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MUSEUM

GONZALO

DI
AZ

“Terras do



A book is pulled to pieces. Artists can do things like that: take a book apart like an anatomist dismantles a body. The aim is to expose layers of meaning, and in doing so take strides toward a larger plan.

The book is not just any book, but the novel “Terras do sem fim” – a classic of Latin American literature. In 1943, when he wrote this novel, Brazilian writer Jorge Amado was still an avowed communist.

The novel deals with the economic and social entanglements surrounding Ilhéus, a port city in northeastern Brazil. This succulent, fertile piece of land was ideally suited to cocoa cultivation, making it a hotly contested territory. Amado describes a bloody war between two clans that almost eradicate one another in their greed for lucrative transactions. In “Terras do sem fim,” the brutal excesses of capitalist drive bristle with red-hot passion. A love affair ignites between the brilliant, corrupt lawyer who knits the the juridical cloak for such crimes and the pretty, much-too-young wife of the most ruthless of all cocoa barons. It is a love affair that will cost both of them their lives over the course of the novel.

sem fim

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So how did Gonzalo Díaz come to the idea of breaking this book down to its essential components, of framing each individual page and hanging them in a single, dense line along the gallery walls? (Díaz actually uses two identical editions so that no page, even or odd, is left out; for him it is about the whole). What is this uniquely tidy, clearly laid out, almost bloodless form that seems so strangely foreign to the wild melee in "Terras do sem fim"?

Not everything artworks do can be puzzled out with language or converted into meaning. Nevertheless, it is clear that Díaz has detached himself somewhat from his reference, Amado's novel, to use the book as sculptural raw material. He transforms the pages of the book into a simple, but all the more memorable figure: the horizon line.

ook is pulled to piece



This line is crucial; it is a key figure of the colonial imagination. Long months aboard a ship consume the mind. The sea seems to stretch to infinity, broken by nothing. It is a journey buoyed only by greed and desperation, until at last something appears on the horizon: the promised land, where the Europeans sensed and actually found gold and exotic treasures. The horizon line is the threshold to be crossed. It appears close and concrete (as we see in so many “Golden Age” Dutch paintings), while always receding, the threat of a wretched death looming.

Born in Santiago de Chile in 1947, Gonzalo Díaz is a conceptualist, which is to say an artist who – for all the sensual terseness of his work – is focused on the precise articulation and execution of an idea. There is a high level of abstraction, but as mentioned the horizon line is no mere abstraction. It is ultra concrete, just as someone must have had the concrete idea to look for the sea route to India, to steal the Aztecs’ gold and raze the jungle for its rich soil – the perfect bed for cocoa plants to flourish.



Díaz never left Chile, so he experienced first-hand the leaden years of the Chilean dictatorship that began in 1973, an outgrowth of US economic interests in their self-proclaimed backyard. Chilean critic Nelly Richards has described the murderous regime's traumatic consequences as a "crisis of intelligibility." A dictatorship corrodes the fine networks of human communication; it breeds speechlessness and isolation (the state it prefers for its subjects). Against that backdrop, the book's dissection can also be understood as work on language (in the broadest sense).

"Terras do sem fim," in Gonzalo Díaz's version, reminds us that the reality of representation sets its limits precisely where violence enters the picture. All the gripping events happen on this side of the horizon line: the wading through the cocoa sludge, the treacherous murder, electoral fraud and the servile press. Starting at the other side of horizon line is the very thing that eludes representation, but affects us nevertheless: the trauma of history.