

Sicardi Gallery

Ana Maria Tavares  
Euryale Amazonica



Ana Maria Tavares. *Victorias Regias for Cocó, Purus & Negras Rivers (Euryale Amazonica series)*, 2014. Installation detail, variable dimensions. Photo: João Tavares Pini.

1506 W Alabama St  
Houston, TX 77006  
Tel. 713 529 1313  
sicardigallery.com

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## The Great Water Lily of America A Science Fiction (On Ornaments and Yrupes)

In 1854, American botanist John Fisk Allen penned a history of the discovery and cultivation of the *Victoria regia* to that date. Allen writes, “The Victoria Regia is found distributed north and south of the Amazon, in the bays and still waters of the river and its tributaries, in many of the lakes or ponds of Tropical America, the Berbice River, and various localities of that section of the continent. A plant so remarkable, for the rapidity of its growth, the leaves often expanding eight inches in diameter daily; instances under my own observation having occurred wherein they have increased, between sunrise and sunset, half an inch hourly...”<sup>1</sup> When European botanists encountered the plant in Brazil in the first years of the 19th century, they were wild about its color and size (up to nine feet in diameter) and its “luxuriant flower, consisting of many hundred petals.”<sup>2</sup>

The European encounter with the plant sparked a gardening rivalry, among British and US-based botanists eager to transplant the mysterious floating flower to their corners of the world. The action of discovery quickly became the action of possession and replication.<sup>3</sup> Upon its successful cultivation in 1849 by Joseph Paxton (hired by the Duke of Devonshire), the lily was presented to Queen Victoria and given the name *Victoria regia* in her honor. A famous drawing shows Paxton’s daughter, Alice, standing on one of the massive leaves. To name is also to claim as one’s own. To stand on is surely a symbol of conquest.

The architecture of the plant—its ribbed undersurface and the support structure of the leaves—subsequently inspired Paxton’s design of the Crystal Palace for the 1851 Great Exhibition. And here the Amazonian plant becomes

intertwined with the most iconic moment of the Industrial Revolution at the height of British Empire.

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In 1991, the Museum of Modern Art in New York held its first exhibition of work by a landscape architect. Featuring drawings, plans, and models by the renowned Roberto Burle Marx (1909–1994, Brazil) the exhibition, *Roberto Burle Marx: The Unnatural Art of the Garden*, contextualized Burle Marx’s work within a grand trajectory of Modernism.

Born in Brazil to German emigrants, Burle Marx moved to Germany during the Weimar Republic to study painting. Upon visiting the Botanical Garden in Berlin, he re-discovered the plants of his homeland, seeing them for the first time in a different context. Often dismissed at home as being too scrubby, these native plants suddenly appealed to Burle Marx as specific forms. Landscape design, he would later write, “was merely the method I found to organize and compose my drawing and painting, using less conventional materials.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Burle Marx’s unique *oeuvre* combined the field of botany and architecture with the aesthetic principles of the 20th century artistic avant-garde. He later collaborated with Lucio Costa, Le Corbusier, and Oscar Niemeyer in 1936 for the Ministry of Health and Education in Rio de Janeiro—the so-called “Ministry of Man.” Later, Burle Marx was invited to design several interior gardens for buildings in Brasília. And, in 1969, Burle Marx designed the iconic mosaic sidewalks that border Copacabana beach in Rio de Janeiro.

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As early as 1910, architect, theorist, and writer Adolf Loos (1870–1933, Czech Republic, Austria) argued that the evolution of culture was dependent upon the removal of ornamenta-

tion from objects of everyday use. Gingerbread should go without frosting, and leather shoes should be unscalped. Associating ornamentation with what he considered to be the underdevelopment of non-European cultures, his argument was as much about the decorative arts as it was a sociopolitical critique. The use of ornamentation, he wrote, was a sign of spiritual and moral weakness, as well as a problem for the flow of capitalist progress: “The relationship between the earnings of a woodcarver and a turner, the criminally low wages paid to the embroidress and the lacemaker are well known. The ornamentor has to work twenty hours to achieve the income earned by a modern worker in eight....”<sup>5</sup> This radically functional aesthetic would come to define modern architecture and design, eventually leading back to Brazil and to Lucio Costa’s design of the country’s capital city, Brasília.

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*Euryale Amazonica* is the result of a collaborative project developed by Ana Maria Tavares in Fortaleza, Brazil, with designer Celina Hissa and a group of seven artisans from the Ceará region. This work, which brings ornament to the center of the discourse surrounding modernism, is part of *Natura in-Vitro: Interrogating Modernity*—a larger research project that examines the cross-pollination of tropical nature and modern architecture at the core of Brazil’s ethos of modernity. The artisans who worked on the project are: Benedita Áurea de Sales, Elenir Fideles da Silva, Francisca Aldenice de Souza Felix, Helena Fideles da Silva, Júlia Fideles da Silva, Tatiana Santos da Silva, Verônica Vieira dos Santos.<sup>6</sup>

Naming is important.

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The Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851, directly influenced as it was by the *Euryale amazonica*

flower (or, if you prefer, the *Victoria regia*) was the first international display of decorative art. After the exhibition, the British “implemented a national policy of arts education intended to improve the application of art to manufacture.”<sup>7</sup> The flower, taken to Europe, leads us to the Crystal Palace, leads us to decorative arts education, leads us to Loos, leads us to Modernism, leads us back to Brazil.

