

Reviewing the Saint's Paradox, Ten Years Later

Regina Silveira

Even before I had come up with the idea for *The Saint's Paradox* in 1994, my imagination had already been sparked by the equestrian monument to the Duke of Caxias, the official protector of the Brazilian Army. Pedestrians heading in the direction of the Luz subway station and passing by Princesa Isabel Square in downtown São Paulo are struck by the statue's tall and impressive silhouette, a kind of huge shadow with very simplified interior volumes. Atop the high stone pedestal the military hero sits on a robust horse with a wavy tail, his right arm holding aloft a sword pointing skyward.¹

What aroused my interest was not any aesthetic concern. This sculpture was a latter production of Victor Brecheret's (1894–1955), who had emigrated from Italy to Brazil at the age of ten to become an artist celebrated by the younger group of Brazilian Modernist artists and the author of various monuments in the city of São Paulo. However, this monument to the Duke of Caxias, executed between 1941 and 1945 during the patriotic fervor of the Second World War, is a statue with a decidedly traditional stamp, out of keeping with the distinctive strong lines of Brecheret's best production.

It was in fact precisely the traditional and substantive character of this official monument that led me to appropriate this artwork in order to develop ideas in which the image of the duke on his horse was a fitting representative for any "generic" equestrian monument.²

Nevertheless, the photographs I took of the monument as raw material for later developments were guided by a clear purpose, since I wanted to capture the image of this strong symbol of Brazilian military power. Even before it became clear to me how to act poetically to accentuate this effect of power, my still-unfocused desire

was to associate this equestrian image to other references and to make the monument's looming outline even more perturbing, by means of distortions in perspective. These operations on the image were intended to explore meanings as well as to investigate the ambiguity of the relations between the shadows and the elements that cast them. In this period my overriding interest was especially concerned with elements absent from the field of vision but which, in some way, would be implied in the shadow.

The Saint's Paradox, the artwork where I finally applied the stretched and overlarge silhouette of the equestrian monument, was created especially for the 1994 exhibition *Recovering Popular Culture*, held at the Museo del Barrio, in New York, in celebration of the institution's 25th anniversary.

At this exhibition the artists were asked to show works that dialoged with an artwork of their own choosing in the museum's collection. A small painted wooden sculpture representing San Tiago Apóstolo on his white horse, by an anonymous artist and cataloged as popular art from Guatemala, was the perfect pair that I found to associate with the shadow of the other horseman.

My installation was designed for the museum's Project Room and consisted of a black silhouette painted on three of the walls and part of the floor, with the small sculpture of the saint sitting on a wooden pedestal, integrated with these shadows as the central point that seemed to project them.

In this juxtaposition of the silhouette with its false origin, the Duke of Caxias became a paradoxical and oversized shadow (the perverse Other) of the tiny, ingenuous and crude figure of San Tiago Apóstolo. This junction was brought about through displacement and a play of double absence, since each of the representations was lacking its complement. The shadow projected by the wooden saint is not there, while for its part the shadow of the Duke of Caxias is disconnected from its origin, that is, the monument that would normally project it.

Another paradoxical difference is the sword. Absent in the wooden figure (removed? lost?), whose hand appears to have been made to hold a sword, it appears only in the shadow, gripped by the Brazilian military leader. The black silhouette has its arm lowered and with a warlike gesture is pointing forward with its long and pointed sword.

The greatest paradox built into the installation's visuality, however, results from the "cut-and-paste" operation by which I brought together two radically different histories and geographies of Latin America, with complete disregard to time and space as well as possible or fictional events.

The paradoxical linking of the wooden sculpture with the painted shadow in this case is supported by analogies, albeit rough ones, that can be set up between the saint and the military monument.

The ingenuous San Tiago is in fact Santiago Matamoros, the patron saint of the Spanish Army during the wars to expulse the Arabs from their centuries-long occupation of the Iberian Peninsula. Matamoros is also represented in the images of fighting and beheadings in the context of the colonial domination that occupied territories and massacred cultures of Spanish America in the times of its "discovery."

For his part, the Duke of Caxias, the official protector of the Brazilian Army, was the commander of the Triple Alliance during the controversial Paraguay War, which from 1864 to 1870 united Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay against the dictator Solano Lopez of Paraguay, whose independent or expansionist actions were threatening the territorial interests of the other countries involved as well as their shared commercial interests with England.⁴ The historical accounts of this long and cruel war, which killed one-half of the Paraguayan population and ruined the country to such a degree that its consequences are felt there even today, have

been the subject of critical historical revision in recent years in South America, which has also reexamined the role and the heroism of General Caxias.

In *Saint's Paradox* the spatial collage that juxtaposes the saint and his phantasmagoric shadow also serves my overriding intention of commenting on the relations of affinity that have historically existed between militarism, religion and power, and which served as a support for the struggle for domination in Latin America.

In this artwork the distortions of perspective and the gigantic proportions given to the shadow are poetic devices to bring this universe of meanings to light, allegorically, in purely visual terms.

NOTES

(1) Among the most interesting historical accounts of this sculpture is that of a commemorative dinner held in the horse's belly, when the sculpture was still in the workshop where the metal was cast. A photo documenting this dinner shows the artist with political and cultural figures of the city, in the 1940s.

Another account has it that the monument's placement near the edge of the square, with the horse's big backside facing a group of buildings – and at the same level as the windows and balconies bordering the square – resulted in an almost immediate devaluation of the real-estate values of the adjoining properties.

(2) The sculpture was only installed in Princesa Isabel Square in 1960, after Brecheret's death. As a symbol that exalted military heroism, which was certainly not the artist's aim, the construction of the monument was in keeping with the era of political crises and strengthening military power during the following years, which

grew in tension and plunged the country into 20 years of military dictatorship beginning in 1964.

(3) During the two months I spent as a resident artist at Banff Center in Alberta, Canada, in the fall of 1993, the photographs of Brecheret's monument were stuck to the wall near my work table, offering possibilities open for intervention. They hung there like "magnets" to attract my ideas, but they were certainly quite distinct from anything I produced during my residence there.

Nevertheless, still in Banff, when I received the invitation to participate in an exhibition designed to reflect on the history and culture of Latin America, in the Museo del Barrio of New York, I knew instantly that the equestrian monument would be part of the theme that I wanted to explore with my installation.

(4) Other interpretations hold that the reasons that led to the War of the Triple Alliance involved the conflicts between the nations over positions of dominance and control of access to the sea, which Paraguay lacked, driven by concerns for navigation and the free expansion of international trade.