

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.

And so is Gilberto de Mello Freyre Neto, the Cultural Secretary of Pernambuco State and grandson of a famous early-twentieth-century public intellectual. He is also a connoisseur of cachaça, and he shares samples of artisanal renditions of Brazil's national spirit, derived, of course, from sugarcane. A cousin to rum—though rum is usually produced with molasses rather than sugarcane—cachaça remains an under-the-radar spirit in the United States, known mostly for its use in the caipirinha. For a long time, cachaça was unappreciated in Brazil, too, as it was historically mass-produced to be sold cheaply to the masses, its lowly reputation accentuated by its history as a currency in the slave trade that long fueled and defiled this country's sugar production. Only in the last decade or so has the spirit been embraced as a more refined beverage, distilled in small batches, aged and savored by those who might otherwise nurse fine Scotches or mezcals.

Ricardo, who mostly drinks Johnnie Walker Black on the rocks, tells me about Sanhaçu, a cachaça from Pernambuco whose distiller plays classical music in the distillery twenty-four hours a day, because fermentation is a living process. I sample it in search of the high notes.

The cachaça works its magic on the large gathering on the veranda, which is buzzing in the aftermath of an ambitious event successfully completed. Soon Ricardo, leaning back in his chair with his ubiquitous whisky and cigar, summons forth the music. The brothers Ulisses and Flávio Cohn, directors of São Paulo's DAN Galeria, who've been preparing for this event of their artist Denise Milan, have been given instruments, Ulisses a saxophone borrowed from the Usina's music school, and Flávio an assortment of percussive kitchen tools. They accompany Tonfil, who's arrived that day, and who sings, with a velvet lyricism, a bossa nova songbook. At times, he's a capella, other times, most of the party joins in to sing along with familiar songs. It's mesmerizing. Since I don't know the songs I can only listen, but it transforms the night into magic. Ricardo tells us that Tonfil is from the town of São José do Egito, and is a poet. That São José do Egito is a city of poets. That Tonfil's father was a poet, and his father's father, and so on.



Casa do Lago/Photo: Brian Hieggelke

Tonfil is “from the traditional family of poets originated by Louro do Pajeú,” Ricardo tells me later. Louro was a “repentista,” a poet who sings his own, improvised verse. São José do Egito, a city of 30,000 people in northeastern Brazil, has poetry in its water, according to legend. It’s hard to imagine such a place, where poetry is so revered, taught and practiced. In a 2016 article about the city on the news site Brasil de Fato, the poet Bia Marinho says, “All families have a poet. And even if you don’t have someone who writes, there is someone who declaims or is involved in some way. In some private and municipal schools, poetry is inserted in the school context. Children learn what the sextile and the quatrain are.”

If we are lucky, we might have two or three moments, days or nights in a lifetime that become poetry in and of themselves. This is one of them.

The Usina de Arte, or Art Mill, is located just over ninety miles southwest of Recife, a city on the northeast coast of Brazil with just over four million inhabitants and the capital of the state of Pernambuco. The largest producer of alcohol and sugar in Brazil in the 1950s, when it was known as the Usina de Santa Terezinha, the usina, the factory, is far beyond the big city’s sprawl, sitting adjacent to the small village of Santa Terezinha. You pass by the usina itself when you enter. It’s one of those glorious ruins of a factory dotting a world more than a century past its industrial revolution. It sits as a relic, now mostly a visual symbol for this incarnation, though its buildings get deployed in various ways at special artistic events, especially during the annual festival of the arts the Usina produces for the region. While it’s easy to envision it being renovated into a spectacular art space—MassMOCA comes to mind as a model—it’s not on the front burner. Ricardo says that developing it at some point is “inevitable.”

Continue driving past the factory and you find yourself in a pastoral tropicale, lush with bougainvillea, orchids and jackfruit trees, a sprawling garden adjacent to several large Spanish-colonial-style houses. The houses are well-maintained, and serve as accommodations for out-of-town guests, like us, at the Usina.

