Art exhibition in the USA

"Oh, I love Brazilian women" - is that really a compliment?

An exhibition is opening in New York that deals with the stereotype of the Brazilian woman. The curator Luiza Testa explains what it means when bodies are reduced to sensuality and sex.

An interview by Marian Blasberg
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"Brazil" is the name of the work by the artist Santarosa Barreto  Photo: Eduardo Ortega / Acervo do Centro de Pesquisa do MASP
Why do foreign men tend to think of sensuality and sex when they think of Brazilian women? What do these stereotypes mean? Where are you from? And why do they lead to violence? These are some of the questions to which an exhibition in New York’s renowned Apexart Gallery will be devoted from January 14th. Curator Luiza Testa, who lives in São Paulo, has compiled 12 works by 12 Brazilian artists. In the interview, she gets to the bottom of the clichés.

Luiza Testa, 34, studied art theory in New York and São Paulo. She works as a translator and curator. After exhibiting the works of local
artists in her own small gallery in São Paulo, the show at Apexart in New York is her first international exhibition.

**SPIEGEL:** Ms. Testa, please describe us: What image do foreign men have of Brazilian women?

**Testa:** Let's put it this way: When you think of us Brazilians, you don't necessarily think of intelligent, creative or happy women. The associations that the term “Brazilian woman” arouses in the minds of foreign men are different: sensuality, for example, eroticism, sexuality. Our bodies are perceived as something that is available to these men. There is a video that sums up these fantasies pretty well. Was Sometime early eighties Arnold Schwarzenegger times to the carnival in Rio de Janeiro. A camera team accompanied him at the time, and in some scenes he is seen surrounded by Brazilian women. The ecstasy in which Schwarzenegger finds himself, the way he scans the girls with his eyes, as if their bodies were just objects that he is about to help himself - it never got out of my head.

"For her, the miniskirt was the symbol of the vulgar Brazilian woman."

**SPIEGEL:** Have you experienced these clichés yourself?

**Testa:** Oh, some. I've traveled a lot in my life; I've lived abroad, which is a privilege not many Brazilian women have. When I was 16 or 17, I was on a student exchange in the US. I lived with a family with exchange sisters who wore the same mini-skirts as I did, but it was not them who were called to the headmistress’ office one day because of these apparently offensive skirts, it was me. I still remember the sentence with which the headmistress told me that they would have different customs: This is not Brazil !, she said. This is not Brazil. I was insecure then, but now I understand that the miniskirt was a sign for her. He was the symbol of the vulgar Brazilian woman.
SPIEGEL: You recently said how deep this image is in people's minds, and you realized again when researching the exhibition when many friends and acquaintances told you about their own experiences. What did they describe to you?

Testa: everyday scenes. Job-hunting moments when suddenly suggestive comments are made. Moments on the road. For example, a friend told me how she once got into a conversation with a stranger in Paris. When she mentioned that she was from Brazil, he put his hand on her chest with an incredible naturalness. I can recommend you to take a look at the Instagram page @brasileirasnaosecalam (»Brazilians are not silent«). Thousands of women share their experiences abroad, and one is worse than the other. What I’m getting at: This is not about individual experiences. The violence these stereotypes lead to is a collective experience.

"Four out of five Brazilians in London are victims of domestic violence"

SPIEGEL: How did the artists take this up in your exhibition?

Testa: These clichés are very often hidden behind compliments: Brazilian women often hear this: »You look good, you are sexy«. Or: »Oh, I love Brazilian women!« This sentence - as glowing pink neon lettering on a wall - is one of the central works that we are showing. But is it really a compliment? Or is there an invisible intention behind it? Ownership? Another example: the one in LondonLiving artist Juliana Manara was shocked to learn that four out of five Brazilian women in the city are victims of domestic violence. She picked up on these statistics when she photographed dozens of naked women's bodies, put the pictures together in a collage and wrote the words: »Our bodies, ourselves« over
them. No matter what we do, no matter how we act - nothing justifies the violence.

SPIEGEL: The artist Camila D'Anunziata takes up the same topic, showing a pair of red high heels connected by an iron chain. "There is no place like home" is the ironic title of her work.

Testa: A house, a home, is not necessarily a safe place for women, not only abroad, but also in Brazil. It is not only since the beginning of the pandemic that we have seen an increase in crime within one's own four walls, rape and the number of femicides. What I ask myself: Why are we creating these stereotypes? What are the intentions behind it?

SPIEGEL: When did this image of the Brazilian woman come into the world?

Testa: Probably at the same moment that Brazil was discovered. What did the Portuguese do? They decimated the indigenous population and raped their wives, who were described in the reports of the colonial rulers as exotic, hypersexualized animals. Later, when millions of slaves came to Brazil from Africa, this was repeated. The truth is: Our racial mix, our people, who are considered so nicely mixed all
over the world, in which people supposedly live together so harmoniously regardless of their skin color, is the result of rape. There is no other term for it.

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SPIEGEL: How can it be that this image persists so persistently?

Testa: Things are deep. We have centuries behind us when our story was essentially told by powerful, white, straight men who had an interest in objectifying women’s bodies. The sociologist Patricia Hill Collins believes the point is to control social groups by imposing a certain social identity on them. In the case of Brazil, there is something else as well. In the 1960s and 1970s, tourism agencies advertised with girls in skimpy bikinis. In addition to the beaches, they advertised the carnival, which is actually a confrontation with our roots, but in the pictures that went around the world, one mainly saw women bathed in sweat and barely veiled. Brazil has sold like this. With women who are available. Who want to be conquered. Which one can submit to like the colonizers at that time. Seen in this way, one shouldn't be surprised if men like Arnold Schwarzenegger take this at face value.

SPIEGEL: In 2019, the current President Jair Bolsonaro publicly stated that male tourists were welcome, even if they were only looking for sex.

Testa: We keep coming back to it. It’s like a trauma that no one can escape from. And only now, only very gradually, are new, emancipatory narratives opposed to it.
SPIEGEL: Is there a difference between Brazilian and foreign men?

Testa: Good question. I would say: in relation to Brazilian men, women suffer from the fact that they are women, which means something in a macho society like ours. In relation to foreign men there is another layer: they suffer because they are Brazilian women.