

IRREALIS MOOD, DANIEL FROTA
FONDAZIONE SANDRETTO RE REBAUDENGO,
CURATED BY LORENZO BALBI
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Celebrating its fifth year of collaboration with ENSBA Lyon – École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts, Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo presents the first solo exhibition in Italy of works by Daniel Frota, a student and participant in the 2016 Post-Diplome course promoted by ENSBA. The artist and writer was born in Brazil in 1988, studied in Rio de Janeiro, Arnhem (The Netherlands) and Lyon, and currently lives in Lyon and Rio de Janeiro. He works with a variety of media: video, printing, installation and book. His research, poised between artistic research and literary criticism, focuses on the reception of texts and the writing of alternative narratives, which he obtains through different translation strategies.

Irrealis mood is the title of this show, which combines various works and new productions by the young Brazilian artist, providing a compendium of his lines of research, themes and suggestions. On a more general level, the work selection documents the ideological issues tackled by the artist in his exploration of the modern heritage, which he sees as declining. He talks about time, our time, as a suspended temporal dimension where skepticism seems to be the strongest conviction. Daniel Frota retrospectively focuses on specific events and references of in the 20th Century history of science, architecture, literature and art, using verbal language as the thread that interweaves all the elements in the exhibition.

Frota is interested in the notion of uchronia in relation to the crisis of modern thought. A subgenre of sci-fi literature, uchronia relies on the possibility to change an event in the past, and consequently to recreate a new, fictional present: the works on view all share this status as re-creations. In his sculptures and videos, Daniel Frota concentrates on the difference between history and stories: what happens to our mental constructions when ideologies fade away? What happens when we realize that the drafts for our projects are really nothing but maps of their ruins?

In linguistics, there is a term that describes a group of verbal moods used in situations of contingency and unpredictability. The term is *irrealis mood*, a set of grammatical 'states of mind' that includes, for instance, the subjunctive mood, which allows speakers to predicate something about things unknown, as yet unconfirmed, or unverifiable. It allows speakers to talk about their intentions and wishes, and it is on

account of this ability that the artist has chosen this expression as the title of his solo exhibition.

At Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Daniel Frota introduces the public, for the first time, to his video *Sol Preto* (2016), an account of the 1919 English scientific mission in the city of Sobral, in North-Eastern Brazil, whose purpose was to document and study a total solar eclipse. The team was welcomed by Bishop Don José, the local city authority and founder of the local paper, and the scientists stopped at the village for a month, in order to carry out the experiment that would later be accepted as the first proof of Einstein's theory of general relativity, and marked the beginning of modern physics. Paul Johnson, a British historian and journalist, hailed May 29, 1919 as the beginning of the Modern era. Conversely, the belief spread among the local population that the day of the eclipse would bring the end of the world. In the video we see two narrators reciting improvised verses, in which they put the idea of modernity in perspective. In a true feat of vocal dueling – which harks back to an ancient oral tradition that is very widespread in the region – the two musicians create verses in which the stories of the influence and evolution of modern thought overlap, emphasizing the social and technological backwardness of the city of Sobral.

The two installations with xylographs, *Concentration of granite in Borborema* (2015), also take us back to the artist's native country. The Borborema region has one of the largest concentrations of granite in North-Eastern Brazil. This rocky formation is the product of the solidification of magma in the innermost layers of the Earth, and comes to the surface as a result of erosion and tectonic movements, thereby allowing human knowledge to somehow reach down to the center of the Earth.

The central area of the show is occupied by the sculptures *Always and again this pathetic if* (Scheerbart), (2015), *What is beautiful I do not know*, (2015) and *Charles Darwin's face on banknotes*, (2016) installed on the floor. The artist sees these three sculptures as “schemes, architectural models and phrases” – informal installations made with highly symbolical materials used in Modernist architecture, organized as a vocabulary of detritus. The observer's view from above, and the scale relationship, point to a constant tension between representation and construction.

The work which ideally closes our journey into the research of Daniel Frota is *Uma jornada infinita de sonhos e descobertas* (2016), a new work produced especially for this exhibition. The installation is

a reconstruction of the crystal display structures designed by Italian-Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi in 1968. The artist found them in the Centro Culturale Sesc Pompéia, where they had long been stored, before their recent restoration in 2015. Originally designed for the Sao Paulo Modern Art Museum, these display structures were discarded after having been the object of a long dispute, with overtly political and ideological overtones, among the different directors of the institution. Made of tempered glass slabs (whose function is to support and display the canvases), with cube-shaped concrete bases, for Lina Bo Bardi these were a 'brutalist' statement against the institutional use of museum walls. Their peculiarity as display elements is that they questioned the usual passivity of spectators, who were invited to find their way around the exhibition space, without the usual linear, authoritarian guidance of the walls. The sense of spatial disorientation they produced, along with the decay of their structures, was the main reason for their withdrawal. The structures had been damaged by the dampness and heat of the tropical climate, which had caused the slabs to expand, compromising the preservation standards for the works. After Lina Bo Bardi's death in 1992, the Museum therefore decided to remove the display structures and install the paintings on traditional, white-painted plasterboard walls. It was only in December 2015 that the Museum's new curatorial team restored the original display system for the painting collection. After 20 years of storage, a patina of obsolescence seems to have deposited on these objects. As he rebuilds the elements, the artist problematically reflects on the motivation for this display project, which has to do with the desire to go back to the historical roots of the Institution, although the approach remains disconnected from the original spirit of debate that was alive at the time, but seems to have vanished today. Significantly, the title of the work – *Uma jornada infinita de sonhos e descobertas (An infinite journey of dream and discovery)* – is drawn from the introductory text for the reconstructed display/restoration, sponsored by a bank in 2015.

The installation of Daniel Frota highlights the different temporal planes relating to Bo Bardi's structures, drawing our attention to their critical potential, which he captures even on the material and visual level, recreating the moment of their dismantling as a physical metaphor of the end of the Modernist museum but also, on the other hand, of its ability to continue to fascinate us.

Text by Lorenzo Balbi