The Parque Jardim Botânico, or Botanic Garden Park, is the main attraction, a thirty-three-hectare (about sixty football fields) walkway that journeys beside ponds and up hills, with about forty outdoor-scaled sculptures tucked into points along the journey.

But as its name indicates, this is a sculpture park blended into a developing botanical garden in the midst of reforestation, and Ricardo seems as enthused to guide us on a tree tour as he’d been to show us the art. Among 10,000 or so plants of more than 600 species, is a rainbow eucalyptus, there is the Sumauma tree from the Amazon, just a few thousand miles west. The mahogany is majestic and the bamboos, both the black and Buddha belly among other species, are fascinating. Tucked away on a hill in a corner of the property is one of the most amazing sites of all, though I don’t think it’s open to the public. It’s a greenhouse the size of a football stadium filled with nothing but orchids, that flower so precious that books and movies are made about its thieves.

While the natural artworks assembled for the botanic element of this park blend organically into the environment, the sculptures command attention. A colossal disembodied head—Flávio Cerqueira’s “It had to happen (Bandeirante’s Head)” 2016— like the crown of a statue from Olympus, floats weightlessly atop a large pond. Atop a peak near the orchid farm sits a huge hammer seemingly encased in lucite, “Fotini” (2021) by Saint Clair Cemin, a monument to the working class, members of which likely make up the majority of visitors to this remote park. More subtly, a perfectly rendered rectangular pond hovers just above the ground. It epitomizes the ideal piece for this environment, working on its own as the artwork “Tiummmmtichamm” (2018) by José Spaniol, but also reflecting multiple natural aspects of the park, depending on the time of day and the viewing angle. Throughout the park, too, you’ll see compelling works in metal created by Ricardo himself, including one especially popular piece up in the mountain that features a swing where visitors can interact with the work, i.e. kick their feet into the air and fly like a child at play.

Closer to the park entrance sits a massive jubilee of stainless steel and airplane parts. It’s “Unclassified” by the artist Frida Baranek, and Frida is the other Usina artist, in addition to Denise, who is in attendance. Her work has been in place here since 2019, but the pandemic prevented any formal inauguration. The longtime wife of New York Times foreign correspondent and columnist Roger Cohen, with whom she has two children, Frida now splits time between Lisbon, Portugal and her Rio de Janeiro hometown since their divorce.

This piece was created using scraps from the United States military, created as part of an exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1993, "Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century." "At the time I was in the States and there was a lot of talk about the surplus of the military industry," Frida tells me about the work's creation. "I asked to have this material and they gave it to me and I made this piece."

The first time she sees it in situ, she walks around it slowly, inspecting. She sees something and reaches into the jumble, pulling out a large piece. It's not part of the work, likely something that was confusedly added somewhere in transit. It's a minor thing though and she's very happy to see her work here. "Here is the first time that the piece is outdoors. And it has a connection with nature because it really discusses abundance and excess," she says. "I'm a fruit of this supposed Industrial Revolution where I always think about the excess we live with."

Though we did not know it at the time last September, the piece has special resonance as contemporary commentary on militarization and war. "I see the questions about militaries for all of us," she says. "It's about, what are we doing? Why are we still fighting? Why are we still throwing bombs? This shows a piece that is completely out of control. That things are there just in this instant, but in the moment, this thing can fly away and transform and be different. And this feeling, it's a feeling that I always look for in my work, that I have this feeling that something is about to happen or just happen and it's there and there is this balance. And like life, there is this balance, that things can change in the next minute."

I guess I should also mention the issue with the vagina. Google the Usina de Arte and you'll find an array of articles from around the world discussing the controversy about Juliana Notari's work, entitled "Diva." It's a reasonably accurate if colossal replica of a vulva cut into the mountainside, thirty-three meters high, sixteen meters wide and six meters deep. In a country grounded in a conservative Catholic heritage and now governed by a president, Jair Bolsonaro, who makes Donald Trump seem statesmanlike, it's not surprising that so much umbrage, so much sound and fury, would be kicked up over what is, of course, a part of the human anatomy, you know, God's creation.

