

NEW YORK: THE BRONX MUSEUM OF THE ARTS**Valeska Soares: Follies**

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Despite her participation in numerous touring exhibitions and a range of international art festivals, Valeska Soares: Follies is this Brazilian-born artist's first significant exhibition in New York, where she has lived for the past decade. Soares' predominant aesthetic combines a minimalist formal vocabulary – polished stainless steel, mirrors, serial repetition – with a romantic proclivity for poetic associations, which are often set off by other sensory perceptions. One must linger to read the story, understand the voice-over, discover the scent that's essential to an installation's gestalt. Her work takes time to sink in, is slow to resolve into sharp focus. But one's patience is well rewarded.

Take Fainting Couch (2002), a Judd-like stainless-steel elongated box with a grid of perforations on its top that reminds one of a space-age air hockey table – less-than-inviting associations for a work that also offers a cylindrical white pillow on which to rest the head. And then the strange, intoxicating smell of stargazer lilies from the interior of the box envelops the room. Or the grander Vanishing Point (1998), which quietly dominates the museum's main exhibition space. It consists of more than a dozen stainless-steel containers arranged on the floor in a labyrinthine composition, reminiscent of an Italianate garden maze. Each filled to the rim with an oily, golden perfume, the slick containers stand in opposition to their organic associations and the olfactory offerings that fill the space.



Soares' own city-dweller garden from a previous Brooklyn home is the source for an adjacent installation, Untitled (from Vanishing Point) (1998). It consists of 123 casts, in beeswax, unglazed porcelain and aluminium of flowerpots and saucers precisely installed as in the garden that is no longer the artist's. Like seashells deprived of their previous inhabitants and removed from their natural habitat, these mute forms are objects of beauty in their own right, but they convey in memoriam the poetics of their utilitarian history.

Indeed, there is a nostalgic even elegiac quality to the artist's temperament – from elegant wall-drawings in silver marker, in which male and/or female stick figures are poised precipitously at the end of a line, to an enchanting video installation called Tonight, Esta noite (2002), in which ghostly figures dance by themselves with imaginary partners in an empty dance hall. One's appreciation is enhanced by knowing Tonight was filmed in the early 1940s Oscar Niemeyer casino and nightclub that is now the Museu de Arte da Pampulha in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, which commissioned the work. Even without this apposite information, Tonight is a hauntingly beautiful installation.

Italo Calvino's Invisible Cities is a natural source of inspiration and one from which Soares draws for two installations in the exhibition. The most captivating of these is Detour (2002–3), a room with mirrors on one pair of opposing walls (one enters through a revolving mirror door), and on the other pair, a bright but faint repeating image of a white classical archway. These walls put the viewer at the center of an imaginary cloister of sorts, while the near-infinite repeat of the mirrors curves into the great distance, where only one's image may venture. Different voices emanating from six speakers in the ceiling narrate from imperfect memory the story of Calvino's 'Cities and Desire (5)', in which a number of men have the same dream of searching for a naked woman running through the night in an unknown city. They seek the city but find only each other, and although they build this city of their dreams according to the twists and turns of their nocturnal pursuit, none ever sees the woman again. Soares' Detour puts us inside the experience of the story. Characteristically, she captures the complexity of the narrative, but loses nothing of its exquisite evanescence in her rich translation to form.

Subtle, hyper-sensitive, multi-sensational, well worth experiencing.

JOE HILL