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JASON FARAGO | ART REVIEW

Predator Hugs His Prey (But There's a Catch)



IMAGES BY JONATHAS DE ANDRADE, ALEXANDER & BONIN, NEW YORK, AND GALERIA VERMELHO, SÃO PAULO

Above and below, stills from Jonathas de Andrade's "O Peixe" ("The Fish"), from 2016, a 16-millimeter film transferred to HD video, at the New Museum. His other video, "O Caseiro," is at Alexander & Bonin.

A Brazilian artist's video depicts fishermen who use an uncommon ritual to kill.

AFTER NIGERIA, the country with the largest population of people of African descent isn't in Africa at all. It's Brazil — where slaves vastly outnumbered Portuguese colonists, and where today just over half the population identifies as black or pardo (that is, of mixed racial origin). Unlike in the United States, where the legacy of slavery endures in our binary concepts of "black" and "white," Brazilians have a flexible and plural variety of racial categories, and matters of identity in the two most populous countries in the Americas don't always run in parallel. Yet enduring inequities between lighter- and darker-skinned Brazilians, and between the richer south of the country and the poorer north, have always contradicted Brazil's fantasy of racial concord.

Art by and about black Brazilians, as well as indigenous Brazilians, sat at the center of last year's Bienal de São Paulo, whose optimistic, at times naïve spiritualism was meant as a rebuke to Western rationality. Among the Bienal's standout works was "O Peixe" ("The Fish"), a seductive and technically accomplished film by the young artist Jonathas de Andrade, shot in the country's

ritual of embracing fish is an invention, the performers are real fishermen, hired by Mr. de Andrade from villages in Alagoas. (On his website, the artist identifies them by first names only — Menezes, Ronaldo — or by such nicknames as Irmão, "brother.") They are acting in a fiction of Mr. de Andrade's devising, but they do so with total naturalism. As they stroke the dying fish, they turn their labor into a private, emotional act. They are exoticizing themselves, but they're doing it for a reason: to short-circuit our ethnographic hunger with false rituals.

The power, but also the danger, of "O Peixe" lies in the intimacy of this fictional ethnography — an intimacy that often turns prurient. The fishermen wear nothing but clingy mesh shorts, and Mr. de Andrade is not shy about filming their biceps, thighs, buttocks and abdominals, glistening with sweat and river water. Mr. de Andrade's own racial identity hardly invalidates the difficult questions around voyeurism and objectification that accompany depictions of the black male body, especially as art audiences in both the United States and Brazil remain all too monochromatic. Several sexy man-on-fish sequences in "O Peixe" recall the erotic character of much colonial photography, which allowed uptight Europeans to project sexual fantasies on the racial other. Mr. de Andrade knows this, of course.

Alexander and Bonin

Jonathas de Andrade: O Peixe Through April 9 at the New Museum; 212-219-1222, newmuseum.org.

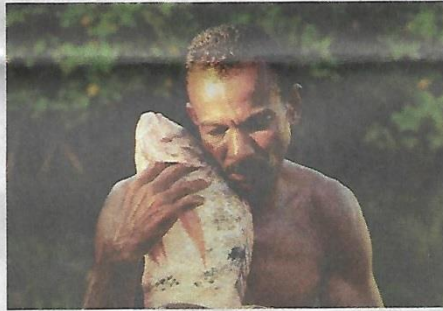
Jonathas de Andrade: O Caseiro Through March 4 at Alexander & Bonin; 212-367-7474, alexanderandbonin.com.

majority-black northeast and depicting fishermen who use a very uncommon technique to kill their catches. It's now on view in the ground-floor gallery of the New Museum, while the downtown gallery Alexander & Bonin is presenting another work by Mr. de Andrade that also engages with Brazil's long, unsettled tradition of ethnography and racial blindness.

"O Peixe" (pronounced PAY-shee) is set near the mouth of the São Francisco River, which divides the northeastern states of Alagoas and Sergipe. During 37 dialogue-free minutes we meet 10 fishermen, all half-naked and all of darker skin tones, who hunt large fish in the brackish water. Once they've reeled or speared their prey, the fishermen undertake a distinctive ritual: They cradle the dying fish in their arms, stroking their scales and kissing their gills as they press the fish to their bare chests. In most sequences, Mr. de Andrade zooms in on the men's faces and the animals' craws as death approaches; one angler is nearly in tears as the life goes out of a flopping fish, whom he embraces like the dying Jesus in a Pietà. These men are lovers as well as hunters, and their familiarity with other species seems, at first, to reprove our own distance from the natural world.

It all looks exquisite. Though it's projected here in high-definition video, "O Peixe" was shot on color-rich 16-millimeter film, and precise sound editing, amplified in the New Museum's tricky ground-floor gallery, emphasizes the rustling wind and bobbing of longboats on the lazy river. The intercutting of unhurried river scenes and sensuous close-ups invokes a contentious tradition of ethnographic cinema, in which (white, European) filmmakers would reveal the "true lives" of black or indigenous people. Yet the conceit of "O Peixe" is that this fishing technique is a pure invention. Those of us who usually encounter fish under *beurre blanc* and capers might romanticize these scenes of interspecies encounter — performed, of course, by people of color. But Mr. de Andrade made it up. What appears at first as a tender gaze on an anthropological idiosyncrasy turns out to be a slipperier, and more critical, interrogation of cinema's ethnographic ruses.

It becomes more complicated. While the



But I'm really not sure whether "O Peixe" succeeds in critiquing the ways black bodies are sexualized, or whether it ends up reaffirming them.

Mr. de Andrade was born in 1982 and lives in Recife, the cultural powerhouse of northeastern Brazil. He has sexed up poor black northeasterners before, in his noted project "Museu do Homem do Nordeste" ("Museum of the Man of the Northeast"), for which he created fake posters for a real ethnographic museum, featuring men he contacted through classifieds or met on the street. (New Yorkers saw that series in "Under the Same Sun," an exhibition of Latin American art at the Guggenheim in 2014.) At Alexander & Bonin, a short new two-screen video called "O Caseiro" ("The Housekeeper") continues his engagement with anthropology and race. On the left of the screen are scenes from a 1959 documentary about the life of the sociologist Gilberto Freyre, who founded that Recife museum, and whose concept of *democracia racial* — the dubious claim that Brazil, through miscegenation and immigration, developed a racial harmony unique in the Americas — still has adherents. On the right we see a new film, shot in Freyre's old house, in which a fictional black caretaker works to keep the place in order. Freyre lounges in a hammock, the caretaker repairs a stereo; Mr. Freyre's cook prepares fish, while the caretaker makes a simple meal of *farofa*, Brazil's staple grain.

"O Caseiro" is a much simpler work than "O Peixe," but it does help to elucidate the historical context and contemporary resonance of Mr. de Andrade's river cruise. Whatever their shortcomings, they together cast a necessary light on a country whose understanding of race is quite different from ours, but whose discriminations are all too familiar.