

Valeska Soares



The artist discusses the objects, ideas
and artworks that have shaped her practice



OVER THE PAST THREE DECADES, Valeska Soares has produced a vast body of work, spanning various media in two and three dimensions. At once sensuous and wry, her sculptures and installations invoke the human body even when absent or abstract. Wax lips and solitary velvet limbs appear like lonely lovers, fragments of a body shattered by unrequited desire. Collaged empty candy wrappers and sticky puddles of perfume, meanwhile, seduce our taste-buds and noses. With Soares's tender touch, such materials pick at knots of complex human emotions – love and loneliness, hope and hunger.

'Absence persists – I must endure it,' Roland Barthes wrote in *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1977). For the French theorist, 'absence becomes an active practice', one that Soares adopts in her own works, in which anthropomorphic qualities also suggest the many 'doubts, reproaches, desires, melancholies' of the soul. Seduction is so often accompanied by pain: Soares's visual language acknowledges this traumatic ambivalence as much as it celebrates the liberatory potential of affection. Romantic tropes, like roses and perfume, though alluring, can be thorny or sickeningly sweet. Her unusable furniture might produce what Barthes called a 'scenography of waiting': the chairs of *Lugar Comum* (Shared Place, 2016), for instance, are conjoined as if trapped in a dysfunctional relationship.

I was late to my interview with Soares. When we finally settled in the cosy sitting room of her Brooklyn home and studio, I spotted her *Edit (Waiting)* (2012) – a poem formed from redactions of Barthes's iconic text – framed just above my shoulder. Soares first achieved international recognition with her participation in the 1995 edition of SITE Santa Fe, shortly after she moved to New York from Brazil, but only recently received a career retrospective, which closed at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in January. With her current survey exhibition opening at the Pinacoteca de São Paulo, we discussed the many references – from contemporary art to architectural studies – that have shaped her diverse practice.

Evan Moffitt is associate editor of frieze, based in New York, USA.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Valeska Soares,
Finale, 2013, antique
table, glasses,
pitchers, decanters,
alcohol and mirror,
79 × 335 × 92 cm.
Courtesy: the artist,
Cisneros Fontanals Art
Foundation, Miami,
Alexander Gray
Associates, New York,
and Fortes D'Aloia &
Gabriel, São Paulo/Rio
de Janeiro; photograph:
Oriol Tarridas

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Teresinha Soares,
Um homem e uma mulher
(A Man and a Woman),
1967, silkscreen
on paper, 41 × 33 cm.
Courtesy: the
artist; photograph:
Jorge Bastos

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Valeska Soares, *Untitled*,
1988, copper, iron and
rotating light. Courtesy:
the artist and Alexander
Gray Associates,
New York

The last thing I wanted to be was a visual artist. My mother, Teresinha Soares, is an artist and I think she scared me – not because of her work but because of the way we lived. She worked in the theatre for a time and there were always actors hanging around the house. There were five of us living there, along with parrots and dogs. She produced performances and cast us in them; she also sent us out to interview people and collect information.

This was in Belo Horizonte, Brazil – a relatively small, very conservative city at the time. The Church tried to excommunicate her. As the oldest daughter, I was always very strong but I was labelled 'the daughter of the crazy woman'. I formed a protective bubble around myself. Literature was essential to that private world. I watched every black and white Hollywood movie from the 1950s and '60s that played in the local theatre; I also loved *The Turn of the Screw* (1972); Shirley MacLaine in *The Children's Hour* (1961); *Singing in the Rain* (1952); Esther Williams, Marilyn Monroe. In Brazil, a lot of European movies were screened. Bernardo Bertolucci's *La Luna* (The Moon, 1979) was a favourite.

I was a very good student, which enabled me to be as rebellious as I wanted to be without anyone raising objections. I once stole the keys for my school and sold access to them to other students, so they could cut class too. I spent years pulling tricks like this, annoying my parents until they couldn't bear it any longer. So, they shipped me off to England for a month. I ended up staying for two years, working as a waitress in London, until I applied to an architecture course in Rio de Janeiro.



