

António Ole.

***Luanda, Los Angeles, Lisboa.* Museu Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon (September 17, 2016—January 9, 2017).**

António Ole has been recognized as one of the leading figures of contemporary Angolan art, and his exhibition at the Gulbenkian Museum (September to January 2017) confirmed the range and depth of his work. Ole¹ is known for his installations, and for the variety of means that he uses to convey his awareness and visualization of social issues of poverty and displacement, of the hidden pages of Angola's history and of the architecture of the *musseques* on the outskirts of Luanda. He delivers his message with video and photography, with painting and collage, and combines them with objects that he collects in the street. In a documentary that shows the artist at work, we see him with a plastic bag, walking through half-standing buildings, collecting discarded items.² He shapes these objects that tell stories of slavery and forced labor, of the colonial war in Angola, independence, and his love for Luanda and the sea. Like other African artists, Ole is dedicated to uncovering what has been hidden in the past and to making it material.

At the entrance to the Modern Collection at the Gulbenkian Museum in Lisbon, an enormous poster in orange and white announced the exhibition. It read, *António Ole: Luanda, Los Angeles, Lisboa*. Ole attended primary school in the 1950s in a village between Figueira de Foz and Coimbra and on his return to Angola as a young artist he did his first photographs in black and white of locals. In 1977, shortly after the coup, he went to Los Angeles to study film at the University of California. He says that with film he felt he had found his path, and that film was a complete art for its immediacy. Yet he has said that he holds no loyalty to any medium, a claim that was apparent in the Gulbenkian exhibition. What linked the extensive number of objects was his ability to bring everything together and to consistently use assemblage to transport the viewer to a place of violence, where individual rights were denied and where escape was impossible.

The links between one work and another were most evident in two powerful pieces that were central to the exhibition: the series, *Hidden Pages Stolen Bodies*

(1996-2001) and *Margins of the Borderland* (*Margem da Zona Limite*) (1995). Together, they anchored the show in their concentration on the theme of displacement and slavery. *Hidden Page Stolen Bodies* consists of eight seven-foot panels based on a photograph of a faceless forced laborer, found by the artist in an archive in Benguela, south of Luanda. In the Lisbon archives he found slave record books with precise indications of the physical characteristics of young slaves: their teeth, the color of their skin, their physical appearance. In each panel there appear found objects from daily life: an empty and rusted tin plate, a cup, yellowing papers with lists of names, all rendered against a background made of natural pigments from the earth. Taken as a whole, the visual assault is a staggering reminder of colonial power and authority over the dehumanized 'stolen body' condemned to live without human rights or recourse to justice. Placed at the entrance of the vast space of the Modern Collection, the series sets the tone for other works that followed.

In *Margem da Zona Limite*, Ole made a boat of scrap metal, split in two halves. In one part he piled old police archives from the colonial period; the other half is filled with bricks. On each half a stuffed crow stands; a video records calm water, and the two broken parts recall a painful past and the future of old objects given new life. In all of Ole's work, what has been rejected from the past is reformed into something that can reconstitute buried and suppressed memory.

The vast space of the Gulbenkian Modern Collection has typically housed a history of the modern art of Portugal. It is a difficult space to use, with its overhead lighting and occasional wall divisions. Ole filled the space handsomely with a sequence that led the viewer from 'stolen lives' to an enclosure dedicated to video, to his murals, including the *Township Wall* (2004), to give a sense of being in a village inhabited by the traces of ghosts. Because of the scale of his work and its architectural qualities, Ole and the curators managed the space to create the way that one might experience that of a lived environment. The *Township Wall* is a re-imagination of parts of the city of Luanda in which Ole cobbled together wooden doors, corrugated iron, windows and glass, to make what appears to be a neighborhood on the edge of town, a *musseque* where one makes do with what's found in order to carve out a life. The effect is a vivid portrayal of the city that Ole loves, its red and pale blue doors, its ladders to nowhere, its textured and cut tin, its battered and abused surfaces. I'm a *caluanda* he has said, a true Luandan, influenced by the ethnologies of Angola, but not beholden to them. The ritual context long admired by ethnologists is no longer the basis for art making, and while

Ole may refer to African objects, the modernity of his work resides in his focus on assembling old objects into themes of war, destruction and Angola's painful past. Ole's work emerges from a social conscience, embodied in everyday reality.

I should mention that adjacent to Ole's exhibition, the Gulbenkian had mounted *Portugal Flagrante/Portugal Exposed*, an examination of Portuguese art since 1900, with supporting documents in art journals from the Gulbenkian library used as explanatory material. Exhibition histories and textual explanations by the curators made this fully researched history a fitting analog to Ole's show, in particular the section that documented the military coup of April 25, 1974 known as the Carnation Revolution, and its effects on Portugal's African colonies. To walk back and forth between these two exhibitions, in which each spoke to the other, was a visual and historical education.

Ole's work has much to say about our own time and place. He explores questions of identity that are relevant to the fragmented and divided time in which we live. He has traveled across Europe where he has exhibited and done research, and has always returned to Luanda. He imagines himself and others with a symbolic freedom that extends to questions of race and belonging, and since his earliest experiments as an artist, he has built fierce and endlessly engaging objects.

Curated by Isabel Carlos and Rita Fabiana. Exhibition Catalogue: *António Ole: Luanda, Los Angeles, Lisboa*. Lisbon: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 2016, with essays by Isabel Carlos, Rita Fabiana, Nadine Siegert, and Teresa Gouveia. The catalogue includes a biography, bibliography and a list of works in the exhibition.

NOTES

1. António Ole is his artistic name, changed from António Oliveira which he thought was too similar to António de Oliveira Salazar. With a few deleted letters, Ole is how he identifies himself.

2. A trailer of the film *António Ole*, directed by Rui Simões is on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/71245090>. An interview with Ole produced by the Gulbenkian appears in *Traveling with António Ole* in which the exhibition is discussed on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wS67mIG4IVE>.

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