetedejeronimo.blogspot.com/>