In the 1980s, art schools in Brazil were very conservative, focusing mostly on classical sculpture and painting. Architecture, on the other hand, was more progressive and gave me access to important modern art movements, like the Bauhaus. We learned about colour theory and perspective – tools that I still use in my work. Many of my friends were involved with the School of Visual Arts of Parque Lage in Rio de Janeiro; I spent much of my time in the library there, which is where I began reading art magazines. I also worked briefly in an architecture office and the owner asked me to host a number of architects that were visiting Brazil: Peter Cook, Zaha Hadid, James Wines.

What I love about architecture as a discipline is that it can be poetic, even imaginary; proposals don't always need to be built. Or, if they are built, they can be follies without function. It's a powerful way of engaging with people's emotions, rather than simply directing them to the toilet.

I was spending time with male sculptor friends back then, who told me I had to suffer in order to be initiated into their group. That pissed me off, so I channelled my rage into my work. Around that time, there was an open call for a sculpture biennial at Parque Lage. I decided to enter the competition and was chosen – I believe I was the only woman. I proposed a copper tower with stairs and, atop the tower, a conical princess roof. Above that would be a rotating beacon, like in a lighthouse, which would illuminate the rainforest. With time, the tower would oxidize and turn green. It was a mixture of architecture and sculpture, a guiding light shining from the middle of nowhere. I fundraised to pay for its construction myself. When the biennial went bankrupt, the plan was cancelled, but my donors never asked for their money back, so I was able to use it to make more work and survive as an artist. I had no body of work at the time, but there I was with the Statue of Liberty!



NEITHER HERE NOR THERE

I came to New York to study at the Pratt Institute on a fellowship from the Brazilian government in the early 1990s. One of the first works that had a transformative effect on me there was Felix Gonzalez-Torres's "Untitled" (1991) billboards. At first, I had no idea that they were an artwork, but I found them striking amidst the city's visual pollution. My marble pillows are an homage to that work.

I loved Robert Gober – his photographs of debris, of a dress hanging from a tree. I'll never forget Richard Tuttle's 1992 show at Mary Boone Gallery, with line drawings on the wall and little sculptures made of junk clustered on the floor. Rosemarie Trockel was another influence. My references back then were mostly contemporary; I had never heard of Eva Hesse when I made my first artworks, which were reminiscent of her sculptures.

In 1992, Bruce Ferguson asked me to show my work in the first SITE Santa Fe, 'Longing and Belonging: From Faraway Nearby', which opened in 1995. I couldn't believe I had been invited to show alongside artists I used to read about in books. Dwight Hackett ran a foundry in Santa Fe, where he produced work for everyone from Richard Serra to Bruce Nauman. Making my own sculptures at that foundry was like art boot camp; I'd be working alongside Kiki Smith or Lynda Benglis, while Nauman was casting his hands on the other side of the room.

I could never identify myself using a hyphenated phrase the way so many curators wanted: to label myself a 'Latin-American woman artist'. I am as American as I am Brazilian, which is why my 2017 exhibition at Alexander Gray Associates in New York was called 'Neither Here Nor There'. I like living in limbo. I don't belong anywhere. I still get labelled as a Latin-American artist, even though I've lived in New York for 30 years.



ABOVE
Robert Gober, *X Crib*,
1987, painted wood,
112 × 128 × 85 cm.
Courtesy: © the artist
and Matthew Marks
Gallery, New York

LEFT
Valeska Soares,
Conversation Piece, 2010,
tempered glass,
44 × 80 × 83 cm. Courtesy:
the artist, Alexander Gray
Associates, New York,
and Fortes D'Aloia &
Gabriel, São Paulo/Rio de
Janeiro; photograph:
Serge Hasenböhler



THE INFINITE LIBRARY

Making works from books helps me deal with the impossibility of reading all the literature in the world. As Jorge Luis Borges illustrates in his story 'The Library of Babel' (1941), no lifetime would ever be long enough. Over time, libraries themselves have become overpowering physical spaces, both in their smell and the sum of their contents.

Books are tactile objects and in my collage works I treat them as forms. I find titles fascinating, too, because they often override the books they label. They're the first thing we remember, the first thing we judge. A title is its own universe, from which anyone can create a different story.

