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Vancouver Biennale aims to rewrite contemporary Brazilian culture

by [ROBIN LAURENCE](#) on AUG 5, 2014 at 10:52 AM



STORY



Nathalia Garcia's towering Castle (House of Cards) is composed of hefty old mattresses bound and supported by multiple strands of thread.




Vancouver Biennale International Pavilion At the Pipefitters Building in Shipyard Square in North Vancouver to mid-October

Open Borders/Crossroads Vancouver, the theme of the 2014 Vancouver Biennale, invites any number of trite interpretations. Happily, lively ideas about the nature of place, along with a strong feeling for materials, reveal themselves through the mixed-media installations and large-scale sculptures on view in the biennale's International Pavilion. This exhibition, spotlighting eight contemporary Brazilian artists, is mounted in the stripped-down and repurposed Pipefitters Building in Shipyard Square, east of Lonsdale Quay in North Vancouver.

Curated by Marcello Dantas, the exhibition aims to rewrite our stereotypical understanding of what contemporary Brazilian culture is all about. In his statement, Dantas asserts that his nation has been "stigmatized by a spectacular image of soccer, carnival, crime and semi-naked women on its beaches". And, yup, that list probably does accord with the clichés we summon when Latin America's largest country is mentioned. Still, it shouldn't be a surprise that visual artists from Brazil are as connected to the international art world—and as fluent in its theories and strategies—as those from, say, China, Germany, Turkey, or Canada.

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During their residencies at the Pipefitters Building this past spring, some artists brought their established forms and working methods with them while others responded to the natural, cultural, and historical environment they encountered here. The show's sub-theme of tension or of holding things in balance is evident in Nathalia Garcia's towering *Castle (House of Cards)*, composed of hefty old mattresses bound and supported by multiple strands of thread, and in Raul Mourão's kinetic sculptures, whose playfully swinging and artfully balanced geometric forms are constructed of aluminum tubing. Tulio Pinto's astonishing *Nadir #5* consists of two big, heavy panes of glass, suspended at a seemingly precarious angle by cables looped around great chunks of stone, sitting in a bed of sand. The tension in this piece, which also speaks of the connections between its naturally occurring and manufactured materials, is both amazing and nerve-wracking.

Gisela Motta and Leandro Lima have riffed on the everydayness of rain in the lives of Vancouverites. (The couple were here in March; who knows what our summer heat-wave visit might have inspired?) Their installation, *Chora Chuva (The City of Rain)*, consists of an array of plastic buckets standing on wooden tables, stools, and stands, the work then animated by sound and subtle movement. The plinking of rain, leaking through an imaginary roof and landing in the buckets, is wonderfully simulated here, as are the ripples in the water in the bottom of the buckets. The effect is strangely soothing, almost mesmeric, suggesting how well we accommodate our temperate rain-forest climate.

Marcello Moscheta's *Arbor-Vitae* (which translates as) speaks to the regional significance of the Western Red Cedar, British Columbia's official tree. The work is anchored by a large-scale, realistic, and highly detailed drawing of the stump of an ancient cedar tree, which Moscheta encountered while walking through Stanley Park. Worked in graphite on black PVC, mounted on a yellow cedar stand, and surrounded by driftwood gathered at Wreck Beach, the drawing conjures up a ghostly presence, amplifying the sense of history adhering to both the immense stump and the eroded driftwood. Moscheta, who is acclaimed for his exploration of romantic landscape traditions, the contemporary meaning of the sublime, and the systems by which human beings represent the natural world, undertook his residency at the UBC Museum of Anthropology. There, he researched the significance of cedar to both indigenous and nonindigenous cultures and economies. This learning imbues his work with a particular character, that of the sensitive visitor to an unknown but not unknowable place.

Paulo Climachauska also immersed himself in aspects of local history and culture, focusing his installation, *Red Fortune*, on Chinese immigration to Vancouver, with particular reference to the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway. The four-by-nine-metre wall drawing that dominates his work depicts a stretch of the Great Wall of China surmounted by a railroad track. Close inspection of the diagrammatic drawing reveals that its "lines" are composed of mathematical computations—essentially many series of subtractions, neatly written in black felt pen, all ending in zero and purportedly signifying infinity. On the floor in front of the drawing are hundreds of oversize fortune cookies modelled in clay and suggesting the elements of lotterylike luck that determined the fate of early Chinese immigrants to this place. My major criticism here is that Climachauska underrepresents the systemic racism, physical and emotional suffering, and high mortality rate that met the Chinese labourers who built the CPR. His work is extremely handsome, but a little overdetermined, a little overedited. Unless, of course, all those zeros signify loss rather than infinity. A series of gambles and calculations that amount to nothing gained. Nothing at all.