

# Fowler

## MUSEUM AT UCLA

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### **Axé Bahia: The Power of Art in an Afro-Brazilian Metropolis**

September 24, 2017–April 15, 2018



Los Angeles, CA—*Axé Bahia: The Power of Art in an Afro-Brazilian Metropolis* explores the distinctive cultural identity of the city of Salvador, the coastal capital of the Brazilian state of Bahia and a sister city of Los Angeles. Founded in 1549, it is Brazil's third largest metropolis, with a population of more than three million, the majority of whom have African ancestry. This exhibition—the most comprehensive presentation of Afro-Brazilian art ever realized in the U.S.—examines how artistic practices express and shape crucial aspects of identity and experience in Bahia and beyond. Dating primarily from the mid-twentieth to the early twenty-first century, and including sculpture, painting, photography, video, and installation art, the selected works illustrate the ways in which seminal artists (Brazilians and resident foreigners alike) have expanded the visual richness of Bahian culture. They also demonstrate potent, and often provocative, responses to the legacy of slavery and ongoing forms of inequality.

In Salvador, the Yoruba-derived word **axé** (pronounced “ah-sheh”) serves as a Bahian catchword, ranging in meanings from “blessings” or “peace” to “let it be so!” or “right on!” As understood in the theology of the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé, *axé* is the intangible energy or vital force that infuses life and carries the potential for positive change in the world—a power that manifests most visibly in ritual and art.

“This exhibition draws on decades of collective research by many scholars living across the globe,” said **Fowler Museum Director Marla C. Berns**. “The strong support the Getty provided for the exploratory phase of this project gave the curatorial team significant access to the many familiar artists working in Bahia today as well as identifying those who are deserving of recognition. *Axé Bahia* offers a well-timed and unparalleled opportunity to examine the cultural importance of the city of Salvador, the wide range of Afro-Brazilian artistic practices, and the broader domains of African diaspora and Latin American art history.”

According to exhibition **co-curator Patrick A. Polk**, “The essence of *Axé Bahia* is revelation. How does art help to reveal what it means to be black or *Afrodescendente* (of African descent) in Brazil? In selecting works, we sought out artists who speak directly to crucial, and often fraught, realities of race and cultural heritage. The exhibition also hinges on specific ways in which Afro-Brazilian traditions such as Candomblé and Carnaval can express empowering notions of self and community; acts that can be inherently transformative.”

### Exhibition Overview

The exhibition opens in a dramatic encounter with **Ayrson Heráclito**'s liquid-filled sculptural work *Divisor* (Divider, 2017). For Heráclito, the red color of palm oil (*dendê*) represents Africa, blood, and new life. The oil forms a layer above salt water when the two elements are poured together, evoking the transformational experience of the Middle Passage. Next, a series of suspended silk-screened cloths by **Goya Lopes**, commissioned for the exhibition and entitled *Sentidos afros-baianos* (Afro-Bahian Senses, 2016), draws on the dominant human senses—sight, smell, touch, hearing, and taste—to trace the essence of Afro-Bahian culture and suggest the profound influence of African aesthetics and spirituality on Brazilian culture.

A haunting tableau by **Caetano Dias**, *Delírios de Catarina* (The Ravings of Catherine, 2017), is anchored by two conjoined but distinctly different tables, recalling those at which slaveholders dined and those at which the enslaved labored. Dozens of disembodied human heads cast in sugar bear witness to the grinding consumption of bodies by colonial plantations. *Delírios* is the focal point of an exhibition section called **Malungos (Shipmates)**, a reference to the hardships experienced by enslaved Africans brought to Brazil by the Portuguese beginning in the early sixteenth century. Woodcut prints by **Hansen Bahia** (1958) and **Heráclito**'s 2015 video diptych *O sacudimento da Maison des Esclaves em Gorée: Diptico I* (The Cleansing of the House of Slaves in Gorée: Diptych I) and *O sacudimento da Casa da Torre: Diptico I* (The Cleansing of the Tower House: Diptych I), evoke the inhuman legacy of the transatlantic slave economy.