The work came out of a residency of the artist at the Usina over the course of eleven months. Notari proposed the work to Bruna and Ricardo, who said yes and then went about the practical aspects of figuring out the how and where. Bruna says they tried multiple locations, using black tissue paper as a proxy to scope size and visibility. In the end, the excavation of the mountainside had to be done by hand, and took twenty men to carve it out.

I don't know anything about Bruna and Ricardo's politics, other than that they are far more centrist than the leftist leanings of Notari. When I ask Bruna about the controversy, she tells me they knew the piece was making a political point, but that the volume and intensity of the response caught them off guard. When it was finished, Notari posted about it on Facebook. She wrote, in part (translated from Portuguese):

In "Diva," I use art to dialogue with issues that refer to the problematization of gender from a female perspective combined with a cosmovision that questions the relationship between nature and culture in our phallogocentric and anthropocentric western society. These issues have become increasingly urgent today. After all, it will be through a change in the perspective of our relationship between humans and between human and non-human that will allow us to live longer on this planet and in a less unequal and catastrophic society.

Fairly benign and conventional sentiments in the art world, but in Brazil world, it set a fire. The post received 27,000 comments, sparked coverage around the world and a major controversy at home.

In the heat of the moment, Bruna and Ricardo called Notari. She expected they were planning to distance themselves from the work and its controversy, only to find out it was a call of support, a check-in on her well-being in the face of threats she was receiving.

Ricardo never considered himself a collector, but started buying paintings in his late teens—mostly modernist, some impressionist. He says he had three Renoirs and also collected silver and glass pieces. But “when I got divorced, all those were left behind.” He moved into an oceanside apartment in Recife and opted for the minimalist white-cube look. Until he met Bruna.

Bruna and Ricardo developed an interest in contemporary art together. They started a club with friends, connected with a curator, and began learning about contemporary art and meeting artists.

Around the same time, they started visiting the Usina more regularly. Ricardo had no interest in reviving it as a producing sugar mill, so they started thinking about potential new uses for the property. Through their art explorations they’d befriended the wood artist Hugo França, and he’d visit the Usina occasionally and make pieces for the site. Ricardo credits França for sparking the inspiration:

“In 2015, we were outside here, smoking, drinking. It was his third year coming here, and he said: why don’t you invite another artist, among other things? And then I remembered about Inhotim, where we had been in 2012, and at this moment, we thought that that could be a change of paradigm. To get something that could bring a new way of sustainability for the community. “

Inhotim, the colossal outdoor art center founded by the mining magnate Bernardo Paz near the Brazilian city of Belo Horizonte, is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear about Usina de Art. Inhotim has become a major international art destination, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors to its remote location, where folks can visit pavilions dedicated to the likes of Hélio Oiticica, Olafur Eliasson and Lygia Pape within the environs of a botanical garden.

While Ricardo admires Paz’s accomplishment, their vision for the Usina is different. Paz was a major art collector looking for a place to locate his collection. Only after situating it did he start to share it with the public. Bruna and Ricardo started with no collection, only a desire to bring something educational to the community. “We have heard from young people here,” Ricardo says, “students studying in the university who, when they were asked where they lived, were ashamed to say they lived here, in an old sugar factory, and now they are so proud to say they live here.”



Ricardo and Bruna/Photo: Brian Hieggelke

I don't think I've ever really spent time with anyone like Ricardo, or a couple like Ricardo and Bruna. They live well but not ostentatiously; their families have had money so long that it's not an issue, not a topic. It's like soap might be for me, always there, necessary and useful, but why would you talk about something so boring? It's not that he's secretive about it, ask a question and he'll answer it, but it's hard to imagine the boundaries of his interests. He seems to own the land everywhere your eye can see, even from a mountaintop; he once owned a fashion atelier in Paris, he owns part of a bottled water company in Recife, Crystal Tropical. Though he no longer refines sugar, his land is full of the cane grown by others on his behalf. More recently he's gotten into cattle; he tells me he owns about 6,500 head. But he doesn't talk much about any of this, unless asked. He wants to talk about art, and the community he's serving with his work.

