

Without a doubt, there are those who think that things have never been so good, that we are on the right path, that “never before, in the history of this country...,” or even this planet, has there been so much wealth and happiness, and that, with the recent mistakes corrected and recent problems solved, we will finally be headed toward peace, progress, order and abundance. Yet the truth is that most of us like to remember the old times, when children could play on the street, traffic was almost unheard of, and life was more full of poetry and ingenuity (or, at least today, that is how we perceive it). In general, things lasted longer: in May, presents from Christmas still looked new, it was normal to use the same clothes for years, no one switched their car every season, and it was possible to learn the names of the players of one’s favorite soccer team, as almost no player changed from one year to the next. The same tendency to idealize the past, which makes us recall poetry and ingenuity where perhaps there was none, also suggests that this different “rhythm” not only had to do with scarcity of means: it was, first and foremost, evidence of a different relationship with the world, a relationship that would not be incorrect to define as more ethical. Now we are all connected, (anti-) social networks watch us from all sides, even while stuck in traffic we can check to make sure that the children are not on the street, and the logic of “disposable” predominates: everything has to be “in real time,” interest in any issue depends entirely on its newness, and everything becomes obsolete in ten minutes. Every day, television transmits various soccer games live, and all of us know the names of the same players, sometimes without even knowing what team they play for today (obviously, before tomorrow’s game, everything may have changed).

Considering that since the beginning of her career, Leda Catunda has exposed the idiosyncrasies and developments of the popular imagination, her recent decision to return to the world of sport is perfectly coherent and understandable, almost logical. The logos, images, colors, symbols and numbers: the entire visual repertoire of sport appears in these works, each element competing with the others, trying to rise above those that surround it, until each centimeter of the available space is filled. Those who have followed the artist’s work for some time know that this need to entirely occupy the canvas constitutes one of the characteristic traits of her iconography, marked, one could say, by a profound *horror vacui*: nothing can remain empty in her creations, and white, the chromatic equivalent of empty, is forbidden. It may be interesting to recall that in one of her first series of paintings, collectively titled *Vedações* [Seals], elements of the print of the materials used were highlighted, covering almost the entire rest of the area of the painting with a uniform layer of paint: that is, by needing blankness to highlight some elements, the artist forewent painting these elements, leaving them to float in a “real” blankness, but created a “false” blankness over a pre-existing background, almost affirming that it was exactly this background that permits the empty space to be sustained. On the other hand, it is clear that the manner in which the elements appear to sprout from each other in her recent paintings is perfectly coherent with the habit, increasingly generalized in the sport environment, of covering every centimeter of t-shirts, carts, baseball caps, rackets and any other available surface with the logos of sponsors. Further, it is coherent with the way in which every day the world becomes more full, more inundated with images, stimuli, news and things. This message should not be considered casual: the fact that the works by Leda Catunda have been constructed since the beginning through overlapping, either through layers of paint or physically from materials themselves, denotes a profound syntony with her time. One could say that since the beginning of the 1980s, when the artist began production, her paintings have been pointing toward where the world is heading, in a manner analogous to what Richard Hamilton did in his celebrated collage “*Just what is it that makes today’s homes so different, so appealing?*” (1956), considered the ground zero of pop art. As with the majority of authentic pop art, which oscillates between genuine fascination and acidic critique of the society that it portrays, and of which it is conscious of being a child of, the collage of Hamilton constitutes, in this sense, an important reference for the work of Leda Catunda, which maintains an analogous ambivalence in regard to her subject, and is almost always constructed as a collage, even when the act of placing one element on the other is not performed physically, but with the brush.

It may be valuable to deepen the reflection about the ambivalent, even enigmatic, character of Leda Catunda’s work, specifically of the sports series. The artist herself admits to not have a univocal position in regard to the progressive contamination and miscegenation of sport iconography, which rejects the purist ideal of modernity, which we could exemplify with the image of a number (preferably written on an elementary silkscreen, sans serif) over a monochrome background, in favor of a carnivalesque mixture in which the numbers coexist with very diverse and strident sponsorship, writing and colors. In the scope of the more ample discussion about the criteria and development of the taste, which is said to have permeated the painting of Leda Catunda since her beginnings, it appears just to attribute a metonymic value to the sports series: by focusing on this world, the artist invites the viewer to look toward a general transformation in regard to society as a whole. Yet according to the artist, she does not participate, instead limiting herself to observe the process, to “watch the circus catch fire”, so to speak, meanwhile appropriating some extreme cases, without revealing if she considers them gaudy aberrations or sublime moments. It is from this ontologically idiosyncratic repertoire that the fascination of these works emerges, from the almost palpable contradiction between colored iconography, which, if not beautiful in the conventional sense, is often attractive and even cozy, and iconographic repertoire, and even physical, to which she reaches for the construction of her imaginary. Towels, sheets, jackets, t-shirts, printed