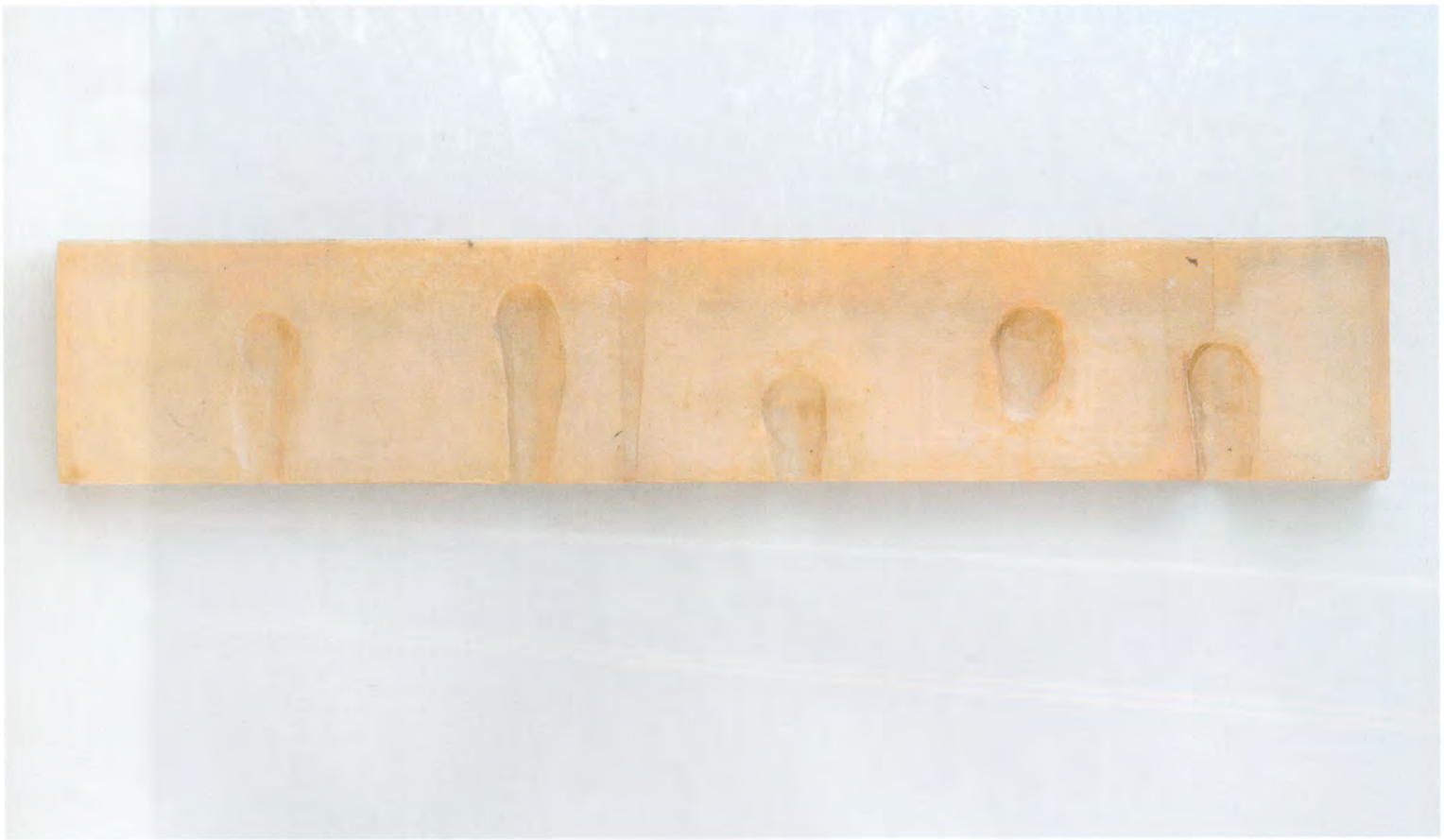
All the books that I use are mouldering away. Their beautiful dust jackets aren't being preserved so, paradoxically, by destroying the books themselves, I save the artworks. Text is being digitized, but the colours and textures of book covers will be lost to history. I'm interested in the way books and other objects can store memories or stand in for a group of people, as a kind of material history.

