

NEW ROOTS

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On one side, the garden: a resting and meditation place under the oversight of botany, with its regenerative power that distances us from the harshness of the city. Located outside the house of collector Eva Klabin (1903-1991), it includes plants such as the tree philodendron, the yellow iris, the dumbcane, the firecracker plant, and other species from tropical climates. The design and maintenance project, dating back to July 1975 and signed by the office of landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx, clearly shows that the space was created in the image and likeness of man, following the style of his time. The garden is not, however, nature in miniature, but holds its own symbolic framework. Here, it becomes the element upon which lies the domesticated landscape, ordered and framed by the glass wall of the house that opens on to it. It reflects the search for joy and tranquility sought by its former owner. However, it never enters the realm of knowledge and rationality, that is, the interior of the house.

On the other side, the forest. At the back of the property, a staircase leads to the overwhelming remnant of a surviving Mata Atlantica [Atlantic Forest], barely altered by human action, where giant philodendrons, peace lilies, *Alpinia purpurata* and other species grow in a disordered and spontaneous manner. Without the limit of framing or of the hand that prunes, nature is perceived as a representation of the savage, producing horror because of the excess of what escapes to human control. Such is the effort of landscaping – and, therefore, of the gardens: to replace its untamed relative by a civilized analogue, aware of its place in the hierarchy ruled by men at the center of the composition. Thus, unfolds an entire History of Art (with its picturesque nature, eager to satisfy the sensibility of a European aristocracy), of science (which insists on the supremacy of intelligence of 0,4% of animal life over 83% of the botanical matter), and of race (which subjugates non-white forms of life to the violence of domination and eradication analogous to those found in the biosystem).

It is within this tripartite alliance that Rosana Paulino investigates the forces of the symbiosis of the Black body with plants. Through extensive and careful research carried out over a year in Eva's garden and collection, the artist invokes the memory of mutualism, a relationship between distinct species, within the private space. Plant-women, born of the encounter of American womanhood with sacred leaves, guard the passage of the house, while cutouts and photographic representations of enslaved people in Brazil coexist with images of botanical life. These beings not only witnessed violent colonization but also act today as healers of Brazilian trauma. It is through the celebration of ancestry and faith in *axé* [the Yoruba word for pure potentiality; the power-to-make-things-happen; energy], the debate on coloniality, and the defense of listening to nature's teaching, that Paulino envisions a possible glimpse of the future.

If, on the first floor, botany guides us pulsating with strength and vitality, upstairs it awaits us with a tone of questioning. Welcoming the visitor that goes up the stairs, *Paraíso tropical* [Tropical paradise] (2017) assembles the social body made from illustrations of Brazilian fauna and flora, eugenic anthropometric studies and photographs of Black women. The composition resonates, in the eyes of 19th century Europeans, the study of living beings that would present themselves as obstacles to civility — in this case, the distinction between human and non-human, is severely violated by the experience of slavery —, while weaving a critique of the parameters that shape our social, scientific and artistic fields. The work joins others on the second floor that engage in a debate about the place of Black woman in the private realm.

At the end of the exhibition, in the bedroom, two installations pay tribute to the wet nurses: Black women who were forced to give their breast milk to white babies instead of breastfeeding their own children. This role, normalized until the abolition of slavery in Brazil, was immortalized in photographic records produced by the elite. In these images, the wet nurses posed with their “little masters” for several minutes, motionless. Mônica's case is an exception due to preservation of her forename, which accompanied her photographs on not one, but on two occasions over the course of her life: the first, in 1860, by João Ferreira Vilela, and the second between 1877 and 1882, by Alberto Henschel. Dressed in luxurious clothes, Mônica is portrayed as a young woman, with a boy beside her and years later, at an older age, with gray hair and expression lines earned because of the harshness of her condition. Kept by the family as a dry nurse after feeding the descendants of her oppressors, it is inferred that she earned the right to remain in her quarters after decades of service. At the heart of a family photograph, where the tension and such colonial violence is established, Mônica's piercing gaze and proud posture stand out like an uprising of resistance and, in her own way, as a true act of resilience.

Today, Rosana reserves for herself, and for so many other women, her ancestors in memory and in life, a place of rest. In the forced movement that brought them to this land there is, at last, the possibility of settling and planting the roots of a new tomorrow. Here, once again, we have a lot to learn from plants: In Nevada, US, the species *Pinus longaeva* represents the oldest recorded tree in the world, surpassing a 4600-year mark. Growing up to 2500 meters above sea level, these pines develop at the edge of what is possible: the soil, of dolomite origin, is so poor in water and nutrients that these trees grow stunted and twisted. These beings have elaborated new survival and longevity technologies amid adversity. Their sisters, found in California, don't even come close to the records set in the White Mountains.

Among the marks and sutures of historical trauma and the information carried in the roots of the trees, survival routes and healing strategies are shared. May we learn to listen to the plant-women.

¹Key-concept coined by intellectual Lélia Gonzalez. With this category she proposed race on a continental level articulating and incorporating the voices, forms of resistance, language, political experiences, and narratives of Black and Indigenous women in the Americas.