This is a one-sided story, of course, since my inability to speak Portuguese meant I could not have conversed freely with locals and asked them about their views on the Usina if I wanted to. But everything I experienced conveyed an authentic deep and caring commitment to the community on the part of Ricardo and Bruna.

Nor for that matter, have I ever known anyone like the artist Denise Milan, who was responsible for Jan and I being at the Usina in the first place. Denise is based in São Paulo, but has strong ties to Chicago with a large sculpture she created with Ary Perez, "America's Courtyard" (1998), residing permanently on the lakefront just south of the Adler Planetarium, and a solo exhibition, "Mist of the Earth" at the Chicago Cultural Center in 2012. As a result, she's made numerous connections to Chicago and its cultural leadership. We first met her here, but stayed in her home on a visit to the SP-Arte art fair several years ago, and became friends. When we brought her to a screening sponsored by Chicago's Mostra Brazilian film festival that coincidentally was taking place during that visit to São Paulo, she met the Chicago filmmaker James Choi, and that led to his documentary film project about her "Engage Earth" community art and education project, one that brought together thousands of children from the favela in a spectacle of art, music, performance, hip-hop and opera.

When Ricardo and Bruna were assembling the guest list for the inauguration of her "Earth Banquet" at the Usina, Denise suggested us. When we were offered to have the Usina cover our travel, food and lodging, we could not refuse. But we also could not imagine what we were about to experience, either.

The way that "Earth Banquet" arrived at the Usina is a story in itself. Denise was invited to the prestigious Bienal de São Paulo in 2018, and her installation, "Ilha Brasilis," was one of the most popular exhibitions. Among those who saw her work was Adriano Berengo, who invited Denise to bring her next work, "Earth Banquet," to his Fondazione Berengo for the "Glasstress" exhibition during the Venice Biennale. When the pandemic struck and the world froze, the work was included in another exhibition at the Fondazione, "Unbreakable: Women in Glass." Meanwhile, back home in São Paulo, a more expansive version of the work was created and exhibited in a modified shipping container at the DAN Galeria. Because galleries were closed, it was shown in the street, and became very popular as a rare opportunity to experience art during that time. The gallery had planned to sell its components as individual artworks, but when Ricardo and Bruna saw it, they wanted it for the Usina in its entirety.

The work is a striking visual tableau, like a colossal shadow box hosting an elaborate setting for dinner in black and silver, with a large mirror that, in its new location at the Usina, reflects the natural beauty that surrounds it. Denise has long worked with stones and crystals, imparting upon them the organic character of their ancient formation. The "Earth Banquet" continues that exploration, the meal being the creation of the planet itself. "It's interesting because the center piece is an ammonite," Denise says. "The ammonite is a form of life that was organic that became a stone. So it is a form of life that transformed, that adapted. And it also talks about time because the idea of this pot in Earth, it's always talking about time. We're talking about this food being done in millions and millions of years. It's being cooked." She asks, "How is a stone born? How does it become something else? Why does it transform? How does it adjust? What is that connected to our human life, to how we surpass obstacles?"

The town of Vila Santa Terezinha exists on Ricardo's property. It once mostly housed workers at the Usina, back when it was an operating factory. Now its 8,000 or so residents mostly work elsewhere, but their well-being is a paramount concern for Ricardo and Bruna. The mission of Usina de Arte seems to be far less about impressing the art world, and far more about enriching the lives of the residents in its immediate vicinity. (At one point, I asked Ricardo how it worked, owning an entire town. "Do they pay you rent?" "I probably should charge rent," he responds, "but I never got around to it in the thirty years I've owned the property, and it would not go over well to start now. Plus, these folks work in low-paying jobs and could not really afford it." I try to imagine an American capitalist in a similar scenario and cannot.)

