

From *ferramentaria*¹ to trance Symbolism, concept and religiosity in the work of Eneida Sanches

Solange Farkas

The work of Brazilian artist Eneida Sanches (b.1962) expands the literal representations occasionally attributed to elements of Afro-Brazilian religiosity by embracing the conceptual and philosophical realms, which inhabit this mythology. In installations such as *Transe: deslocamento de dimensões* (2007), for instance, Eneida uses tiny metal engravings as building blocks to a three-dimensional structure that invites the spectator to experience trance as a powerful **'alteration in the visual field'**.²

Despite a strong artistic training in her childhood and adolescence, Eneida started her career as an architect. Making this choice was an attempt to work around the repression on artistic practice imposed by the military regime, which ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985. This was **'a time in the 1970s when artists were being heavily cracked down on. So I graduated in architecture and worked as an architect until 1990,'** says the artist.

During the 1990s, Eneida Sanches regained contact with the field of visual arts by working as a *ferramenteiro de santo*³ apprentice, creating copper and tin garments for Candomblé rituals. Part of the same matrix as the Cuban

Santeria, Candomblé is the Afro-Brazilian ramification of the Yoruba cult of the orishas.⁴

'Cutting, hammering, carving, working with a blowtorch, I became completely enamored with the items and the symbolic realm of Candomblé,' the artist explains.⁵

From her work with Candomblé tools, Eneida Sanches embarked on a lasting relationship with the international community of the African and Latin America Diasporas in the United States, which culminated in 1992 in a show at the Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute, New York, and developed into multiple residencies and shows at museums in Chicago, Atlanta and Philadelphia.

In the early 2000s, influenced by the Brazilian filmmaker Glauber Rocha, the Brazilian singer Clementina de Jesus and the study of Yoruba philosophy, Eneida extrapolated elements from the symbolic universe of Candomblé tools. She focused more strongly on those linked to the representation of Orishas, while looking to remain faithful to the concept and the energy of the **"originator saints"**.⁶

To the artist, mythologies such as that of the orisha Ogun⁷ densely and incisively address inherent traits of human



Above: Photograph of São Joaquim market fair, Salvador de Bahia.



Right: Eneida Sanches detail of *Transe: Deslocamento de dimensões /Transe: Displacement of dimensions 2007*

nature, such as autonomy and responsibility, and bring to the fore concepts that delineate purely religious experiences. These issues later evolve in her work towards an artistic research focused on contemporary Africa: ‘Africa, to me, is a source,’ explains the artist.

In Eneida Sanches’ oeuvre, engravings and their variations place these issues in greater evidence utilizing a formal framework, as the artist explains: ‘At the São Joaquim market fair⁸ I saw a booth selling ox cuts: liver, brain, paws, eyes; those were items which were not meant as food, but rather as offerings. The eye was used for evil eye. Using images of the eyes, I started creating garments to ward off evil eye – a jacket, a shoe, pants, underwear, dresses – and then I would hang these clothes in murals. From afar, you could only see the mural. From up close, the clothes would come out from the surface. Working with that displacement, I created a three-dimensional structure for the engravings and a specific light that unfolded on the wall. When you begin working with a concept, it tells you where to go.’

In this interview with curator Solange Farkas, made in Brazil in September 2012, the artist discusses how her creative process has expanded over recent years to bring in conceptual aspects of Candomblé.

Solange Farkas: In the 2000s you extrapolated the universe of *ferramentaria* to attain a less literal representation of Candomblé symbolism. How did that process occur?

