

Jill Feldman, "Meet Brazilian Artist Alexandre da Cunha, Who Makes Art With Mops, Ironing Boards, and Bracelets", Blouin Artinfo, February 2012

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On the occasion of his solo show in New York's CRG Gallery on view February 23 through March 23, Jill Feldman speaks to Brazilian-born, UK-based artist Alexandre da Cunha about Brazilian tradition and the modernist heritage, culture, context, and mop heads.

Can you tell me a little more about the process of intervention, appropriation, and re-contextualization in relation to the works in the CRG exhibition?

Although the focus of my practice has been always in the sculptural field, I don't see myself as a typical maker. My practice has been mostly about my personal encounter with things in everyday life and a quite straightforward intervention on those elements. By highlighting specific aspects of objects that surround us, I impose a possible entry for them in what is known as the art world. I am interested in seeing those elements taking new forms and gradually making their trajectory to become sculptures. The work proposes a discussion about the value of those things both in everyday life and in the art context. In order to negotiate that, I work all the time with notions around appropriation and re-contextualization.

In the show at CRG, there is a new element to my practice regarding appropriated objects: I made a series of metal pieces where the presence of the readymade is perhaps more subtle in comparison to earlier works; the found elements look more fluidly merged as if they were welded together echoing traditional methods of figurative sculpture making. The pieces have much less color and carry a patina from the found objects (pots, vases, bracelets, lamp shades). The sculptures will be presented alongside two large wall based pieces made of mop heads that were knotted, dyed and woven together creating patterned tapestries inspired by modernist textile designs.

Your work is often described as loosely referencing modernist traditions, and you've described it as "readymade with the twist." Can you elaborate on that?

The modernist tradition feels like a natural heritage to me. I grew up in Rio de Janeiro, where modernist architecture was everyone's playground, slightly different than today where everything seems more confined and protected. Later on, when I started to study art, modernism played a crucial role in my formation. This specifically Brazilian modernist legacy has only recently been disseminated internationally, but in Brazil it has always been the core of the education of young artists. I believe that a lot of artists who are concerned with the legacy of modernism are revisiting it with a new approach where formalism plays an important role. It may be a more introverted form of artistic practice, which has at its center a genuine interest in techniques and materiality—something that would have seemed rather reactionary only a few years ago but now seems pertinent.

Regarding the readymade with twist—I suppose it has got to do with my interest in the subject going beyond the Duchampian tradition and not being restricted by historical quotes only.



Detail of “Kentucky (Divider),” 2011. Mop heads, metal rods and hooks, 200 x 242 x 30 cm.
(Courtesy CRG Gallery, New York and Sommer & Kohl. Photo: Jens Ziehe.)

Why mop heads?

I am generally interested in the cultural use of the objects that I incorporate in my works. Apart from the more obvious connection to the human body, there are other aspects that I try to explore with the use of the mops in my work.

The ideas of trading and labor triggered off by those mops can lead the viewer to several readings of the work. Also, their repetition and visual aesthetics in the work make reference to architecture; there is also a nod to crafts and how those relate (or not) to the contemporary art context.

I have been working with a lot of objects like brooms, dusters, and so on. The parallel between the studio practice and home cleaning makes perfect sense to me. Cleaning can be quite meditative and it involves somehow the idea of a new situation, a possible restart, a plain canvas. I suppose this is a more internal aspect of my creative process and not so visible in the work where my main interest in the objects has to do with what they signify in society or because of their specific forms, colors, and materials.

Does humor in your work offer a way out of the set of rules?

Yes, humor is a very important element in my work. It makes the reading of the work much more appealing and enjoyable. Sometimes appearing a bit silly is the smartest thing one can do. Perhaps it's right for art works too.