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Fernanda Gomes Creates a Surreal Domestic Space With Her Abstractions

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Fernanda Gomes at the Pinacoteca de São Paulo, Brazil (photo by Romulo Fialdini | courtesy Pinacoteca de São Paulo)

SÃO PAULO — It's rare for austere white to feel intimate. And yet, the Brazilian sculptor Fernanda Gomes has for four decades created a body of work that is rigorously abstract, but also unexpectedly inviting. That intimacy often stems less from the individual pieces than from their arrangement — the way Gomes lays out her works in space. It also frequently comes from inflecting the color white with warmer tones of wood and rust, and in so doing, subtly subverting the common association between whiteness and purity, or formal restrictiveness.



Fernanda Gomes at the Pinacoteca de São Paulo (photo by Romulo Fialdini | courtesy Pinacoteca de São Paulo)

The current show at the [Pinacoteca do Estado](#), in São Paulo, which includes over 100 works and spans the 1980s to the present, is reflective of Gomes's approach. Gomes, who lives in Rio de Janeiro, often works from home, where daily, mundane objects are not distinguished from sculptural pieces. Those pieces often mix plaster, wood, metal, and glass, as well as nails, string, paper, repurposed chairs, tables, and books. The exhibition, which Gomes spent three weeks installing in the museum space, alternates between rooms in which works are

presented sparingly, and those in which they form conglomerates, with many pieces spread out on walls and floor. All of the works are unnamed, with no dates or chronological order. In this sense, the exhibition, which also doesn't have a title, is a regrouping — a reimagining and restaging of Gomes's oeuvre.



Fernanda Gomes at the Pinacoteca de São Paulo (photo by Romulo Fialdini | courtesy Pinacoteca de São Paulo)

The first room is dominated by four pieces. The largest piece is composed of three thin sheets of plywood painted white, stacked together and leaning against the wall. From the front, we see only the top sheet, but the side view reveals the additional layers, plus two small white balls that prop up the plywood. This, too, is characteristic of how Gomes re-compartmentalizes and reinvents spatial relations. Some of her sculptures seem solid, but when we walk around them, they turn out void, or with hidden layers. A taut string outlines an incomplete rectangle against the white plywood sheets, which rest on the white museum wall — seemingly blending into the exhibition space. And yet, the shadings of white vary. Gomes has told Agência Brasil that her preference for white stems from it being “the most complete color, because it’s at the same time empty and full.” At Pinacoteca, this sense of fullness — particularly of white’s contamination by other shades, acting as camouflage yet energizing the space, making our viewing experience more active — is further enhanced by how the artificial lighting luminously falls on the artwork. The pane itself has scratches and cracks — the imperfections that Gomes often incorporates into her works. Another loose piece of string rests on the floor, at the work’s right corner. The overall sense is that of spontaneity — the scratches, the wood showing through the paint, the abandoned loose string — yet all this is contained within the strict, geometric form.



Fernanda Gomes at the Pinacoteca de São Paulo (photo by Romulo Flaldini | courtesy Pinacoteca de São Paulo)

Gomes's playful approach to geometry is felt throughout the show. She destabilizes the geometric order, and negotiates her own sense of equilibrium — one that is always slightly off. This quality of incompleteness — of flux — is present in multiple works; in some, pieces of yellowed paper are tagged onto the white surface of painted wood; in others, the wood shows through the white paint. One work that hangs on a wall as part of a larger constellation resembles a metal clamp, but when removed from the mundane context of a practical tool, it becomes more somber and mysterious.

Mystery reigns over the installations, in which dozens of pieces occupy a single room. The mixing of abstract forms with common objects — such as chairs, tables, books, but also cigarettes, corks, match boxes, hair — and then with unclassifiable composites (e.g. paper bags on the floor with thin sticks jutting out of them, other pieces of paper swaying from the ceiling), creates an atmosphere of a surreal domestic space, or a workshop. In one room, the configuration of various pieces feels as if Alberto Giacometti's miniature sculpture "The Palace at 4 a.m." (1932) were blown up to real-life proportions — with the same frugality of conception, but also whimsy. Even though, unlike Giacometti, Gomes doesn't hint at figuration, her universe conveys a consistent residue of human presence — the creator is felt through her creations.



Fernanda Gomes at the Pinacoteca de São Paulo (photo by Romulo Fialdini | courtesy Pinacoteca de São Paulo)

While Gomes has more often been associated with the Brazilian Neo-Concrete art — artists such as her predecessors, Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, and Lygia Pape, or those of her generation, such as Ernesto Neto — the exhibition, curated by José Augusto Ribeiro, and its catalogue amplify the context of her work. They draw comparisons to contemporary artists such as Joseph Beuys who has broadened our sense of sculptural form, and to modernists as Giacometti and Joseph Cornell, who breathed into their creations a sense of wonder. Cornell's boxes, very much like Gomes's collected objects, partook in the surrealist spirit of celebrating waste, repurposing what's been discarded or fallen out of use. "The debris and remains are choices, not conditions or restrictions," as noted in the catalogue text. Gomes's art proves that no object is ever entirely disposable, while also pushing back against such formal notions as purity and abstraction.

Fernanda Gomes *continues at the Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo (Praça da Luz, 2, Luz, São Paulo) through February 24.*