

Odoteres Ricardo de Ozias

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24 Grafton Street, London



Odoteres Ricardo de Ozias, *A Aparição*, 2002, Oil on hardwood board
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David Zwirner is pleased to present an exhibition of paintings by Brazilian artist Odoteres Ricardo de Ozias (1940–2011) that will open this autumn at the gallery's location in London. The works on view, all completed between 1996 and 2004, were formerly in the collection of the Museu Internacional de Arte Naïf (MIAN), Rio de Janeiro, which was founded by Lucien Finkelstein, the preeminent collector of Ozias's work. This is the first time that Ozias's work will be shown in the United Kingdom and is among the first solo presentations of his art outside of Brazil.

A self-taught, imaginative artist, Ozias was born and raised in a rural area of the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil. He began painting in earnest when he was in his mid-forties, embracing the practice as an escape from his daily administrative work for the federal railroad company. He later became an evangelical minister and began to concentrate on painting Brazilian and biblical narratives. Many of his paintings portray rural life and Afro-Brazilian religious rituals in the country landscape where he spent his childhood, while another body of work depicts the famous communal parades of Rio de Janeiro's annual Carnival. Featuring Ozias's signature style—simplified yet dynamic compositions characterised by bold colours and repeated patterns—the paintings in this exhibition capture the artist's interest in spiritual themes of piety and rapture alongside scenes of revelrous celebration, together illustrating Ozias's distinctive interpretation of the traditions of his native Brazil.

Ozias frequently painted on panels of Eucatex—a high-density wood-fibre sheeting used for manufacturing and furniture—or Formica, which he took from discard piles in his office. Using a variety of tools, including toothbrushes, toothpicks, his fingers, and a rough brush made by chewing the end of a wooden stick, the artist applied oil or acrylic paint to render compositions in bold, flat colours, often accentuated with black and white. Resourceful and fast-working, he soon committed to painting as much as possible, later recalling: "As I didn't know how to paint, I worked on many pictures at the same time, trying not to forget all ideas that came to mind."¹

Several paintings on view depict rituals of Afro-Brazilian religious traditions, including some surrealist scenes that suggest dreamlike visions and manifestations of spiritual lore. A Black Brazilian, Ozias was especially attuned to the practices of Candomblé—a faith developed by enslaved Africans and their descendents, combining elements of several West African religions and influences from Catholicism. It recognizes a pantheon of deities known as orixás, many associated with Catholic saints. Compositions such as *A aparição (The apparition)* (2002) feature devotional themes of rapture and exaltation, while scenes like *A cerimônia (The ceremony)* (2000) depict Candomblé rituals of offering, sacrifice, and prayer. Another group of paintings illustrate the famous Carnival parades in Rio de Janeiro, held annually before Lent, incorporating the dancing lines of costumed samba schools, the iconic figures of baianas in headwraps and full skirts, and the throngs of spectators that gather to watch and celebrate. In these works, groups of costumed revellers crowd the street, their simplified, wide-eyed faces forming a homogenous grid-like throng that fills the picture and conveys the teeming festivity of the iconic Brazilian holiday. A third body of work comprises scenes of farm labour and rural recreation, situated in the agricultural landscape of the artist's childhood.

Most paintings are executed in a landscape format with a visible horizon line, while some pictures forgo any perspectival markers entirely, with figures appearing suspended against a field of colour. In many agricultural and spiritual scenes, Ozias enlivens the surrounding atmosphere with layered, impressionist brushwork. Clearly defined forms emerge from backgrounds that are punctuated by dry strokes, often used by Ozias to depict light emanating from the sun, moon, or stars, as well as to provide depth to bodies of water and cloudy skies. Semi-abstract passages of repeated geometric patterns and subtly varied shades contrast with the opaque jewel tones that define the figures. With a signature formal vocabulary, Ozias emphasises the two-dimensionality of his paintings through colour and flattened perspective. Imbued with the joy of regional traditions and the mysticism of religious rituals, the works on view coalesce into a vibrant portrait of Ozias's Brazil and reveal the artist's extraordinary vision of his country's customs and culture.

Lucien Finkelstein (1931–2008) had been collecting Ozias's work for at least a decade by the time he founded MIAN in 1995 (the museum permanently closed in 2016). A successful jeweller, Finkelstein was born in France and emigrated to Brazil in 1948, soon developing a passion for naïve art, a term initially used to describe the work of French self-taught modernist artist Henri Rousseau (1844–1910). Amassing approximately six thousand works by an international group of artists, Finkelstein came to hold one of the most important independent collections of naïve art in the world and was the preeminent collector of Ozias's work.