materials, even mattresses have flowed together, during the last three decades, in her paintings, always worked in a manner that leaves the characteristics of the material very clear, and principally the expense and subject of the prints and decorations that cover them. Practically all of these prints and decorations come from the popular realm, made from Walt Disney characters, crudely printed photographs of stereotyped landscapes, stylized animals in unusual or even grotesque poses, to compose a small compendium which, according to a perhaps elitist view, could be considered cheap iconography, aesthetically poor and without any content. In spite of this interpretation, it is known that the work of Leda Catunda enjoys undeniable public success, perhaps because she paints in a manner essentially faithful to current tastes, or because of the physical pleasure that her soft surfaces suggest, or perhaps more simply because they are beautiful in the same way that the above-cited collage by Richard Hamilton is beautiful.

Complementing these considerations, it is important to clarify, if it is still not sufficiently clear, that beauty, at least as we understand this term in the conventional sense, is not among the characteristics that the artist seeks in her painting. The undeniable appeal of her work is much more tactile and organic than aesthetic: curiously, when dealing with paintings, the viewer feels the desire, almost the need in some cases, to touch and feel the surfaces, proving with their hand that which the eye suggests, yet does not dare guarantee, that being the softness of these works. In fact, in her doctoral thesis, the artist invokes the expression "poetry of softness" in order to analyze the work produced beginning in the 1990s; that is, paintings that even when mounted on the wall, sprawled onto the floor, or looming in space, in recurring shapes that alluded to, as explained by the titles, "stomachs," "tongues," "insects," etc. Without a doubt, it was one of the artist's most fertile and well-known creative periods, and while it is not possible here to expand in an analysis of its characteristics, it is important to remember this production because now, after almost 20 years, the sports series is pointing to a new path, less inclined toward tridimensionality. Naturally, it is not a radical change, considering that various works are still sold, although in a more limited manner, and anyway, in the work and thinking of Leda Catunda things always mix and start, and the adherence to tridimensionality was never of a militant or exclusive character. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize this characteristic of the current series, because the prevalence of the bidimensional may be a result of the "force" of the chosen theme, as if its iconological value was sufficient to justify the predominance of the visual, without the need to interrupt the space in order to create an impact and transmit a message. This force of the visibility of sport is in part derived from the immediate empathy that it creates in the public, at least in the partnership which recognizes the symbols and colors that it loves or hates, but also, or principally, of the metonymic character mentioned above, which makes these works become extremely clarifying from a certain tendency in the visibility, and even, if we want, in contemporary society, in which everything appears to be for sale: court sentences, each square meter of the helmet of the motorcycle champion Valentino Rossi, the votes in the senate, the dialogues of the eight o'clock soap opera.

The most inexplicable in this process is that, in an unrestrainable yearning for identification and emulation, even those who do not gain anything from this (after all, strictly speaking, he pays) feel protected if they can dress in a t-shirt with the same colors of his team, the same number of his idol, and (why not?) the same sponsors. It is in the visceral desire of the fan to appropriate each and every symbol, which reveals the soul of emulation, the superficiality of the passion, as well as, in some cases, its profoundly enigmatic character, as when a simple number, removed from the back of the idol, reappears, completely emptied of significance and function, on the back of an anonymous youth, silent and perplexed, on a bus heading toward the urban periphery. Or, to cite a real case in the news during the time this text was being developed, on the back of a thief who attacked bakeries and supermarkets always dressed in a Cristiano Ronaldo jersey, which facilitated his recognition and ultimately his capture. Life imitates art, and reveals to us without a trace of doubt that Leda Catunda, in her unique and distinctive style, presents us with a small theater of the absurd, a faithful reproduction, however on the verge of grotesque, of the abuses and craziness of the society of the spectacle.