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How Brazilians became the cool cats of contemporary art





Inside the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art CREDIT: ALAMY

By **Alastair Smart**

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There are certainly plenty of distractions in Trancoso, Bahia, halfway up Brazil's Atlantic coast. This one-time fisherman's village has evolved into one of the hippest beach destinations in South America and is a favourite with the rich and famous. Not long before my visit, Solange Knowles (Beyoncé's sister) had honeymooned there, and Mario Testino had done a Vogue photo shoot. Its powder-white sands stretch for miles, and on the grassy main square, the Quadrado, visitors pop in and out of quirky boutiques or join locals for an evening spot of capoeira or football.

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Lucas Simoes, however, is hard at work. An artist based in São Paulo, 1,000 miles south and inland of here, he is in Trancoso on a residency of indefinite length at the Uxua Casa Hotel and Spa. He specialises in uncanny sculptures – such as drinking glasses filled to the brim with cement – but admits he “came to Trancoso without fixed ideas... happy just to let the mood of the place take me”.



Trancoso has evolved into one of the hippest beach destinations in South America CREDIT: AP/FOTOLIA

The mood in Trancoso is laid-back and chic, and in Uxua's open-air workshop, Simoes is working on new pieces of furniture for the hotel – all from locally sourced wood. Amid much competition, Uxua is the town's most fashionable accommodation: a cluster of old fishermen's cottages bought up individually by Wilbert Das, and converted into a hotel of idiosyncratic "casas". Das, artistic director of fashion house Diesel, clearly seeks artistic flourishes throughout (sinks and baths carved from tree trunks, for example) – which is where his line of successive artists-in-residence comes in.

In many ways, Uxua is unique: I've not swum in too many hotel pools laid with 40,000 pebbles of aventurine, a gemstone that gives water the green shimmer of a jewel. Its art programme, however, is matched in many hotels across the land. More broadly, it reflects the rise and importance of contemporary art in Brazil.

The hub, undoubtedly, is São Paulo. Simoes is represented there by the Emma Thomas Gallery in the leafy neighbourhood of Jardins. Founded in 2006, the space shows work by emerging Brazilian artists. On the evening I visit, a new show is opening, and founder Fabiana Bernardo is serving ice-cold beers and caipirinhas to guests on the top-floor terrace.



Uxua Casa Hotel and Spa

The three-floor building itself is as interesting as the art within. Its striking facade consists of perforated bricks that create a lattice effect. The porch in front of it, meanwhile, put me in mind of a Methodist church.

“We are just one of a large number of galleries which have sprung up in São Paulo in the past few years,” Bernardo tells me. “The scene is alive and, I’m pleased to say, growing all the time.” Certainly the figures back Bernardo up. Around two thirds of the city’s 80-plus art galleries opened this millennium.

Most Brazilian art is sold domestically, reflecting the rise of a prosperous middle class with newly disposable income – though, admittedly, rather less of it in the current recession. That said, interest from abroad is rising too. Eight São Paulo galleries showed at the Frieze art fairs in London last October. Total export sales for Brazilian art rose to \$67 million in 2015, from \$51 million the year before and \$27 million the year before that.



Helio Oiticica's installation at Inhotim

It's a far cry from the days when art in São Paulo was synonymous simply with street art. "It's an exciting time for the city," says Bernardo. Forget Rio de Janeiro. São Paulo, the economic and cultural capital of Brazil, is where art is at – and we're not just talking about Helio Oiticica, Lygia Clark and other 20th-century masters

who made it big worldwide, but a new generation of artists like Lucas Simoes. As a sign of the times, a new app – the Brasil Art Gallery Guide – provides a round-up of galleries, exhibitions, artists and events, as well as an interactive map to help you navigate them.

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One place to get a sense of the buzz is the São Paulo art biennial, the second oldest in the world after Venice (its 32nd edition opens in September) and the city also boasts some great museums. For a journey through Brazilian art of the past 150 years, the Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo is unrivalled: an elegant, neoclassical building in which to track the evolution from 19th-century realism to the multimedia artists of today.