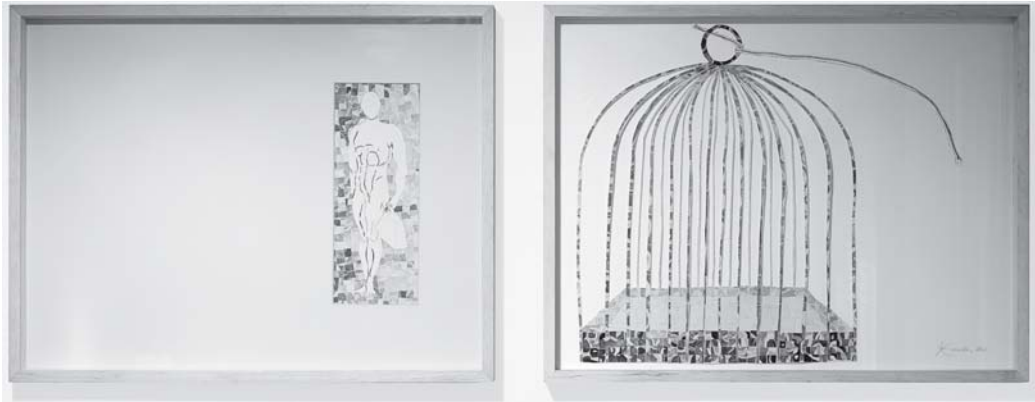
Eneida Sanches: From the time I learned to write until I was 15, I went to a school which placed a strong emphasis on the art curriculum, and that enabled me to move through

various languages and techniques. From 1975 to 1978 I explored painting. Then, at 17, I purchased a *Super 8* camera and started dedicating my practice to image in motion. In 1990, I became familiar with Candomblé tools and their aesthetics. Only then did I begin crafting items related to this symbolic universe and studying the art of Africa south of the Sahara especially the ancient Yorubaland.⁹ Within a short while I began using engraving as a technique to replace the hammering of metals.

Throughout the 1990s, I started going to the United States on a regular basis to exhibit and undertake artistic residencies for short periods. At that time, *ferramentaria* was the focus of my artistic production. I started making engravings through the influence of the British engraver Michel Walker, but I was still working with a symbolic universe strongly representative of orishas. I was stuck to that.

In 2000, when I was invited to undertake an artist’s residency at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, I sensed that the cycle had ended. Some experiences that I went through, particularly during that residency at the Smithsonian, led me to change. Umberto Eco’s book *The Open Work* was also decisive to that process.

During that period I used a huge amount of keys, which had been recently changed in the entire museum, in order to work with the Candomblé universe in a less literal way. So I hired a local metalworker to build an iron structure of pair of pants, which I then dedicated to Ogun. On the last day of my stint at the museum, the curator of a Cuban art show told me that in Cuba’s Santería, Saint Peter and Ogun are syncretized! I did research on artists such as Olazábal, Carlos Garaicoa, José Bedia, and realized that the need to break from those symbols was not going to disconnect me from that universe



**Eneida Sanches Me finjo de preso para nao publicar minha liberdade/
I pretend to be arrested not to publish my freedom (2011) etching and collage.**

or the original pulse it contains: it would only broaden my view. It was the start, for me, of a fabric that combined my individual experience of Brazilian Africanism and what is shared through the essential experience as a human being.

Solange Farkas: Aside from your artistic practice, how does Candomblé resonate in your life?

Eneida Sanches: Despite having been “officially” brought up in Catholicism, many people from my generation in Bahia grew up involved with Candomblé practices. Our mothers served food for children spirits, known as the twins *Ibejis* or *Cosme and Damião*, we used to praise Yemanjá, the Goddess of the Ocean for New Year’s Eve, so on and so forth. By that I mean to say that Candomblé is a founding aspect of my being rather than something external, which belongs to another culture. Whenever I integrate this dimension into my artistic practice, I don’t talk “about” it, I remember it, as a key part of my own history.

There is a philosophical aspect, a knowledge which runs through each orisha. And in the light of artistic research, it all gains another dimension, that of philosophical understanding, the elaboration and exteriorization of something which at first was merely intuitive.

This dimension is not limited to ancestry, because whenever you operate between the visible and the invisible, other windows open up to show the coherence of things.

Solange Farkas: You once mentioned that Glauber Rocha’s *Entranced Earth (Terra em Transe, 1967)* was a driving force for you to start dealing with the issue of trance as an immediate resignification of the symbolic realm. How do you incorporate the displacement and

