

ERNESTO NETO

O protesto e a serpente

"The body does not lie". Ernesto Neto

The body figures large in Ernesto Neto's work. Over the course of the last 20 year his sculpture has engaged the human body's various physical senses with extraordinary imaginativeness and ingenuity, literally incorporating viewers' bodies into the work itself, and in the process converting the viewer into an active and autonomous participant in the experience of the art work. Neto's current show at the Galería Elba Benítez, entitled *O protesto e a serpente* (The Protest and the Snake), continues to be shaped in large part by this well-established aesthetic and frequent use of bio-morphic, organic forms; nonetheless, the works on view also signal new developments in Neto's work, drawing on the artist's personal experiences and spiritual beliefs.

O protesto e a serpente, as its title suggests, is organized around two axes: on the one hand, protest -- i.e. society's internal reaction to its own ills -- and on the other, the natural world of forests, plants and creatures (including human beings), which Neto sees as the only possible source of any and all genuine healing. Thus the exhibition includes works with explicit references (such as the phrase *Quem paga o arrego*, or 'Who pays the bill?') to the violent demonstrations that shook Brazil in 2013 and in which Neto participated first-hand, as well works that juxtapose objects such as the cross of Christianity and the billy-clubs used by police the police, both of which Neto considers "instruments of torture." As Neto says, "the image of the cross is not an image of Christ: it is an image of those who killed him."

On the other hand, *O protesto e a serpente* also draws on the artist's recent and ongoing experience with the Huni Kui, an indigenous people of the rain forests of western Brazil, who are known for their profound understanding of the natural world, and whose rituals involve shamanistic healing and the use of ayahuasca as sacred medicine. For Neto, the Huni Kui and their relationship to nature point to the possibility of healing -- physical healing, spiritual healing, and healing our relationship with the earth itself -- and thus a necessary alternative to the ideologies that have shaped most of what is considered to be the more 'civilized' world: as Neto says, "the earth is the body, and nature is the cure".

"Protest is an important tool to break the power of hate and the stupidity of human greed", according to Neto. "But it will never provide a cure because it comes from the same spirit as the cross".

Taken together, the works on view in *O protesto e a serpente* come together to offer a statement of Neto's strongly held vision of the world today; and yet they do so while remaining firmly rooted in Neto's signature artistic *modus operandi* that centers around the body. And thus Neto's newest and more varied work is still driven by the desire to convert the viewer into an active and autonomous participant in the experience of the art work -- but now both body and soul.

Ernesto Neto (Brazil, 1964) has had solo shows at major museums around the world, including the Guggenheim Bilbao, the Museum of Modern Art (New York), the Hayward Gallery (London), the Aspen Art Museum, the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Monterrey, the Nasher Sculpture Center (Dallas), the Park Avenue Armory (New York), the Fearnley Museum (Oslo), the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art and the Hirshhorn Museum (Washington). He has participated in numerous group shows and biennials, and he represented Brazil at the 49th Venice Biennale. His work forms part of numerous public and private collections internationally. *O protesto e a serpente* is Neto's fourth exhibition at the Galería Elba Benítez.

George Stolz