

## Markers of Blackness in Brazilian Black Art

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Cleveland, Kimberly L. *Black Art in Brazil: Expressions of Identity*. Gainesville, FL: U Press of Florida, 2013. Pp. 216. ISBN 978-0-8130-4476-7.

Historically, religious elements related to Candomblé and Umbanda's deities and practices have shaped most of what is understood as "black art" in Brazil. Therefore, the term acquired a negative connotation in the academic and popular realm since Afro-Brazilian religious ceremonies were, supposedly, only related to black enslaved persons who, even after abolition, continued to be socially and politically thrust to the margins. In the compelling read *Black Art in Brazil: Expressions of Identity*, Kimberly L.

Cleveland discusses the relatively new concept of "Afro-Brazilian art," designed to include a discourse of national identity as well as its (un)acceptance by modern and contemporary artists. The book reconsiders "black art" as an alternative to "Afro-Brazilian art," as the latter term fails to comprehend many of the complex factors of black art in Brazil. Cleveland communicates that the label "Afro-Brazilian" is linked to two elements: the presence of Afro-Brazilian cult-like elements in the artwork, and the artists' race. The Introduction and Chapter 1, which discusses race, identity, and cultural literacy, Cleveland investigates the problematic construction of how black Brazilian art is interpreted and debated in both North American and Brazilian academia. By expanding the notion of black art in Brazil while analyzing artwork of two modern and three contemporary artists (chapters 2 to 6), she proposes a discussion that transcends the aforementioned two narrowed categories. In doing so, the author empowers signs of "blackness" in Brazilian society – which go beyond Afro-Brazilian religious references, and can be translated into visual signs of sociohistorical, economic, and political black people's marginalization.

By articulating the notion of "blackness," Cleveland argues that its visual signifiers are arbitrary. She contends that black art produced in Bahia and Rio de Janeiro, for example, tend to offer visual signifiers related to African inspirations as "capoeira and the baianas" (43). On the other hand, in bigger metropolitan areas such as São Paulo, because of the hybridity of the city, those signs are more contemporary (hair style and clothing, for instance), reflecting a more global market, which goes along with the author's own words: "black art has had more to do with signifying blackness than the larger purview of national arts production to date" (45).

The second chapter is prudently set up to establish connections with the term “Afro-Brazilian” and the artist Abdias Nascimento. The strict relationship traces back to the painter’s exile in the United States from 1968 to 1978, when his artwork received attention from North American scholars. Nascimento’s paintings in the 1970s, Cleveland argues, were seen as demonstrative of blackness and black art in Brazil. The conclusions regarding black culture in Brazil as a synonym of Afro-Brazilian religion, observed by U.S. scholars, were then accepted by Brazilian academia as an outset for prospect discussion. Some of that acknowledgment can also be attributed to the attention black art in Brazil claimed after the hundredth anniversary of the abolition of slavery in 1988. Chapter 3 outlines a very interesting understanding of black art, as Ronaldo Rego, for whom the chapter is named for, is a white artist. The chapter compares the Brazilian and North American approach to black art with regards to the theme of race. Rego illustrates the dissociability between race and the choice of subject matter, grasping the reader’s attention to recognize how North American scholarship has operated on the construction of the term “Afro-Brazilian art.” In chapters 4, 5 and 6, artists Eustáquio Neves, Ayrson Heráclito, and Rosana Paulino are rich examples of how contemporary black art production is inevitably at some point related to different levels of network. Cleveland does a remarkable job while addressing those artists’ background and their contact with academia. Neves’ critiques on social marginalization and racial challenges depart from regional Minas Gerais to contemporary Brazil. Heráclito’s use of palm oil, sundried beef, and performance on his artwork is an example of the connection between art a Afro-Brazilian religion unchained from the symbolic sacred allusion to religious concepts that Cleveland highlights. Additionally, in order to recall the past, the gastronomic elements establish connections to current social problems, which become an imperative addition to the book’s pivotal discussion. Lastly, by including an artist from the city of São Paulo, the author broadens even more the reader’s understanding of black Brazilian art. With Paulino’s contributions regarding the female black experience, she then underscores the complexity in which black Brazilian art stands.

Cleveland aims to shed light on a wide variety of artistic production to demonstrate how African-influenced art is not solely confined to Afro-Brazilian religions. Slavery and the black body have also been relatively new signifiers capable of conveying “blackness.” The exposure of such markers can be understood through a recovery of the historical past as well as its impacts on present times of black Brazilian citizens. In a very straightforward fashion, the author dismantles stereotypes associated to black art in Brazil. Nevertheless, both her wide-ranging choice of the aforementioned artists’ oeuvres and a chronological scope of Brazilian history make Cleveland’s *Black Art in Brazil: Expressions of Identity* an insightful while essential addition to criticism with regards to black Brazilian art.