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The Guarani people of Argentina called the flower *Yrupe*. In Brazil, it is called *Aguapé-assú*, *Abatiyú*, *Agoapé*, *Aguapé*, *Hoja de sol*, *Iguapé*, *Maíz de agua*, *Maruru*... The list goes on.

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In a 1991 interview, Burle Marx made a case for the significance of garden design within the history of art: “Unlike any other art form, a garden is designed for the future, and for future generations,” he said.<sup>8</sup>

To look forward and to imagine the world is a gesture not only of modernist progressivism, but more, it is a gesture of science fiction. Meaning: to imagine the future is to look in new ways, to find new possibilities.

With her first exhibition at Sicardi Gallery, Ana Maria Tavares brings major concerns of the 20th century in dialogue profoundly and simply. The exquisitely handmade objects, created in collaboration with artisans from Brazil—remember, women’s textile work has been dismissed for centuries as merely ornamental or (strangely enough) solely functional and therefore unworthy of study or exhibition—is placed within pristine Plexiglas cubes. The tinted glass and metal legs of the cubes reference a scientific mode of looking, a way of exploring the world around us. To pair these flowers, handmade by artisans in Brazil, with the vitrine is to make a statement

about the legacies that inform modern modes of viewing. It is also to reclaim the flower that transformed 19th century Europe, inspiring significant cultural change in the practices of Modernism, and to say, “look again.”

Laura A. L. Wellen, PhD

#### Notes

Special thanks to Fabiola López-Durán for her generous insights throughout the writing of this essay.

1. John Fisk Allen, *Victoria regia, or the great water lily of America, with a brief account of its discovery and introduction into cultivation, with illustrations by William Sharp, from specimens grown at Salem, Massachusetts, USA*. Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1854: np, preface.
2. Ibid.
3. For more on the *Victoria regia*’s remarkable history, see Tatiana Holway, *The Flower of Empire: An Amazonian Water Lily, the Quest to Make it Bloom, and the World it Created*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
4. Larry Rohter, “A New Look at the Multitalented Man Who Made Tropical Landscaping an Art,” *The New York Times*, January 21, 2009: C1.
5. Adolf Loos, “Ornament and Crime” (1929). Reproduced in *The Theory of Decorative Art: An Anthology of European and American Writings, 1750–1940*. Ed. Isabelle Frank, with translations by David Britt. New Haven: Yale University Press and The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, 2000: 291.
6. Artist statement, October 2014. From email correspondence with author, in collaboration with Fabiola López-Durán.
7. Isabelle Frank, ed. *The Theory of Decorative Art: An Anthology of European and American Writings, 1750–1940*: 5–6 (introduction).
8. June 6, 1994, by James Brooks.

## Ana Maria Tavares

b. 1958, Brazil

Looking to the legacies of modernist architecture in Brazil, Ana Maria Tavares creates futuristic non-places, and meditations on institutions, systems, and information. Her intricate installations are fantastically urban in their visual vocabulary, suggesting parallels with not only Oscar Niemeyer, but also with Giovanni Battista Piranesi—the 18th-century Italian artist who created fictitious architectural landscapes—and with the labyrinthine worlds of M. C. Escher.

Known internationally for conceptual work and installations that probe the workings and dysfunctions of Modernism, Tavares completed her B.A. in fine arts at the Armando Alvares Penteado Foundation, São Paulo. She earned an M.F.A. from the Art Institute of Chicago and a Ph.D. from the University of São Paulo. In 2002, she received a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship. Tavares is Professor of Art at the University of São Paulo, and has held various visiting positions, including artist-lecturer at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam and Ida Ely Rubin Artist-in-Residence at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She was the Lynette S. Autrey Visiting Scholar at Rice University in 2013-2014.

Tavares’s work has been shown in numerous international biennials, including the São Paulo Biennial, Havana Biennial, Istanbul Biennial, and Singapore Biennial. She has had solo exhibitions at Frist Center for the Visual Arts, Nashville, TN, USA; Paço das Artes, São Paulo, Brazil; Centro Cultural Banco do Nordeste, Fortaleza, Brazil; Kröller-Müller Museum, Arnhem, Holland; Instituto Tomie Ohtake, São Paulo, Brazil; Centro Cultural São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil; Museu Brasileiro da Escultura (MuBE), São Paulo, Brazil; Museu de Arte da Pampulha, Belo Horizonte,

Brazil; and Paço Imperial, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, among others. Her work is in numerous international collections, including Casa da Cultura de Ribeirão Preto, Ribeirão Preto, SP, Brazil; FRAC Haute Normandie, Fonds Régional d’Art Contemporain, France; Fundação ARCO, Madrid, Spain; Kröller-Müller Museum KMM, Arnhem, Holland; Museu de Arte Contemporânea de São Paulo (MAC), São Paulo, Brazil; Museu de Arte da Pampulha, Belo Horizonte, Brazil; Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM SP), São Paulo, Brazil; Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil; and Stichting Sonsbeek Internationaal, Arnhem, Holland, among others. The artist lives and works in São Paulo.