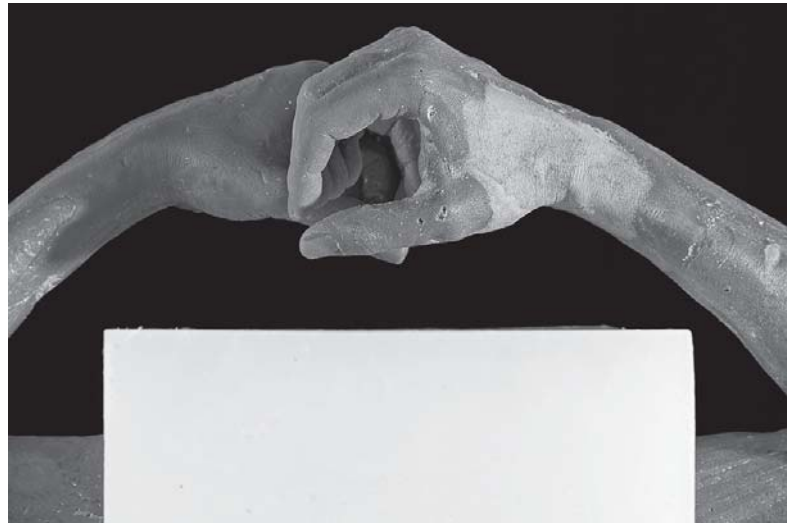
alteration of the senses evoked by the trance?

Eneida Sanches: It was during my residency at the Smithsonian that I watched a Glauber Rocha retrospective and the *Entranced Earth* movie. That’s when I realized how Glauber evidenced the symbol while diluting it in a conceptual reading. Glauber would discuss these experiences with an intriguing skillfulness; he was not stuck to a preconceived representation.

From then on, in my work, the “trance” left the religious realm to attain a nature of “*translator of dimensions.*” In Candomblé, this is the function of Exú, an entity who dwells in the crossroads, continuously moving throughout seven different dimensions (left, right, front, back, up down , inwards). I started researching all of that intensely, and I did a series of interviews with priests and psychoanalysts on the issue of trance and the unconsciousness.

In New York, with the babalawo¹⁰ John Mason, I watched a video of Miles Davis. There is a moment in which his eyes turn and he is “*taken*” by the music. At that moment, Miles no longer belonged to himself, but rather to the music that passed through him. And then Mason said to me: ‘**What do you think he’s doing? He’s capturing a sound, an image, a need of expression, and bringing it to the physical plane. That’s what the artist does. A displacement.**’

The engravings in my work then migrated to the bodies of people and started being shown as photographs. My production became a hybrid of engraving and photography, whose main personification is the body. To me, this was reminiscent of an important religious foundation of Candomblé: the body as the orisha’s horse. In it, art and the energy dance. So, I have been investigating this displacement of dimensions ever since.



Eneida Sanches two sculptures, each called *Ex-Voto, Untitled* (2011) Courtesy of Artist

Solange Farkas: In the process of incorporating this displacement of dimensions into your work, how did the study of Yoruba philosophy enhance your research?

Eneida Sanches: The concept behind Yoruba symbols is incredibly instigating. In Candomblé rituals, for instance, initiated followers of the orisha Oxóssi¹¹ clad for celebration carry two cross-strapped small purses. In Creole tales, each purse is said to contain a different potion: one carries venom and the other an ointment for the cure. Both are made from the same herb, but at different concentrations. With one same substance in hand, depending on proportion and intensity, you can either kill or save a being. This mythology indicates the understanding of autonomy and responsibility in African religiosity. Well, that is much more than mere symbolism, and hence the need to move beyond representation in order to tackle its concepts. That was when I went back to studying African art, this time from a different perspective.

Solange Farkas: Do you believe that being a female artist puts you in touch with Candomblé in a different way? How do female orishas interfere in your practice?

Eneida Sanches: Charles Daniel Dawson, a researcher on African-American studies at Columbia University, once made a remark that added a lot to my understanding of the feminine in Candomblé. He claimed many of the female orishas perform some sort of “cooling” or “ventilation” of people’s spirits and situations. That is directly linked to the props these female divinities carry, such as Yemanjá’s handheld

fan, Yansan’s tool, the *eruechim*,¹² and Oxum’s tool, *abebé*.¹³

Even though my work is not directly focused on gender issues, the feminine mythology of Candomblé and the regalia associated with different divinities point to issues of great importance to my artistic practice.

