

Jandyra Waters: The Perfect Heretic

Adrian Locke

Two essential components found in the work of Waters have always been colour – and within the limits allowed by a rigorous geometry – lyricism. Therefore, for concrete standards she is a perfect heretic. And, finally, emphasizing her peculiarity, she never had the methodical fervour and proselytism of rigid concrete artists. She is not an intellectual but a painter.¹

Olívio Tavares de Araújo

One of eleven children Jandyra Waters (née Ramos) was born in Sertãozinho, a small town in the interior of São Paulo state, in 1921. The name Jandyra comes from the indigenous Tupí language and roughly translates as ‘she who says sweet words’. The Ramos family soon moved to the state capital which was rapidly emerging as the most important and wealthiest city in South America, one with a diverse immigrant population. Having studied English and graduated from a secretarial course, Jandyra secured a job working at the American Embassy in Rio de Janeiro, the then capital of Brazil. In 1945 she volunteered to work with the United Nations Relief Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), which was set up to help deliver post-war relief and economic rehabilitation in Europe and Asia. In 1946 Jandyra met Eric Dale Waters, an officer in the British Royal Army Medical Corps, in Austria. They returned to England and married the following year, settling in Lewes, East Sussex. Here Jandyra attended a local branch of the County Council Art School in 1948. Due to an allergic reaction to oil paint Jandyra was temporarily forced to give up painting when she became pregnant. Charleston, the house and studio of Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant of the Bloomsbury Group, is located near to Lewes, as is the popular seaside resort of Brighton.

When her husband retired in 1950 they, along with their son Martin, moved to Brazil settling in São Paulo. Jandyra continued her fine art education in Brazil in 1951 attending the studios of Yoshiya Takaoka and Clóvis Graciano among other artists, as well as taking courses at the Fundação Armando Álvares Penteado (FAAP), a private institution. She also briefly studied art history at the Universidade de São Paulo (USP) in 1952.

In 1957 she exhibited her work for the first time at the Salão Paulista de Artes Moderna (SPAM) becoming a regular exhibitor in Brazil over the next forty years. In 1963 she had her first solo exhibition at Galeria Aremar, Campinas.

Arriving back in Brazil for the first time in five years Jandyra would have left behind the post-war rationing and visible scars of German bombing raids in England as it struggled to reemerge following four years of intense warfare. In São Paulo she would have been suitably impressed by the changes that had taken place during her absence; Brazil was resurgent. A new found belief in the future created a sense of optimism that Brazil was finally on the path to fulfilling its long-awaited potential. Central to this thinking were the arts which were seen as an important yardstick for measuring the well-being of Brazil in terms of its global standing. Aside from the physical and economic investment in the arts there were important artistic movements emerging in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Salvador. There

¹ Olívio Tavares de Araújo quoted in Denise Matta, *Jandyra Waters: Ritmo de Tempo*, exh. cat., Galeria Almeida e Dale, São Paulo, 2015, p.5.

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was the *Grupo Ruptura* in São Paulo founded by Waldemar Cordeiro, *Grupo Frente* in Rio de Janeiro founded by Ivan Serpa plus important Afro-Brazilian artists such as Rubem Valentim, who lived and worked in Bahia and was a regular participant in the São Paulo biennales. The Concrete Art (represented by such artists as Waldemar Cordeiro and Judith Lauand), and Neo-Concrete art (personified by Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark) movements appeared in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro respectively giving rise to important artistic experiments in differing forms of geometric abstraction. Intense creativity and regional rivalries marked the many differences between the two main cities of Brazil. For Jandyrá, even though she appears to have been an artist working independently of these groups, it was a time of excitement and experimentation. In the meantime, Brasília, a new modern capital city built in the geographic centre of Brazil was under construction. Such an ambitious project was designed to emphasise Brazil's wealth and progressive development. Furthermore, new modern art museums in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro hosted exhibitions of international and national artists and a new biennale, only the second after Venice, was inaugurated in 1951 followed by the biennale of Bahia in 1966.

The military coup d'état which overthrew the democratically elected government of João Goulart in 1964 soon punctured that sense of optimism. In 1968 the military rulers introduced the Ato Institucional No.5 (AI-5) which, among many other repressive measures, brought in state censorship of the arts. The result was that creatives across Brazil became extremely proficient in finding creative ways to overcome this censorship. The military remained in power until 1985.