Ricardo and Bruna are hands-on when it comes to the town and especially its children. Not only have they built a music school at the Usina, but they directly engage with the education, not only bringing students to the Usina to see the art but also bringing the artists into the school. I saw this firsthand when, upon arrival, Denise informed me that they'd like me to give a talk to a student assembly as part of the presentation of her work.

The school resembles any other grade school in the United States built in the sixties or seventies, except for the open-air character befitting its tropical setting. It shows its age but is well-maintained. The assembly area is an al fresco pavilion, and as the students file in, I see that they range in age from grade-school through high school, more than a hundred in all. Ricardo speaks, then Denise introduces the fourteen-minute documentary film about her work, "Engage Earth," made by James Choi. I speak for a few minutes about how Chicago has connected to Brazil, in part through our connection with Denise; she translates it into Portuguese. The students are mostly attentive, with the occasional pockets of chatter endemic to any gathering of teenagers. After we finish, the students are given a snack of fruit and a beverage, and we head back to the Usina. The next day I found myself, right after the induction ceremony for Denise's artwork, being interviewed for the school newspaper by three local high school girls.

Ricardo is gregarious, comfortable being the host at the center of the table, equally at ease talking and listening to those in his domain as they converse about art, about travel, about Brazil. He keeps an extensive selection of Cuban cigars close at hand in the main house, a shrine to this particular vice, under a large photograph of Fidel Castro and Ernest Hemingway, "the only one they ever took together," he says. Bruna is content to stay more in the background, quietly disappearing each night to retire and let Ricardo carry on as host; she's up early with the small children.

Family is very important to Bruna and Ricardo, and they share it even more than most couples, as they are cousins, a curiosity that is not a secret but an openly discussed fact. Ricardo, in his late fifties, has four children by his first wife; they are present at various times over the weekend. Bruna's mother, Ricardo's first cousin Marta de Lima Cavalcanti, is also present the entire time; she's been close to Ricardo their whole lives. Bruna, now in her thirties, started dating Ricardo after his marriage ended and they have three small children together who are also a regular presence at the Usina over the weekend.

When Bruna gave us a tour upon arrival, we saw a large artwork in one room that recalled the work of art nouveau painter Gustav Klimt; up close, she points out that it's actually a Cavalcanti family tree, far more extensive and deeply rooted than any I've ever seen before. It's not just decoration; in conversation, Ricardo's appreciation of his legacy is deeply rooted.

When I ask him about his family history, he jokes, "I hope you have like 360 hours." And he's right. It's a remarkable story of business and politics that parallels the mysterious and frustrating history of Brazil as a nation. A story, perhaps in some ways, like the Roosevelts, with the dramatic violence that plagued the Kennedys thrown in. And a bit of Romeo and Juliet, too.

While Ricardo's family history goes deep into colonial Brazilian history, the story of this engenho, which is the Portuguese word that correlates to plantation, begins when Ricardo's great-grandfather, José Pessôa de Queiroz, purchased a small farm in 1926 and ordered a turnkey sugar plant from The Dyer Company in the United States; the mills were fabricated by the Farrel Company in Connecticut.

By 1929, it was up and running as a sugar mill, just in time for the U.S. stock market crash that presaged the worldwide depression. "But we were not worried about the crash. We were worried about what was going to happen in Brazil the next year," Ricardo says of his ancestors.

That's because his family was just as involved in politics back then as it was in business, and things were getting dicey. José's uncle, Epiácio Pessoa, was the eleventh president of Brazil, with a term ending in 1922. José's cousin, João Pessoa, became governor of the state of Paraíba in 1928 and started feuding with another cousin, the media baron F. Pessoa de Queiroz. In 1930, João Pessoa was a candidate for the vice presidency of Brazil, the running mate of Getúlio Vargas, when he was assassinated in a coffee shop in Recife —not, ironically, as an outcome of the family feud, but rather in a crime of passion committed by someone whose illicit affair Pessoa had exposed.