Visitors to the International Graffiti Fine Art Biennial in Sao Paulo CREDIT: ALAMY

Because of traffic, São Paulo is not the easiest city to get around – though downtown, once you get there, is negotiable on foot. Among the popular spots is Macusp (the Museum of Contemporary Art from São Paulo University) in Ibirapuera, the city's principal park. Designed by Brazil's greatest architect, Oscar Niemeyer, in the Fifties, it was originally used as a State transport office. Spread over seven floors, it now exhibits the university art collection.

Greeting you upon entry is the largest cat sculpture I have ever seen, by local artist Nina Pandolfo – something to give nightmares to ailurophobes like me. A Freudian would also have a field day before it: a furry, tabby creature with uncannily long whiskers and a sharp-clawed right paw that reaches out at you. It's apparently the most photographed work in the museum.

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Much more my thing was Henrique Oliveira's vast installation *Transarquitectonica*, occupying much of Macusp's ground floor. It's a marvellous, interactive work that invites you to walk its labyrinthine path. You begin in what looks like a White Cube-style contemporary art gallery, only to progress, via rooms of brick and stone, to obscure wooden hollows – as if travelling back through the centuries. Super stuff.

It's impossible, of course, to sum up the art of a whole nation in one fell swoop, but Oliveira's work is certainly typical. I remember interviewing conceptual artist Cildo Meireles before his big Tate retrospective a few years ago and he said that, unlike the Spanish colonies in Latin America, which inherited the painterly tradition of El Greco and Velázquez, Brazil had to invent an art of its own in the 20th century. "And that art became a multi-sensory one experienced through the whole human body."



A visitor to the São Paulo international art fair

And when it comes to multi-sensory experiences, there's nothing quite like Inhotim – the almighty sculpture park in the neighbouring state, Minas Gerais. It's not especially accessible, but worth the effort. From São Paulo, it requires a flight to the state capital Belo Horizonte. Base yourself there, then take a two-hour road journey to Brumadinho.

Inhotim is owned by local iron-mining magnate Bernardo Paz, who in 2006 decided he didn't want an art collection like all the rest. No stuffy indoor space in an urban area for him; he wanted to place art in the natural surroundings of his home state (Minas). He now plans to open an on-site hotel, plus an airport nearby, to ensure it's not just art pilgrims but general tourists who visit.

For me, though, Inhotim's inaccessibility is one of its strengths. Arriving, it feels like entering some sort of prelapsarian Eden. It stretches over 5,000 acres of lush, green countryside, complete with 25 pavilions devoted to individual artists; flora and fauna of infinite variety (there are 1,400 different species of palm tree alone); and individual artworks popping up unexpectedly out of the exuberant, tropical growth.

To call this a sculpture park is to underestimate it. Paz's vision is huge, and though meant by some as a criticism, the name "Art's Disneyland" perhaps comes close to

suggesting the sheer scale. For Paz himself, who pours a reported £50 million annually into the park, Inhotim is a chance to “regain the sense of wonder of being a child again”. I chose to experience it on foot, though you can also hire a golf buggy – available at reception for £5 from one of Paz’s 1,000 on-site staff.

Memorable exhibits include a tree-trunk sculpture by Giuseppe Penone that seems to float in mid-air; Doug Aitken’s bass murmur installation, summoning sounds from 650ft below the earth; and Cildo Meireles’s Red Shift, an unsettling domestic environment in which everything, from the sofas to the contents of the fridge, is blood-red.

I managed to “do” Inhotim in one day, but even at the end of that I didn’t feel tired. There’s no museum fatigue here. As Meireles suggested, Brazilian art manages to engage all the senses at once and is all the more thrilling for that. A vanity project this may be, but it is fast becoming one of the art world’s essential destinations.

Getting there

Tap Portugal (0345 601 0932; flytap.com) flies from Gatwick to São Paulo 15 times a week, with return fares starting at £603.

Package

Journey Latin America (020 8600 1881; journeylatinamerica.co.uk) offers a seven-day itinerary to São Paulo, Minas Gerais and Trancoso from £1,706 per person. The price includes internal flights, transfers and accommodation (see below) but not international flights.

