



Geraldo de Barros

Geraldo de Barros (1923-1998) concentrated on photography within two periods of time, each resulting in the production of the two bodies of work represented in this exhibition: the Fotoformas (1949-51) and the Sobras (1996-1998). By using a medium that so persuasively locates itself within day-to-day reality, de Barros was able to interrogate the relationship between photography and other forms of capturing experience. In both series, he overlaid photographic document with the making-visible of imaginative or formal associations, and collapsed different moments of time into a single image.

The Fotoformas, first exhibited under that name in a ground-breaking 1951 solo show at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP), were shown again as a complete series only in 1993, at the Musée de l'Élysée, Lausanne. The renewed reception of his first photographic series coincided with a process of return that had he had commenced gradually since 1988, when he started to work through boxes of prints and negatives unearthed from storage by his daughter Fabiana. After a 1994 retrospective in São Paulo, De Barros re-workings picked up pace and certainty, resulting in the production of the Sobras, over the last two years of his life.

Fotoformas and Sobras therefore bridge the beginning and end of de Barros' working life as an artist. Between the two, his activity had included participating in the formation of the Concrete Art group Ruptura (1952-1959); co-founding both the collectivist furniture factory Unilabor (1954-1961) and the graphic design consultancy forminform (1958); creating, with Nelson Leirner and Wesley Duke Lee, an anarchic space named Rex Gallery & Sons (1966-1967), and founding the furniture company Hobjeto (1964-1989). The artistic output of this varied trajectory encompassed abstract painting, industrial and graphic design, assemblages produced by painting over found billboard fragments, and abstract reliefs made of Formica. This multifaceted career suggests a wilful and dextrous heterogeneity that is also contained within De Barros' attitude towards photography.

His introduction to the medium, in his early twenties, was incidental. In 1946, an artist friend had suggested taking photographs of amateur football matches, as a means to earn money. De Barros built his first camera himself, set to work, and was soon producing experimental images with a newly acquired 1939 Rolliflex. In 1947 he joined one of a network of amateur photo-clubs, the Foto Cine Clube Bandeirante (FCCB), as well as setting up a small photographic lab within the Grupo XV painting atelier in downtown São Paulo. A provocative muse for the development of de Barros' technique was São Paulo's nineteenth century railway station, the Estação Luz. In a set of images produced in 1949 and 1950, he used multiple exposure to create composite images of the station's ironwork roof. While veering towards abstraction, these images retained a clear reference to an iconic downtown landmark. In other images - such as the 1950 Fotoforma composed from multiple exposures of slices of light created by a door opening into a dark room - the relationship between form and reference is harder to decipher. As a set of images, the Fotoformas move fluidly across a range of approaches to realism and representation, two subjects hotly contested at the time, within both art criticism and the Fotoclub movement. If his images of the station roof suggested he was heading towards abstraction, others pointed in a different direction. His 1949 *Homage to Picasso*, exhibited here, is one of a number of intuitive and expressionistic works within the series. The original exposures, many taken in the East São Paulo district of Tatuapé, had suggested figurative associations which he subsequently captured by drawing directly on to negatives before developing a final image.

By jointly inhabiting the worlds of amateur photo-club and artists' studio, de Barros contributed to the decisive intrusion of the photographic medium into critical debates that had previously centred on painting and sculpture. By 1949, he was playing a significant role in the milieu surrounding São Paulo's new modern art museums, having been invited, alongside Tomaz Farkas and German Lorca, to set up MASP's first photographic laboratory. This represented the first incursion of photography into Brazil's fine art circuit, a move later consolidated by the inclusion of a selection of work by members of the FCCB at the II São Paulo Biennale in 1953. For his 1951 Fotoforma exhibition at MASP, the contradictory representational arguments contained within the series were deliberately brought into relationship with one another. He selected the works himself, and employed display devices that re-invented them for exhibition. A group of four images, for example, was collected within a frame suspended from the ceiling. The framed photos, differing in representational style, were juxtaposed by opaque painted squares and openings that captured fragments of exhibition space, drawing this actual background into the overall composition. Other Fotoformas were displayed as cut-outs on plinths, as if sculpture. This method of display created contiguities between modes of realism, from those contained by the photographs themselves towards a perception of the situation within which they were being viewed and the indeterminate reality of the

photograph itself, presented as both image and object.

