

Sugar High: Communing with Art and Nature in the Tropical Paradise of Usina de Arte

APRIL 1, 2022 BY BRIAN HIEGSELKE



Paisagem ("Landscape") by Regina Silveira/Photo: Camila Leão

I am sitting on the veranda of a grand tropical mansion, the Casa do Lago, in a remote area of northeastern Brazil, about two hours southwest of Recife. It's a beautiful evening in September, as most evenings here are, and while drinking a glass of wine, I'm attempting to smoke a Cuban cigar and failing to keep it lit while also carrying on a conversation. The conversation is much more interesting than the cigar, as I am interviewing the proprietor of this home, as well as the Usina de Arte that surrounds it, and the nearby town of Vila Santa Terezinha, and most of the land as far as the eye can see in any direction. Ricardo Pessoa de Queiroz is telling me the story of this grand undertaking, a sculpture park and a botanical garden on the grounds of the old sugar mill that is the passion he shares with his wife Bruna, who is also his cousin. It's the story of family politicians and tycoons that goes back at least ten generations in Brazil on his father's side, and to 1650 on his mother's side. Of presidents and governors and assassinations and revolutions. Of land lost and regained. And of art.

Saturday afternoon, two days later, a small crowd of artists, gallerists, collectors, government officials and townspeople of all ages is gathered in a large circle in an open field, once a runway for the airplane that shuttled Ricardo's great grandfather between the sugar mill and his home in Recife, back when roads were almost impassable. It's next to the hangar that is now occupied by an installation created by the artist José Rufino.

In the center of the field a crater has been dug, and at the crater's center, a pyramid of rocks has been assembled, a volcano of sorts.

Suddenly, at 4:16pm, or 16:16 the way the Brazilians write it, a woman's voice fills the air, reciting verse, in Portuguese, and then in English:

Savor the stone,
sample its secrets,
taste its innards,
gnaw on its origins...

Are you ready to channel
wisdom from life?
abandon what you were
to become what you will be.

Facing impermanence,
New agreements:
organic turns inorganic
one cycle ends, another begins.

To disappear or to evolve?

What doesn't reinvent itself
Turns to dust

To survive, matter flows...

...we are reborn.

—"Petraphagia" by Denise Milan

The body connected to that voice, a dark-haired woman in a long, vaguely futuristic gray dress, appears like an elder from the cosmos, slowly moving toward the rocks, where smoke is pouring out. She bends over the rocks, finds a glass hammer and strikes at a mass of crystallized sugar, shattering it. She carries the fragments across the field and enters a container car that's been converted into a giant glass display case, housing her artwork. It's an installation of beautiful shiny objects, all silver and mirrors, a table setting. She places the fragments on the table, where ants commence devouring them.

And so, "Banquete da Terra," the "Earth Banquet," by artist Denise Milan, is inaugurated.

Later, the guests gather on the veranda for food and cocktails, a daily ritual since our arrival, though today there are more people and the spirit is even more festive. The curator of Denise's project, Marcello Dantas, who'd offered some words at the ceremony not long after his arrival, is here.

