

TURPS

PAINT- ING MAGA- ZINE

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Issue Twenty-Two

TURPS

Featuring:

Giuseppe Marasco talks with Dexter Dalwood

Congo: Matt Lippiatt talks with Desmond Morris

Roy Oxlade by Henry Ward

Sargy Mann and Bonnard by Charlotte Mann

Charles Williams on Carracci's The Butcher's Shop

Vieira da Silva by Amy Robson

Peter Saul by Phil King

Derek Boshier talks to Turps Banana

The Diagonal: David Sweet with Sharon Hall

Luisa Jacinto and Tim Ralston in conversation

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MARIA
HELENA
VIEIRA
DA SILVA
BY
AMY ROBSON

"In an experiment with painting... everything is open, and different every time. That is the starting point. I say something. It could be something different. Or something else again... That is my deeper nature: I never assert anything. There is also a little of that in my painting. It is all maybe, maybe."
– Vieira da Silva

Though I had seen images of Vieira da Silva's paintings online and in book form, I first saw her actual work in the flesh at her Foundation in Lisbon while on an artists' residency. The paintings were cityscapes and interiors mostly from the 1960s and they far surpassed my expectations. Based on reproductions I had incorrectly categorised Vieira da Silva's work as '*abstraction with the training wheels on.*' Excited, I raced back to my studio in Lisbon to begin stealing from her bag of painterly tricks.

What excited me was the fact that the paintings appear relatively simple at first but then become disconcertingly complex. I initially noticed that there is a strong-ish one-point perspective that seems to make sense. The colour palette looks highly muted or even monochrome. There appears to be compositional harmony. Then, upon closer inspection, the spatial trickery begins to confound. There are multiple vanishing points

competing for my attention. In some places, I am pushed away from the picture plane and in others, I am pulled in. There are subtle blues, yellows and oranges hiding in the monochrome, and what seemed like a mass may actually be a portal. I returned to London a Vieira da Silva fan and therefore had high expectations for the Waddington Custot exhibition. I was not disappointed. The sheer breadth of Vieira da Silva's work on display makes the permanent Foundation collection look almost provincial.

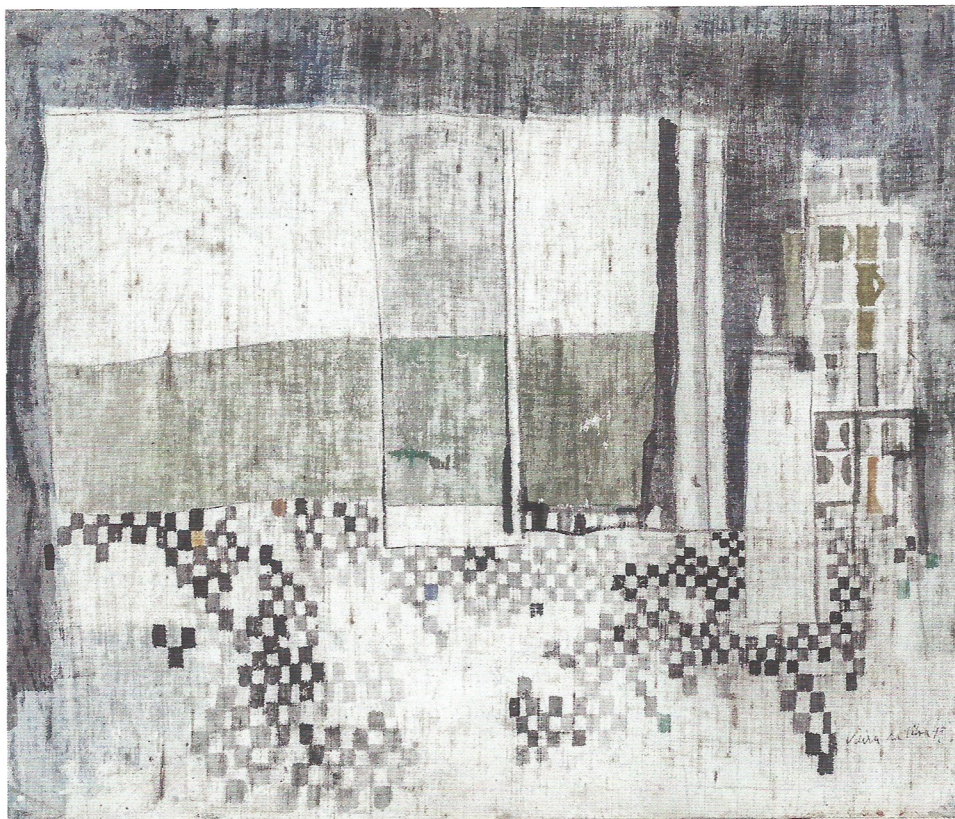
Over a six-decade-long career, Maria Helena Vieira da Silva created fascinating and disorienting pictorial spaces that reflect the beauty and brokenness of the modern world. If her oeuvre is laid out on a bell curve, it is the ends of the spectrum that are most exciting, and the Waddington Custot exhibition presents a well-edited selection of work that lies at the boundaries of her practice. Each painting feels like an 'outlier' rather than a mere example of consistency.

