



A Spine Immersed in Water: Ernesto Neto's 'One Day We Were All Fish and The Earth's Belly'

Ernesto Neto

By Dave Mann

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Ernesto Neto's new Johannesburg exhibition announces itself before it is seen. Currently on show at the Goodman gallery, the Brazilian artist's work makes use of the deeply aromatic effects of spices – cloves, paprika, sea salt – which fill both the gallery space itself and the entrance to the space. In this way, Neto's meditations on nature, human origins, and spirituality take place in the minds of the audience, before the work is even viewed.

'One Day We Were All Fish and The Earth's Belly' marks Neto's first exhibition on the continent and serves as an anchor of sorts for the Goodman's latest project, 'Between Land and Sea', which showcases the works of artists exploring "constructions of social space and the natural world, freedom of movement, the real and the imagined spaces between continents and the limits and ethics of representation." Other artists in the project include Alfredo Jaar, El Anatsui, and Kapwani Kiwanga.



Upon entering the space, you are guided towards the artist's main work, *Um dia todos fomos peixes (One Day We Were all Fish)*, a large installation piece that's the source of the aforementioned aromas. The piece was initially commissioned by Barcelona's Blueproject Foundation and takes the abstract form of a large fish made up of blue netting knitted together. For Neto, the work is a convergence of various points of inquiry and fascination. Much of the artist's work over the years has found inspiration in the ocean and in landscapes, always returning to our relationship and history with nature as human beings. Over the years, his work has always concerned itself with the natural world around us, and using those elements of nature to push past a placid form of seeing in order to seek out universal commonalities and relationships. In this way, Neto's work separates itself from any kind of Naturalism or landscape art which reduces the natural environment to something

only to be gazed upon or admired from a distance.

While *Um dia todos fomos peixes* makes use of objects and materials that may be more familiar to the human world than to the natural environment – spices, fabrics, netting – these materials attempt to bridge the gap between those two worlds, to evoke the flow of the ocean, the smell of the coast, and our personal connections to water through these seemingly commonplace objects. It prompts viewers to fully immerse themselves in the shape, the texture, and the scents of the artwork in order to better connect to a collective history – the lines of which Neto says all run back to the ocean. This specific

work was inspired by a ceremony the artist attended in Brazil, led by spiritual leader Álvaro Tukano. As Neto explains in the exhibition's accompanying statement: "He said in the beginning the Tukanos were fish, just a spine immersed in water." Neto later created *Um dia todos fomos peixes* as a "metaphor and a desire to encounter our own ancestry and absolute connection to nature, the nature that we are."

This central installation is not the only work on show that deals with this theme. A few smaller works, somewhat overshadowed by the installation, make up *The Earth's Belly*. Dotted throughout the gallery, on the floors, the walls, and creeping around corners like animated skirting boards, these pieces can be seen as the more literal examples of the artist's thematic points such as the organic exchange between cultures as hinted at by Neto's use of African and Brazilian textiles. Again, you'll find Neto's meditations on humans and nature, land and sea, with some of the works being situated on the ground, some mounted on the walls, and a few of them reaching down from the walls to rest on the ground.



Perhaps it's the exhibition's location – a quiet, almost clinical gallery space in the dry, hot city of Johannesburg, flanked by upmarket restaurants and busy main roads – but I felt no deep, human connection to anything other than the work itself. And that's okay. Neto's work, for me, is the mark of a brilliant bit of immersive art. It encourages a kind of interaction and engagement from the viewer that goes beyond the act of viewing. It fosters an element of play and invites you to touch, see, smell, and respond. Interactivity aside, ancestry is fragmented and complex but Neto's work, rather than attempting to unify its viewers to a fixed ancestry, serves as an entry point to these meditations on the relationship between the human body and natural landscapes.


In this way, you do find yourself achieving a link – either through memory or through dreams – to some far-off place outside of the confines of the gallery. This is one of the reasons we view art, to become momentarily transported or inspired, and to use that journey to make sense of the environment around you. To this day, I've yet to see a storm as ferocious and mystifying as the one put forward in Moses Tladi's *Highveld Summer Storm*, and I'm still searching for forests as green and inviting as the ones dreamed up in Andrew Sutherland's paintings. Now Neto's work may just be my new favourite idea of the sea.

Um dia todos fomos peixes allows you, even in the middle of another Joburg heatwave, to sit inside its network of fabrics and dangling bundles of spices and feel as if you are somewhere else entirely. To take your mind to a place – be it somewhere at the beach, or up in the mountains – where you are completely at ease, and free to wander.

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