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ABOVE
Felix Gonzalez-Torres,
"Untitled", 1991,
billboard, dimensions
variable. ©
Felix Gonzalez-Torres;
courtesy: The Felix
Gonzalez-Torres
Foundation

RIGHT
Valeska Soares,
*Sur L'Herbe II (On
the Grass II)*, 2012, three
hand-carved marble
pillows, 38 × 75 × 70 cm,
38 × 51 × 33 cm and
44 × 41 × 17 cm.
Courtesy: the artist



*“People tend to just see romance in my work,
but I think it’s perverse; it always has a darker side.
Every rose has its thorns.”*

ANTHROPOPHAGY

Of any artistic movement, *arte povera* has probably had the greatest influence on my practice. There was a poetry in its use of animals and marble and plants, a sensitivity towards material, even cheap material. Its cheapness makes it relatable.

I’m much more interested in the messier side of minimalism, in artists like Barry Le Va rather than Donald Judd or Carl Andre. It’s a fantasy to think that anyone could make art without it reflecting its context. Gonzalez-Torres understood this, even if people can’t see the Latino references in his iconography. The sweets in his *“Untitled”* (1992) are party favours – add curtains and lights and you have a *quinceañera*. His work is subtle, but you cannot deny the man was Cuban.

If Gonzalez-Torres’s candy works re-enact the Eucharist, mine are more anthropophagic. I don’t just buy empty chocolate boxes; I buy full ones and eat all of their contents. I call these ‘Body Works’ because whatever is missing has been processed by my body. The work is more about consumerism than repurposing my body. It’s a communion, but it’s a communion with myself rather than with other people, as it is in the case of Gonzalez-Torres’s works. I have to resist the demand for my chocolate collages or I would become morbidly obese!



People tend to just see romance in my work, but I think it's perverse; it always has a darker side. Every rose has its thorns. Perfume, for me, is a metaphor for intoxication. It's the perfect material: it can be sweet and seductive or overpowering and disgusting. My mother wears so much perfume she makes me want to puke. My perfume works reside at the threshold of intoxication. In a way, the material is a metaphor for relationships, for the states we traverse when we try to relate to one another. Our emotional boundaries are inherently fragile: you can love a guy one day and hate him the next for the most trivial reason, like the popcorn scent on his breath.

I'm not a romantic person. Love is fundamentally unattainable: the only way you'll fall in love is if you're not trying to. If you let go. As Roland Barthes writes in *A Lover's Discourse* (1977): 'If you feel loved you will also feel abandoned at the same time.' It's a paradox of proximity and detachment. My work explores that tension. Take my glass chair, *Conversation Piece* (2010): if a couple actually sits in it, the work will shatter and they both will fall to the ground. No conversation. Many of my furniture sculptures, such as *Lugar Comum* (Shared Place), reflect the fragility of human relationships; if you tried to use them, the result would be disastrous.

Barthes also writes: 'I try not to wait for my lover to call me, I go around the house, I don't pay attention, but I find myself waiting, I'm still waiting.' My work *Edit* (*Waiting*) turns that text into a kind of poem by redacting certain parts. Love as a form of madness, for which there is no cure; its cure would equal its absence.

Very little art today puts forth a politics of love, or of desire. Eroticism, even pornography, is considered acceptable – yet, love is one of the most transgressive subjects of all. When hate is a subject of our discourse – and we have a politics of gender, of race, of class – why should we not also have a politics of love? ●



OPPOSITE PAGE ABOVE
Bruce Nauman, *Wax Impressions of the Knees of Five Famous Artists*, 1966, fibreglass and polyester resin, 40 × 217 × 7 cm. Courtesy: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The Agnes E. Meyer and Elise S. Haas Fund and Accessions Committee Fund

OPPOSITE PAGE BELOW
Valeska Soares, *Us (from Sinners)*, 1995, cast beeswax and wooden benches, 26 × 122 × 15 cm. Courtesy: the artist

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Valeska Soares, *Sugar Blues (II)*, 2007, used candy-box assemblage, paper collage and wooden stool, 91 × 30 × 30 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, São Paulo/Rio de Janeiro

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Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *"Untitled"*, 1992, installation view at Fondation Beyeler, Basel, 2018. © Felix Gonzalez-Torres; courtesy: The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation; photograph: Mark Niedermann



VALESKA SOARES is an artist based in New York, USA. In 2018, she had a travelling survey exhibition at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, USA, and Phoenix Art Museum, USA. Her retrospective at Pinacoteca de São Paulo, Brazil, is on view until 22 October.