Three circular galleries dominate the center of the exhibition space, each intended to provide opportunity for visitors to learn about emblematic facets of daily life in Salvador. The first addresses the **baiana**, a familiar archetype, if not stereotype, of black Bahian women, and simultaneously, a crucial expression of self-determination. The *baiana* can be recognized by her colorful turban-like head wrap, white hoop skirt, lace blouse, and *jóias de crioula* (creole jewelry), a costume derived from African-inspired styles of dress worn by free and enslaved women during the colonial period in Salvador. Portraits of *baianas* by **Voltaire Fraga** (1940) and **Helemozão** (2015) expose evolving attitudes toward their subjects, as does **Thaís Muniz**'s arts activism project *Turbante-se* (Turban Yourself, 2012–2016).

The second gallery introduces audiences to the arts of **Candomblé**—practiced throughout Brazil but historically centered in Bahia, with Salvador being home to its most famous *terreiros* (temples). Rooted in West African traditions, the religion illustrates the process of “world building,” whereby enslaved and free Africans established new communities of faith based on ancestral theologies. In addition to the life force of *axé*, Candomblé believers recognize several categories of divine beings, above all, the human-like **orixás**, who intervene beneficially in the lives of their worshippers, interacting with them through prayer, music and dance, pilgrimage, and food offerings. Photographs by **Adenor Gondim** (1994), **Tacun Lecy** (2014), and **Pierre Verger** (1946) capture intimate aspects of ritual practice. In a more recent series from 2016, **Tauan Carmo** starts with photographs created by friends and colleagues, and digitally transforms subjects into virtual *orixás*, adding symbol-laden traced lines. The installation also features emblematic *ferramentas*, or ritual implements: iron sculptures forged by José Adário dos Santos, known as **Zé Diabo**; dolls made by Valdete Ribeiro da Silva, known as **Detinha de Xangô**; and watercolors by **Carybé**.

The third circular gallery highlights the popular Brazilian export **capoeira**, based on African choreographies of celebration and combat, and emblematic of defiant notions of Afro-Brazilian identity. Associated by some with street violence, its practice was illegal in Brazil prior to 1937. Although the dance/martial art form is now taught by *mestres* (master teachers) throughout the world, its wellspring remains Bahia, which draws experts and novices from around the globe. The 1954 film *Vadição* (Delinquency) by **Alexandre Robatto Filho** was seminal in ongoing efforts to recognize *capoeira* as a valuable cultural tradition.

The next section of the exhibition features ***Candomblé as artistic inspiration***, spotlighting artists who have translated the religion's symbology for broader audiences. Rubem Valentim created his own visual language based on spiritual forms and symbols by way of constructivism. **J. Cunha's** monumental twenty-one-panel painted masterpiece *Códice* (Codex, 2010–2015) depicts an expansive system of African-inspired religious iconography. A 2009 ceiling installation by **Oscar Dourado** translates his experience of initiatory seclusion in a tiny, windowless room into lightbox photographs of sunlight passing through slits between roof tiles. Dramatic photographs by **Bauer Sá** and **Mário Cravo Neto** also engage with Candomblé's cosmology. A powerful work by **Ayrson Heráclito** features a wall of twelve large-scale photographs called *Bori* (Feeding the Head, 2008–2011), in which twelve *orixás* are represented by performers' heads anointed with sacred foods.

In the final section, ***Cidade do Salvador (City of Salvador)***, artists capture everyday realities and critical tensions impacting the lives of Salvador's residents, especially *Afrodescendentes*. Self-taught visionary artist Aurelino dos Santos appears to translate his experience of the urban design of Salvador—or perhaps some other metropolis of the mind—into brightly colored and wildly geometric cityscapes. **Alex Igbó's** street art intervention *Jexus* (2014–2015) provocatively combines the names Jesus and the *orixá* Exú. **Tiago Sant'ana's** video *Apagamento #1 – Cabula* (Elimination #1 – Cabula, 2017) comments on murdered youth in the Salvador neighborhood of Cabula.

A final sweep of works includes **Rommulo Vieira Conceição's** sculptural barricade *A fragilidade dos negócios humanos pode ser um limite espacial incontestável* (The Fragility of Human Affairs Can Be an Incontestable Spatial Boundary, 2015) and a selection from **Pedro Marighella's** *Série Mata* (Mata Series, 2014), evoking a moment during Carnival when the boisterous crowd reaches critical mass, laying claim over public space. **Caetano Dias's** poignant video *O Mundo de Janiele* (Janiele's World, 2007) brings viewers to the periphery of the *favela* of Dom Avelar, a low-income neighborhood in Salvador. Dias's circling camera reveals a young girl in a sunny open space hula-hooping to the sound of a music box. Janiele's determined and graceful *ginga* (personal style of movement or creative rhythm) becomes the axis around which the *favela* and the world spin.