As with most paintings, Vieira da Silva's work is more interesting where the balance is skewed towards 'a little wrong' versus 'too right.' *Bibliothèque* (1952) embodies wrong-ness with its jarring colours, chunky wide-weave canvas and fractured lines. Almost totally non-representational, we are only tipped-off as to the painting's possible subject matter by the title. With almost no perspectival depth, all the action is happening on the surface of the picture plane, which is unusual for Vieira da Silva's work. There are warm ketchup-y cadmium reds with dirty oranges and cool maroons off-set with a surprising range of greens and blues breaking up the mix. All this colour is encased in a scabby brown ground around the canvas edge enclosing the grid as a figure, which is another compositional outlier for Vieira da Silva. The lines are wonky, the shapes are awkward, but we love this painting for its clunky-ness.

Opposite: *Bibliothèque*
1952
Oil on canvas
73 x 92 cm

Courtesy of
Waddington Custot Gallery, London





Normandie
1949
Gouache on canvas
40 x 47 cm

Courtesy of
Waddington Custot Gallery, London

Opposite:

Maria Helena Vieira da Silva
(Installation view)
Waddington Custot Gallery, London
28 November 2019 – 15 February 2020

Courtesy of
Waddington Custot Gallery, London

Le Jeu de Cartes (detail)
1937
Oil on canvas with traces of pencil
73 x 92 cm

Courtesy of
Waddington Custot Gallery, London

Though *Bibliothèque* is a fabulous outlier on the Vieira da Silva bell curve, it still manages to remain true to her central obsession with space and perspective. Though there is ample variation within her oeuvre, she steadfastly sticks to her core 'story'. Her vision saw the relationship between space and figure to be the common denominator in the progression of Western art. She evidently came to this conclusion after visiting Italy and being struck by the flatness of the pre-Renaissance frescoes. She was also interested in Cézanne's use of atmospheric perspective to divide up space. Her obsession with disrupting pictorial space was a means to free herself from what she called the 'tyranny of the vanishing point.'² In an oft-cited bit of Vieira da Silva history, she came up with her reoccurring harlequin/checkerboard/grid motif while recovering in bed from a nasty bout of jaundice. She made a painting of her

room (*La Chambre à Carreaux* (1935), held in the Tate collection) as if she were delirious, breaking up the walls, ceiling and floor into tiny rectangles of colour by bending and shifting perspective.

This was the beginning of Vieira da Silva's lifelong exploration of the grid motif. Her grids are endless in their possibilities, but they lie on the 'grid spectrum' somewhere between Agnes Martin's subtle delicate squares and Julie Mehretu's post-internet explosions. Not only do her grids provide armature but they can also be cages (*L'oiseleur*), moving parts (*Vers la Lumière*) or even figures (*Figure de Ballet*). They can be meditative Japanese Zen gardens (*Sans Titre*, 1952) or they can be roller coasters flipping you around and spitting you out (*Composition aux Damiers Bleus*). They can be loaded with heavy theoretical baggage conjuring Hal Foster's broken Lacanian image-screens³ (*Chemins de la Paix*), or they can be as light and banal as Farrow & Ball colour charts on magic mushrooms (*Échec et Mat*).

