

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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### Waves of Dark History Break on an Olympic Pool

Laura van Straaten



*Adriana Varejão, an artist whose work is steeped in a history that is dark and complex. (Vicente de Mello)*

In a few weeks, as TV cameras swoop over the Olympic Park in the Barra da Tijuca neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro, viewers will glimpse what looks like a colossal seascape mural encircling the new aquatics stadium.

But what appears to be ancient, cracked decorative tile is actually a scrim of 66 panels of perforated canvas, each 90 feet high — the largest contemporary artwork commissioned for Rio 2016. And the blue-and-white work is steeped in a complicated past that is typical of its creator, Adriana Varejão, 51, the revered Rio artist.

“If you look closely, it’s not just a seascape,” she said recently, speaking via Skype from her Rio studio, “but parts of angels, and other historic Baroque motifs, all fragmented, reordered and turbulent.”

In some ways, Ms. Varejão (pronounced bah-ruh-ZHAO) is the perfect artist for the commission, given her long use of tiles, pools and water as visual imagery. Yet she is also a bold choice for the global Games because much of her work asks uncomfortable questions about the hidden, bloody stories of racism and subjugation — Portugal’s colonization of Brazil in particular, but also England’s and Spain’s of other parts of the Americas. She puts the Baroque to work in service of those questions: “The beauty and grotesque are always like opposites in the Baroque — it’s an aesthetic that deals with contrasts,” she said.

The as-yet-untitled commission's tiled appearance is a double trompe l'oeil, because it is composed of printed images from an older Varejão artwork called "Celacanto Provoca Maremoto" ("The Coelacanth Causes a Seaquake"). For that work, created between 2004 and 2008, Ms. Varejão encrusted with plaster 184 panels, each roughly 43 inches square.

Then she let the panels crack and painstakingly painted onto them fragments of images from her digital inventory of more than 2,500 tiles. Until you are within inches of her work, you'd swear you were looking at tiles; you're tempted to touch.

Ms. Varejão sat for two interviews, one via Skype last month and the other in 2014 at her studio on a residential street just outside Rio's Jardim Botânico. In the earlier interview, she showed her delight in the layers of reality and trickery built into her work.

"It's fake," Ms. Varejão said, laughing, her brown curls falling forward on her face. "I love the fake."

Both seascapes mimic the experience of being surrounded by whorling waves, as if from a swimmer's point of view. "I was looking for the sensation of vertigo," Ms. Varejão explained, "so someone can be totally immersed in a sea of Baroque waves."

Carla Camurati, director of the cultural programs for Rio 2016, encountered "Celacanto" on a scouting trip to Instituto Inhotim, the expansive art park in the southeastern province of Minas Gerais, where she was seeking visual artists to round out the cultural programs for the Games.

Ms. Varejão's is among Inhotim's largest pavilions, which are scattered amid 2,500 lush acres and function as permanent solo galleries for contemporary artists. Ms. Varejão, who has two children, is married to Pedro Buarque de Hollanda, a film producer.

The pavilion's upper floor is devoted to "Celacanto Provoca Maremoto," whose faux tiles line all four walls. Ms. Camurati said the title resonated with her, as it does for most Cariocas (as Rio residents are called) of a certain age; the phrase started appearing as graffiti in 1977 in Rio's Zona Sul and then throughout the city in the early 1980s.

Ms. Varejão, a Rio native, explained that "everybody thought it was a revolutionary slogan" since the graffiti began appearing during a dictatorship.

Ms. Camurati said, "No one knew exactly what was the meaning," adding that "it was such a strong thing." A celacanto, or coelacanth, is a rare order of fish thought to have died out with dinosaurs, until several specimens were spotted in 1938, causing what could be called a seaquake in evolutionary science.

Young Cariocas, however, also recognized the sentence as a recurring line from a Japanese TV series, "National Kid," which featured a coelacanth and was a cult hit in Brazil.

"It is a sentence I think sounds very poetic," Ms. Varejão said simply.

Such layering of referents is very much her style. Many works draw on Brazil's traditional blue and white hand-painted azulejo tiles, whose complex provenance through trade and colonization connects Brazil with the ceramic traditions of the ancient Islamic world, China, Holland, Spain

and, most obviously, Portugal. The azulejos traditionally decorated churches, monasteries, and residences of the rich and powerful in Brazil and function in her work as a metaphor for a mixing of cultures, by force or by desire. Ms. Varejão calls that mixing “mestizo,” which also refers to a person, like Ms. Varejão herself, of combined European, Amerindian and African lineage.

One can see how her trompe l’oeil technique might stand in part for the “fake” way that societies, through artistic traditions like decorative ceramics, cover up the horrors that made them possible. But in other series of her drawings and paintings, the violence is writ large: She often depicts blood seeping through the gridded tiles of a modern spa. Elsewhere, she builds free-standing ruins and fills the walls with simulacra of bloody guts.

“It’s confrontational, there is a level of repulsiveness to it,” said Louise Neri, a director at the Gagosian Gallery in New York. “There is an abject quality to some of Adriana’s work, which I find very bold. It connects her to the realm of political art.”

Ms. Neri is curating a show of Ms. Varejão’s newest and largest-ever paintings opening Oct. 1 at Gagosian in Rome, which features the artist’s abstracted azulejos. (Ms. Varejão is also preparing for two 2017 exhibitions: a solo show at her London gallery, Victoria Miro, and a project on the Talavera tiles of Puebla, Mexico, for the Amparo Museum there.)

Ms. Varejão’s work, in the collections of the Tate Modern and Guggenheim museums, has engendered critical discussion about “cultural formation through violence,” Ms. Neri said. “She is actually talking about the colonization for financial or territorial gain that shaped many countries, including her own, that we would rather forget.” She connected Ms. Varejão’s preoccupations with the violence at Istanbul’s airport that took place just hours before the conversation. “The world as it is right now is a consequence of how certain parts of the world have divided other parts of the world,” the curator said. “That’s what we are looking at right now. Everywhere.”

“She is the iron fist in the velvet glove,” Ms. Neri added. “Even in the most seductive of the work there is this underlying tension.”