Where to stay

Hotel Unique, São Paulo

One of the city’s trendiest hotels, designed in the shape of a ship’s hull. Located in the Jardins area, with views over Ibirapuera park. Rooms from £301 per night b&b (0055 11 3055 4700; hotelunique.com.br).

Ouro Minas Palace Hotel, Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais

Clean, comfortable hotel in the heart of Belo Horizonte. An ideal base from which to visit Inhotim. Rooms from £60 per night b&b (0055 31 3429 4001; ourominas.com.br/en).

Uxua Casa Hotel & Spa, Trancoso, Bahia

Sought-after hotel in one of Brazil's chicest seaside resorts. Casas from £303 per night b&b (0055 73 3668 2277; uxua.com).

Where to see art

Emma Thomas Gallery (0055 11 3063 2193; emmathomas.com.br), Jardins, São Paulo.

32nd Bienal de São Paulo (bienal.org.br) – September 10-December 11 2016, various venues, São Paulo.

Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo (0055 11 3324 1000; pinacoteca.org.br), São Paulo.

Macusp – Museum of Contemporary Art from São Paulo University (0055 11 5573.9932; mac.usp.br), Ibirapuera, São Paulo.

Inhotim (0055 31 3571 9700; inhotim.org.br), Brumadinho, Minas Gerais

Zika virus

The FCO recommends that travellers to Brazil follow the advice of the National Travel Health Network and Centre (travelhealthpro.org.uk), particularly women who are pregnant or who plan to become pregnant.

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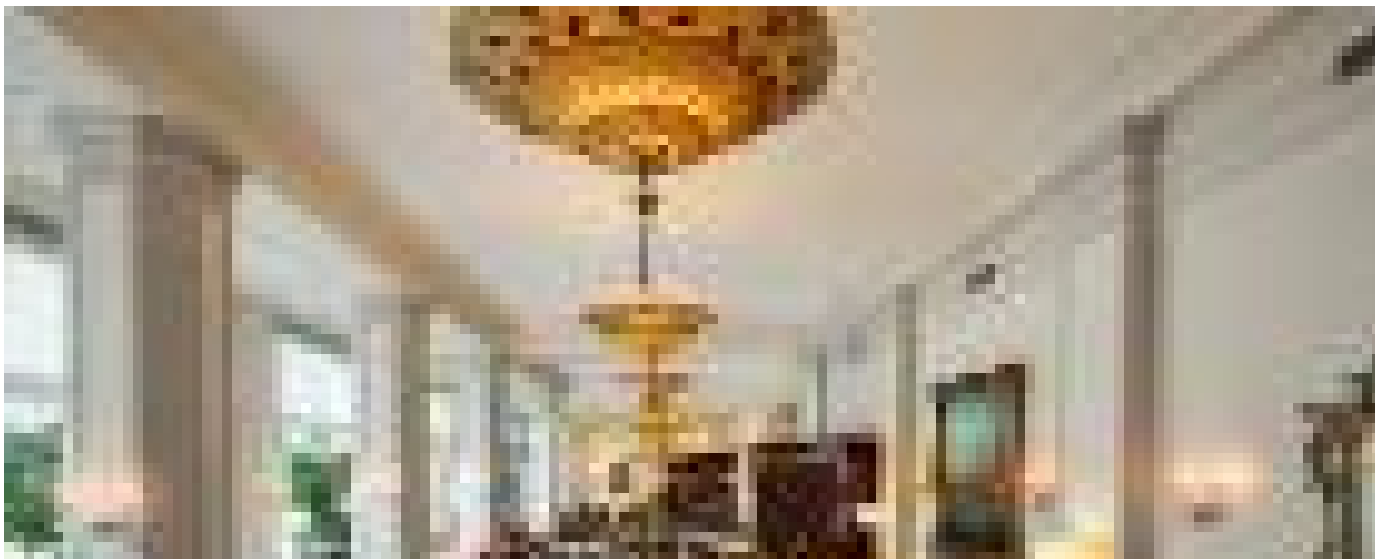
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