Vieira da Silva's various riffs on space are not a means to record what it is like to be in a particular place, even when she is depicting real spaces. Nor are they a didactic reflection of her personal history as life-long exile from Portugal. Yes, dislocation is an evident theme, but her work transcends the categorisations of landscape, memory, or nostalgia. Her paintings are manifestations of the lack of orientation and anxiety of being alive. As Jennifer Higgie wrote in 2008: "*Living in the modern world is like having fun at a picnic while keeping your ear cocked for the distant rumble of thunder.*"⁴

Far from being bleak and anxiety-inducing, Vieira da Silva's work reminds us that we are still having fun at the picnic. This counterpoint can be found in *Sans Titre* (1955) which is lithe, spritely, and full of virtuosic movement. Airiness and space are emphasised as the grid becomes a labyrinth. Syncopated marks, suggestive of Vieira da Silva's tile



in reality, Vieira da Silva ensures that the viewer is engaged: “*I do not want people to remain passive, I want them to come and take part in the game, go for a walk, climb up, go down.*”⁵ A large rectangular shape to the left of the shelves could either be kitchen cabinetry or a window to a landscape. Is the green form a handle to a door or a shrub in a pasture?

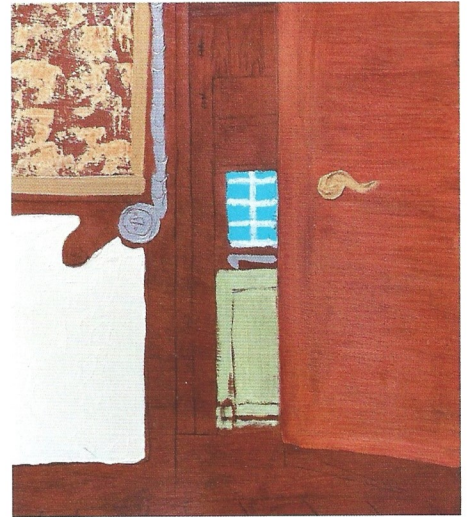
“*Maybe, maybe.*” The ambiguity of Vieira da Silva’s work is presented brilliantly in many different guises in this historic exhibition. The paintings are off-kilter, fractured and captivating celebrations of being alive.

“*Everyone, sooner or later, gets a thorough schooling in brokenness. The question becomes: What to do with the pieces?*”⁶

— Michael Chabon

motif, march towards the vanishing point while delicate red and yellow-highlighted bars glide towards the viewer. Life is celebrated, but not without a bit of dis-ease: Are the marks marching or slightly falling? There are two or possibly three additional off-kilter vanishing points competing for attention. The seemingly delicate lines are not actually straight drawn lines, but on closer inspection appear to be globules of paint laid down non-uniformly with a loaded rigger brush. *Sans Titre* is a painting that balances on the knife-edge between celebration and foreboding – and is a fitting example of Vieira da Silva’s brand of wonky refinement in paint.

More fun at the picnic can be found in the attention-grabbing, Instagram-friendly *Le Jeu de Cartes* (1937), but my take-away picture is another show highlight, one at the opposite end of the spectrum. The surprisingly ethereal *Normandie* (1949) is an atmospheric painting of a kitchen which could possibly pass for an empty Swedish interior by Mamma Andersson, with its subtle colour palette and delicate monoprint-like mark-making. Though *Normandie* is grounded



Die Tür (The Door) – Amy Robson
2019
Oil on board
40 x 35 cm

Courtesy of the artist

References:

1. Gisela Rosenthal (1998) ‘Vieira da Silva’, Cologne: Taschen
2. Rosenthal
3. Hal Foster (1996) ‘Obscene, Abject, Traumatic’, *October*, Vol. 78, (Autumn, 1996)
4. Jennifer Higgie (2008) ‘The Embarrassing Truth: Matthew Brannon’, *frieze*, no. 119, Nov-Dec 2008
5. Rosenthal
6. Michael Chabon (2013) ‘Wes Anderson’s Worlds’, in Seitz, M. Z. ‘The Wes Anderson Collection’, New York: Abrams