

Artforum, October 1, 2023, Agnieszka Gratza



**View of “João Modé,” 2023. From left: *Constructive [Paninho], beach, 2019–23; Blue column, 2023; br, 2023. Photo: Sebastian Schaub.***

João Modé’s solo show “Geom Poem” started with an open window. Located in a corner, the narrow aperture let daylight, color, and air into the otherwise sterile environment of the white cube. The breeze stirred the pleated buriti mat sculpture suspended from the ceiling (*Untitled, 2023*), making the loose, dry palm fronds at the bottom edge shuffle along the wooden floor. The neighboring wall-based work *9 circles, 2023*, was brought to life by the same gust of wind, which brushed against its protruding flaps of round white paper, each folded a different way, rising out of the dark-blue ground like so many phases of the moon. The distinctive hue of the smooth metallic Dibond support, its artificial nature somewhat at odds with the handmade and organic materials that the artist tends to privilege, recalls Yves Klein’s trademark color. This blue is echoed in a freestanding sculpture consisting of stacked blue-glass ovals—*Blue column, 2023*, a nod to Constantin Brâncuși’s modular *Endless Column* of 1918—installed on the opposite side of the showroom. Through such dialogues between works, Modé created subtle resonances—formal, material, and chromatic—that acted as invisible threads binding together the eleven pieces on view.

The show’s playful title was at once an homage to Brazil’s geometric abstract art and to the homegrown concrete poetry movement, both of which emerged in the 1950s. “Geom” suggests “geometry” as well as “geo,” which feels

fitting, given the way Modé weaves organic elements into his composite artworks—from stones in the elaborately framed *Two drawings (Dptych)*, 2023, to pink seashells in *Constructive [Paninho], beach*, 2019–23. Modé’s sensual approach has affinities with Neo-Concretism, which emerged in his home city of Rio de Janeiro when Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape, and Hélio Oiticica reacted against the rigidity and mathematical rigor of Concrete art as it was practiced in São Paulo. Factions aside, geometric abstraction and Concretism of every stripe constitute a high point in the country’s artistic production, and it is this tradition that the artist wishes to emulate at a time in which Brazil’s contemporary art scene appears fixated on figurative art with marked political overtones.

In his 1956 manifesto, poet Augusto de Campos described concrete poetry as “the tension of thing-words in space-time.” The graphic and phonetic affinities that Campos enacts in poems such as “*tensão*”(tension), 1956, are equally present in Modé’s exhibition title. Time, in tandem with space, is an integral part of this fragile body of work. In fact, the show’s centerpiece was a bouquet of flowers displayed in a vase on the floor next to *Open Guias [for Cabelo]*, 2023, two beaded cords hanging from the ceiling and spilling onto the floor to form a serpentine motif. Regularly replaced but allowed to wither, their petals strewn on the ground around the vase, the flowers were there to make visitors more keenly aware of the temporal dimension of Modé’s art and the time that went into its making. To make the twinstrings, whose contrasting palettes draw on the elemental symbolism associated with different *orixá* spirits in the African-Brazilian Candomblé and Umbanda religions, Modé undertook to learn some fiendishly complicated Indigenous beading techniques from a Xavante craftsman. No less intricate and labor intensive is the exquisite beadwork of *Skin*, 2023, so named because the black and white lozenge motifs evoke the body painting of Indigenous people. The devil is in the details, and to appreciate its sheer delicacy Modé’s handiwork must be seen in the flesh.