De Barros' approach to display suggests that the Fotoformas series was deliberate in its internal contradictions. This attitude is also suggested by his navigation of critical debates surrounding abstraction in 1950s Brazil. Following his MASP exhibition, and during a year-long trip to Europe, de Barros both studied print-making with Surrealist and Expressionist artist Stanley Hayter at Atelier 17 in Paris, and travelled to Zurich to meet celebrated Concretist artist Max Bill. On his return, de Barros co-founded the Ruptura group, and produced paintings adhering to the strict anti-representational precepts of Concrete art. The text of Ruptura's 1953 manifesto advocated the exclusion of any form of naturalistic representation, including the "incorrect" naturalism of children, mad people, "primitives", expressionists, Surrealists, etc.". Prior to his involvement with this group, however, de Barros' formative theoretical influence was Mário Pedrosa, critic, theorist, and eventual co-founder of the competing Rio de Janeiro based Concretist group Frente (1952-1964). Pedrosa had introduced de Barros to both to the Gestalt theory of form and the work of psychoanalyst Nise da Silveira, who had established a therapeutic art studio with residents of Rio's Engenho de Dentro psychiatric centre.

Concretism, a movement in which de Barros played a vital part as both a painter and a designer, has long dominated our understanding of the history of Brazilian art of the 1950s and 60s. It is for this reason, perhaps, that the Fotoformas have been widely perceived to be part of the neat narrative of an artist's journey towards the decisive turning point of abstract art. Looking at this series as a whole however, de Barros does not appear to be an artist who was dogmatic or partisan by orientation. Although art historians often mistake artists' lives for straight and logical lines, it is clear that his subsequent work continued to be informed not only by his Concretist period but also by everything that preceded, followed and was contemporaneous with it. His career as a whole (and especially the extroverted outburst of Rex Gallery & Sons) suggests an artist informed by openness, risk, and experimentation as well as by Ruptura's ascetic lessons in abstraction.

Like the Fotoformas, the Sobras include series produced by using different techniques. The most numerous are images printed from negatives that de Barros cut and remounted on glass plates. The original negatives had depicted a life-time of holidays and road-trips, snapshots of everything that had remained outside the bounds of his life as an artist. In the new prints, cut-out spaces and drawn lines disrupt the apparently casual gaze of an artist at leisure, creating lines and deep black spaces that interrupt the naturalism of the original shots.

De Barros did not view the shutter's 'decisive moment' as sacrosanct and he had never adhered to the specificity of photography as a privileged imprint of time, truth, or memory. Instead he viewed it as 'print-making,' and invited different means of capturing experience, such as drawing, into its documentary surface. The strength of this conviction is perhaps never more evident than in the Sobras, where he commits the iconoclastic act of cutting into the family photographs we often mistake for real memories.

Through their use of cutting, cropping and collage, the Sobras also recall the processes first used in the production of the Fotoformas. Whereas the relationship between the two series is consistently apparent at the level of technique, the set of photo-collages on paper that also forms part of Sobras creates a more explicit connection to the Fotoformas. Their source materials were reproductions of his earliest images, as produced for a book published for his 1994 retrospective in São Paulo. Being fortunate enough to be witness to the beginnings of his own historicisation, the Sobras thus allowed de Barros to submit his photographic practice to a degree of chronological disobedience. As a deliberate return to photography, his final series again marked out the distinct parameters of his approach to this medium. This is a series of work that de Barros began at the end of his life, but it is also one provoked by a need to recall his first motivations for engaging with photography. The Sobras, formed by a process of looking back that acted against both nostalgia and narrative, continue to invite the intrusion of the present.

— Isobel Whitelegg