Recently the Brazilian art historian Talita Trizoli has asserted that female artists associated with geometric abstraction of this period were frequently marginalised by the historiographical narratives promulgated by their male counterparts; recognition only comes after they have died or are in advanced years.² This may account for the twenty-year hiatus in exhibitions of Jandyrá's work. Trizoli furthermore asserts that Jandyrá's work is increasingly being seen as having made a significant contribution to the field of geometric abstraction in Brazil.³ Interest in her work has revived with a number of monographic exhibitions take place in São Paulo and, most recently, London. Jandyrá also published three Haiku poetry collections: *Pedras Nuas*, São Paulo, 1974; *Desvendador*, São Paulo, 1977; and *Ritmo do Tempo*, São Paulo, 2001. Jandyrá died in 2025.

Over her career spanning some seventy years Jandyrá's work can be divided into a number of distinct phases. The early work was figurative focussing on domestic interiors, still lifes and landscapes which reflect the influence of Takaoka with whom she studied. By 1960, however, her work had taken a dramatic shift into abstraction influenced by the Tachisme movement, the non-geometric abstraction art that developed in Europe in the 1940s and 1950s. This second phase was dominated by indistinct forms utilising a wide range of colours giving way to more muted tones and organic shapes which hover between abstraction and figuration. The shapes created by Jandyrá feel tangible while the forms are animated, appearing to move across the canvas.

Towards the end of the 1960s her work had consolidated into a Lyrical Abstraction using a bolder palette. In this third phase the previously amorphous forms have given way to a greater and more deliberate distinctive and rhythmic shapes. The large-scale canvases are filled with sweeping shapes that seem very organic, and inter-related with much stronger colours. In turn, these give way to more distinct paintings, often monochromatic, that refine the forms even further becoming ever more lyrical

² Talita Trizoli, 'Cem anos de Jandyrá Waters', <https://www.itaucultural.org.br/anos-jandyrá-waters>, 2021.

³ See Talita Trizoli, 'Uma dupla exclusão: Judith Lauand e Jandyrá Waters, entre concretismos, misticismos e possíveis feminismos', in *MODOS: Revista de História da Arte*, v.5, n.1, pp. 231–248, 2021: <https://periodicos.sbu.unicamp.br/ojs/index.php/mod/article/view/8663977/26069>.

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and organic in the process. One cannot help but think of Bossa Nova and Samba when viewing these, perhaps reflecting the sinuous depictions of dancers by her former tutor Graciano. Interested in the individual forms these shapes assume in the paintings, Jandyra created a number of *Caixas* which hang like conventional paintings but are sculptural in their execution or much later become cut-outs, *Metamorfose*, that hang like mobiles. Within the confines of the frame and against intensely coloured backgrounds these shapes hover between the figurative and the abstract. The Brazilian art historian Giancarlo Hannud refers to Jandyra ‘as one of the great colorists of her time’.⁴ In many ways the forms are ethereal, as if they have been captured at a particular moment; the energetic movement evoking dancers or smoke catching in the breeze.

The following phase in the 1980s sees Jandyra move into Geometric Abstraction. Here the more fluid forms give way to hard geometric shapes, often architectural in style, that occasionally revert back to softer, organic forms. The combination of colour and form create bold, meticulously painted canvases that likewise explore the relationship between colours. Within this later body of works emerge the distinct group of white or two-tone *Templos*. Here it is as if her paintings have become three-dimensional architectural sculptures that one looks at and through, the geometric shapes receding from the front to the back. These forms are intensely sculptural and architectural. In a later body of work, perhaps her last phase, blocks of colour are overlaid with cutout shapes creating three-dimensional paintings called *Pseudo projeção* that have the look and feel of experimentations with colour and form.

The reemergence and repositioning of Jandyra’s art is long overdue allowing her work to finally assume its rightful position in the long and illustrious history of post-war Brazilian art.

⁴, ‘Phanerothyme paintings: A look on Jandyra Water’s work’, in *Jandyra Waters*, exh. cat., Galeria Mapa, São Paulo, 2021, unpaginated.