## PARTICIPATING ARTISTS

Gil Abelha, José Adario dos Santos (Zé Diabo), Jorge Amado, Tauan Carmo, Carybé, Dorival Caymmi, Lita Cerqueira, Christian Cravo, Mário Cravo Neto, José Antônio Cunha (J. Cunha), Marco Aurélio Damaceno, Caetano Dias, Oscar Dourado, Voltaire Fraga, Adenor Gondim, Karl Heinz Hansen (Hansen Bahia), Ayrson Heráclito, Alex Igbó, Tacun Lecy, Goya Lopes, Pedro Marighella, Deoscóredes Maximiliano dos Santos (Mestre Didi), Eder Muniz, Thaís Muniz, Valdete Ribeiro da Silva (Detinha De Xangô), Alexandre Robatto Filho, Bauer Sá, Tiago Sant'ana, Agnaldo dos Santos, Aurelino dos Santos, Arlete Soares, Nadia Taquary, Rubem Valentim, Pierre Verger, and Rommulo Vieira Conceição.

## PUBLICATION

*Axé Bahia: The Power of Art in an Afro-Brazilian Metropolis* will be accompanied by an illustrated publication. This volume includes essays by the four curators and contributions by fourteen scholars, including Scott Alves Barton, Sarah K. Chenault, Kimberly L. Cleveland, Christopher Dunn, Cécile Fromont, Ana Paula Höfling, Vanda Machado, Lucas Marques, J. Lorand Matory, Paulo Miguez, Anadelia Romo, Roger Sansi, Heather Shirey, and Jeri Bernadette Williams.

## CREDIT

*Axé Bahia's* curatorial team is led by Patrick A. Polk, Fowler Curator of Latin American and Caribbean Popular Arts, with guest co-curators Roberto Conduru (Associate Professor of Art History and Theory at the Art Institute, Rio de Janeiro State University); Sabrina Gledhill (Brazil-based scholar of Bahian culture and history); and Randal Johnson (Distinguished Professor, UCLA Department of Spanish and Portuguese).

Presented as part of Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA, this exhibition anchors a three-part program exploring Brazil's African history and cultural heritage, which includes ***Lineage through Landscape: Tracing Egun in Brazil by Fran Siegel*** (through December 10, 2017) and ***Africa/Americas: Photographic Portraits by Pierre Verger*** (September 10, 2017–January 21, 2018).

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**The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts**



## **ABOUT PACIFIC STANDARD TIME: LA/LA**

Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA is a far-reaching and ambitious exploration of Latin American and Latino art in dialogue with Los Angeles. Supported by grants from the Getty Foundation, Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA takes place from September 2017 through January 2018 at more than 70 cultural institutions across Southern California, from Los Angeles to Palm Springs, and from San Diego to Santa Barbara. Pacific Standard Time is an initiative of the Getty. The presenting sponsor is Bank of America.



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## **About the Fowler Museum**

The Fowler Museum at UCLA explores global arts and cultures with an emphasis on works from Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and the Americas—past and present. The Fowler enhances understanding of world cultures through dynamic exhibitions, publications, and public programs, informed by interdisciplinary approaches and the perspectives of the cultures represented. Also featured is the work of international contemporary artists presented within the complex frameworks of politics, culture, and social action.

## **Fowler Museum at UCLA**

308 Charles E Young Dr N | Los Angeles, CA 90024 | [fowler.ucla.edu](http://fowler.ucla.edu)

Admission to the Fowler is free.

Hours: Wed 12–8pm and Thu–Sun 12–5pm

Parking available in UCLA Lot 4, 221 Westwood Plaza at Sunset Blvd. (\$12/day)



@fowlermuseum #pstlala #axebahiapstlala

### **Caption:**

Christian Cravo (b. 1974, Salvador, Bahia, Brazil)

*Afternoon with Bonfim Church in the Background*, 2003

Photograph

Courtesy Christian Cravo

Artwork © Christian Cravo