That assassination sparked the Brazilian revolution of 1930 that elevated Vargas to the presidency. Before long, Ricardo's great-grandfather and his brothers had to run from Brazil for their lives, as their side of the family had been on the other side of the political spectrum as João Pessoa and now were blamed for his death.

Meanwhile, Carlos di Lima Cavalcanti, the great-uncle of Ricardo's mother, became the revolutionary governor of Pernambuco. "Twenty-two years later," Ricardo says, "a marriage gets together. A daughter of Lima Cavalcanti with a son of Pessoa de Queiroz. My mother and my father. They married in 1952, from what had been enemy families in 1930."

But back in 1930, no one would have imagined the prospects of such a union. The home and the businesses of Ricardo's great-grandfather José were invaded, were burned. Ricardo's father, a six-month-old baby at the time, was spared when Ricardo's grandmother fled her home. José was forced to go into exile in the Uruguayan embassy in Rio, his life spared only because he was the godfather of Assis Chateaubriand, the media mogul, arts patron (co-creator and founder of MASP, the São Paulo Museum of Art) and one of the most powerful Brazilians of the twentieth century.

Eventually things calmed down and José was able to return from exile and reclaim his properties, including the Usina. He brought in his grandson to run the operation, and Ricardo's father did, dedicating his life to the enterprise and raising his family there. As Ricardo says, "Me and all my brothers, cousins, we spent our childhood here. Our connection here, it's a very sentimental thing."

But in 1982, during the reign of João Figueiredo, who was the final president during the U.S.-backed military coup that ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985, the government confiscated the Usina under the premise of financial mismanagement. But in a long and sordid tale that helps explain why filmmaker Terry Gilliam titled his satire of epic bureaucracy "Brazil," the government took a very large sugar producer, with 24,000 hectares of land (more than ninety square miles, almost the size of Milwaukee) and a private railroad with about 100 kilometers of tracks, out of service.

Instead, the bureaucrat placed in charge of the Usina "started dividing the land among his family," Ricardo says. "The judicial administrator divided it into several pieces for his brothers, nephews, his brother-in-law, amigos."

More than a decade of ineptitude later, the Usina was bankrupt and the properties that had been confiscated started going up for auction, one by one. Ricardo, at the age of twenty-eight or so, started buying them, eventually getting back about 7,000 hectares. Why? "I had lived eight years of my life living with this sensation of something stolen from you," Ricardo says. "Your life, your childhood... your life entirely. Your history." Twenty-five years later, Ricardo is still waiting for the court, which has ruled in his favor, to finalize a restitution settlement.

Ricardo had the family property back, but it was tarnished for him. He did not return to the home he'd known as a child and young man, instead renting another usina to produce the sugar he was growing on the land. It took his marriage to Bruna in 2008 to inspire the return. She pressed him to come back, and they finally did in 2012.

"She spent four years insisting that I bring her here," Ricardo says. "To know the heart, to know the Usina, because her grandmother always talked about the Usina, because it was beautiful. And after four years, I brought her here. And then I got the love again."

For as long as Brazil has existed as a place in the Western imagination, it has evoked a powerful mystique of natural and human beauty, of tropics and jungles and beaches, of bossa nova and samba and "The Girl From Ipanema" and "Black Orpheus." It's all that, a paradise lost by the enduring wounds inflicted on it by the colonizers, who slaughtered its indigenous people and imported enslaved workers from Africa to harvest its vast natural resources in pursuit of wealth. And if that sounds familiar, it's because Brazil also might be viewed as sort of a Bizarro USA, a broken mirror image grappling with many of the same sins we are. Nevertheless, its mysteries are vast, and it's hard to imagine anyone resisting its magic.