On the occasion of the exhibition, new scholarship has been commissioned, with essays forthcoming by British art historian Simon Grant and Brazilian curator Moacir dos Anjos that will be published exclusively on davidzwirner.com.

¹ Quoted in Lucien Finkelstein, *Os Futuros Grandes da Arte Naïf: Ricardo de Ozias, A arte naïf do pastor evangélico*. Exh. cat. (Rio de Janeiro: Museu Internacional de Arte Naïf do Brasil, 1996), p. 9.

Odoteres Ricardo de Ozias (1940–2011) was born and raised in Eugenópolis, Brazil, a small town in Minas Gerais, a rural state known for its colonial towns with baroque churches. Ozias taught himself to read and write while working in his family's fields, eventually finding work as an assistant to a local baker. In 1960 his father moved to Rio de Janeiro to work in civil construction, soon relocating his wife and his several children. Upon settling in the coastal metropolis, twenty-year-old Ozias worked as a mason before finding work with Rede Ferroviária Federal, the federal railway network.

There, he first worked as a shunter and subsequently as a station agent, before transitioning to an administrative role when health problems affected his ability to do manual labour. Working in an office for the first time, Ozias encountered such quotidian novelties as stationery and office supplies. He began drawing caricatures of his colleagues, gaining attention for his artwork and covering his office walls with sketches. He was invited by an engineer to illustrate a book on Amazon wood species, *Madeiras da Amazônia: Identificação de 100 Espécies*, published in 1981 by the railroad company. These illustrations comprised repeated cubes showing variations in colour, texture, and wood grain, and Ozias experimented with new techniques, including adding powder and sand to his pigments and fixing drawings with wax crayons to achieve the accurate shades. He began pursuing artwork adamantly during his free time, using found materials and handmade brushes to create colourful paintings inspired by the lands and traditions of his country.

Ozias later became an evangelical minister in the Pentecostal Assembly of God. Some of his evangelical community rejected his artistic practice: with a religion marked by a rigorous traditionalism and fundamentalism, some followers of the Assembly of God church subscribed to aniconism, opposing the visual depiction of any living beings or religious figures. Ozias's subject matter focused on the rituals of Afro-Brazilian religious traditions, illustrating religious deities and devoted worshipers in the country landscape where he spent his childhood.

By the mid-1980s, Ozias lived in the Gramacho neighbourhood of Duque de Caxias, a city in the Rio de Janeiro metropolitan area, with his wife and their six children (including three from his wife's previous marriage). He was introduced to scholar Elizabeth Travassos, who worked for the Fundação Nacional de Artes (Funarte) and organised Ozias's first solo exhibition in Rio de Janeiro, at the Sala do Artista Popular – Centro Nacional de Folclore e Cultura Popular. Several solo and group exhibitions throughout Brazil followed, and Ozias maintained his art practice with support from his employer. In 1993 his work was exhibited at the Brazilian Embassy in Paris, and in 1994 his work was shown in Frankfurt, Germany, as part of an exhibition of Brazilian naïve artists. Ozias's artistic activities and news of his exhibitions featured frequently in issues of *Expresso Refer*, a monthly periodical published by the railroad company. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, his works were acquired by Brazilian museums, including Museu de Arte Primitiva de Assis "José Nazareno Mimessi," São Paulo, and the Museu do Folclore in Rio de Janeiro, as well as by collectors in Brazil, the United States, and Europe. In 1994, the legislative assembly of Brazil awarded Ozias the title of Cidadão do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. Ozias continued to make and exhibit art throughout Brazil into the early 2000s until suffering a stroke in 2010. He was hospitalised in Rio de Janeiro before returning to his hometown of Eugenópolis, according to his wishes, where he died a year later.

Recognition of Ozias's work has increased over recent years, particularly in Brazil. In 2019, he was a featured artist in the group exhibition *Arte Naïf – Nenhum museu a menos* at the Escola de Artes Visuais do Parque Lage in Rio de Janeiro, and in February 2023, his work was included in the exhibition *Arte nas Estações*, which was presented in simultaneous thematic exhibitions across three locations in the towns

of Ouro Preto, Congonhas, and Conselheiro Lafaiete, all in the state of Minas Gerais, where Ozias spent his childhood. Both exhibitions were organised by Ulisses Carrilho, curator at the Escola de Artes Visuais do Parque Lage, and comprised works previously in the collection of MIAN. It was of particular importance to Carrilho to bring Ozias's work back to the artist's birthplace: the curator focused the narrative of each exhibition around Ozias, highlighting the significance of the artist's roots in the rural area outside of Brazil's urban centres.

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