To that end, I would like to mention a very important female figure, one that bridges both trance and art in her expression: the Brazilian samba singer Clementina de Jesus. Like Miles Davis, she would go into a state of trance in her stage performances, as if she were incorporating an entity, a *preta velha*, while she sang.¹⁴

Solange Farkas: As a result of an expansion process, your work now constantly operates at the boundary between religion, culture and concept. How do you elaborate the intersection between aesthetics and religious issues?

Eneida Sanches: As I’ve said before, I went back to studying and investigating what is most broad and essential in that mythology, and just like the “*Miles-Davian*” or the “*Clemetinian*” blow, I was able to allow the trance to have its say. In 2007, for a show in Rio, I made a large mural and several clothing items in engravings with images of bull’s eyes – which are originally used in rituals to repel “evil eye,” to drive away envy and jealousy.

From afar, the entire piece seemed two-dimensional. As one came closer, the volume would reveal itself. I propose this displacement whenever possible and I seek a reflection about what seems flat in day-to-day experience, but brings unexpected development when seen in displacement.



Eneida Sanches *Mergulho na Floresta/ Dive in the forest* (2011)

Solange Farkas: How does engraving, combined with other techniques, contribute to bringing about the sensation of motion in your more recent installations?

Eneida Sanches: Traditional engraving observes formal aspects from which I depart with conscience and purpose. I reprint one single painted plate four or five times, not caring about their series, and causing it to dilute until the initial image disappears. When they are arranged side by side, the image vanishes, not allowing the eye to rest on clean, clear-cut images. However, I don't treat them as repetition to ratify an idea. Neither does the whole of the mural swallow its cells. They work in tandem, creating a movement which exists only to the beholder of the piece.

Starting in 2011, I reduced all engravings of eyes that I had in my studio to pieces. The images built from the collage of engravings speak of delving deeper into the abyss of non-knowledge, which I call "*do not know*." During that interview with the Cuban babalawo Mason, in 2000, I remember he mentioned that just before "*incorporating*" the ego, he would say: '**I don't want to go**'.

Once again, I call this new work "*trance*". It's a tribute to all that resist, to the unknown, but once the last vestige of fear has subsided, they allow themselves to be ridden as horses in a cheerful role of art bearers.

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Notes

1. *Fermentaria* or *orishas tools* are sacred items used by the Orishas to augment the performance of their roles.
2. *14th Salão da Bahia*. Salvador: Bahia Museum of Modern Art, 2007. p. 112
3. *Fermenteiro de Santo*: the craftsmen that manufacture the orishas tools.
4. In Yoruba mythology, Orishas are divinities or demigods created by the supreme god Olorun. The Orishas are guardians of the elements of nature and represent all of their domains in the aye (the physical reality humans are inserted in, according to Yoruba tradition). There also are intermediate orishas between men and the African pantheon which are not considered gods, but ancestors who were divinized after death.
5. *14th Salão da Bahia*. Salvador: Bahia Museum of Modern Art, 2007. p. 112.
6. Orishas that inspired a determined artistic practice in Eneida Sanches' work.
7. Ogun, in Yoruba mythology, is the blacksmith orisha, the lord of metals. Ogum himself would forge his own tools for hunting, farming, and warring.
8. Created in Salvador de Bahia, in the 1960s, after the destruction of the old street market Água de Meninos, the São Joaquim fair commercializes fruits, vegetables, handcrafted materials, and specially products and animals dedicated to candomblé rituals and sacrifices.
9. The cultural region of the Yoruba, referred to as Yorubaland, gathers parts of the modern states of Republic of Benin, Nigeria and Togo.
10. Babálawó is the name given to priests of the Orúnmilá-Ifá Orisha, from the Jeje and Nagô cultures. They never go into a trance. Their main function is to initiate other babalawos and to convey the knowledge of the Ifá Cult to initiated ones.
11. The term *Oxóssi*, in Portuguese, derives from the Yoruba *Òṣòṣì*, meaning god of war and prosperity. His cult has been preserved both in Brazil and Cuba.
12. The *Echim* represents a "*horse tail*" in Candomblé mythology.
13. The *Abebé* represents a "*mirror*" in Candomblé mythology
14. *Pretos-velhos* (literally old black men) are *umbanda* entities, spirits which present themselves in the fluidic bodies of old Africans who lived in the *senzalas*, most of them as slaves who died while being whipped or of old age, and who love to tell stories from their days in captivity.