Since my visit last fall, the Usina de Arte has continued its ambitious program, with its dual mission to bring the local community a richer experience of art and nature while also elevating the profile of its artwork and acquisitions. To that end, they recently hired a curator for the Usina, Marc Pottier, a Frenchman who splits his time between Paris and Rio de Janeiro, and brings thirty years in the contemporary art world with him. He calls this "the luck of a life," the opportunity, he says, to contribute to one of the very best projects in South America.

Part of his mission is to elevate the visitor experience of the art. When I visited, some of the pieces were not identified with signage, and the ones that were written were only in Portuguese, rather than a multilingual approach that would serve tourism. Pottier told me about plans to add QR codes that open up artist interviews in place of long explanatory texts and that the Brazilian artist Claudia Jaguaribe has been commissioned to design benches for the park that "will be made of tiles telling about the local patterns, local history of Northeast Brazil." And yes, a multilingual approach will be emphasized.

Pottier says that moving forward, the collection will expand to include international artists, like Alfredo Jaar, the Chilean artist living in New York, whose large neon work, "Claro-Escuro" 2021, is the newest acquisition and will be installed later this year, after the artist visits in June to look at the site. Brazilian artists will remain important, especially the work of women, with a new emphasis on indigenous and Afro-descendant artists.

I asked Pottier what attracted him to the project, and he affirmed much of what I'd been able to sense during my short visit. He wrote in a text message:

"I think what is important is to say that the power of this project is that, even ambitious, it keeps a 'family angle' of a very nice couple who loves art. As a pro, they invited me but I am more an advisor than a curator. This is their adventure and I shall try to translate what they want to create. This is a project which wants to respect local people, and wants to show how diverse Brazil is, that is why we shall now focus on indigenous and Brazilian Afro-descendant artists."

When I checked in with Ricardo recently, he shared images of new works arriving at the Usina since my visit: the powerful "Paisagem" ("Landscape") by Regina Silveira, which was shown at the Bienal de São Paulo last fall, "Nadir #quase uma ilha 02" and "Athar #05" by Túlio Pinto, "Pai" ("Father") by Saint Clair Cemin and "Campo da Fome" ("Hunger Field") by Matheus Rocha Pitta, which was being installed when we corresponded.

But just the same, he also proudly shared images of a student outing they'd just completed, where they sent a bus of kids to an international convention about the environment. In the photo of that outing, there is Ricardo up front, looking like the proudest chaperone ever.

Even fairytales have endings, and by Sunday night, we're reaching our final chapter. About two-thirds of the guests have left, including our friends Denise and her Eduardo. Ricardo and Bruna have one last thing they wanted to share with all of us, their favorite spot to watch the sunset. A few of us pile into Ricardo's car, a nice luxury sedan rather than the all-terrain SUVs favored by American urbanites, and head out along a fifteen-minute or so journey through the countryside and another small town or two. Ricardo pulls off the main road and starts driving up the mountainside, on a road that's not even plowed to make a dirt road, it seems. More like a trail, barely wide enough for our modestly sized car. As we drive, the tall stalks of sugarcane slap at the windows. Eventually we come to a stop at a peak of Serra de Pedra, in Algoas, and I see that we're not the first to arrive. Some of the staff of the Usina is there, setting up a table with refreshments, including a charcuterie board. Small stools are perched around the mountaintop, and wine glasses and bottles of beer are soon in our hands. At some point a couple of uniformed officers armed with serious-looking guns show up, giving Jan a jolt of momentary trepidation. But they're just checking in, and exchange brief pleasantries with Ricardo before returning to their rounds.

Beyond this luxurious way to watch a sunset, the view is truly spectacular, a panoramic 360-degree vista of rolling hills and small mountain peaks and fields and fields and fields of sugarcane. By now, I just assume that Ricardo owns it all. And that when he sees it, he sees a particular paradise, one with artwork and nature and children.