Enthralling, From Brazil

A timely exhibition speaks of a resistance to racism.

SÃO PAULO, BRAZIL — It’s worth going a distance for greatness. And great is what the exhibition “Histórias Afro-Atlânticas” (“Afro-Atlantic Histories”) is. With 450 works by more than 200 artists spread over two museums, it’s a hemispheric treasure chest, a redrafting of known narratives, and piece for piece one of the most enthralling shows I’ve seen in years, with one visual detonation after another.

Its timing, for better or worse, is apt. In national elections scheduled for late this month, a right-wing populist candidate, Jair Bolsonaro, has a strong chance of becoming Brazil’s next president. He’s been vocal in his hostility to the nation’s Afro-Brazilians, calling current immigrants from Haiti, Africa and the Middle East “the scum of humanity.” The exhibition, which focuses on the dynamic African-influenced New World cultures that emerged from three centuries of European slavery, takes precisely the opposite view.

The story of the westward African diaspora has been told many times, but never, in my experience, with this breadth or geographic balance. The European trade in black bodies hit South America early in the 16th century, and lingered late. By the time slavery was officially abolished in Brazil in 1888 — the show coincides with the 130th anniversary of that event — the country had absorbed well over 40 percent of some 11 million displaced Africans. Today it is home to the world’s largest black populace.

Continued on page 23

“Afro-Atlantic Histories,” at the São Paulo Museum of Art and the Tomie Ohtake Institute, includes, clockwise from left, a portrait of the envoy Don Miguel de Castro, José Alves de Olima’s slave ship “Eshu’s Barge” and Dalton Paula’s “Zeferina.”
**Enthralling History, From Brazil**

Continued from Page 1C

Holland Cotter | Art Review

**Afro-Atlantic Histories**

*Through Sunday at the Sao Paulo Museum of Art, mapo.org.br. Also through Sunday at the Tomie Ohtake Institute in Sao Paulo.

ecstatic Afro Brazil Museum.)

And in a fantastical piece by José Aires de Oliveira, at the Tomie Ohtake Institute, the gods have their chance. Figures of deities in a Shower of Divinity — green, sly, and alert — line the deck of a miniature slave ship. They are the ship's guiding crew. Are they leading back to Africa or on a rescue mission to the Americas? The show encourages creative readings. Its organizer, Adriana Pedrosa, the curator of MASP, leading a tour that includes Lilia Schneider, research assistant, Maria Maia Neto, and Tomás Toño — note that the Portuguese word "historias" has a more complete meaning than English "history." "Historias" can be both fact or fiction, reality or fantasy, and in these stories, often confused, sometimes purposefully.

The first Europeans known to have painted the South American landscape were the 17th-century Dutchman Frans Post. His "Landscape With a River in the Caño Tamoio" is a mid-summer woodcut, black to the coconut palm, and you're in Claude Lorrain's Italy. And a Peocock Kingdom effect is enhanced by the inclusion of what looks to be a group of mixed-race negroes, black and Americanized — having a ball, no hint that, at the time Post confided this 17th-century slaves were working 20-hour days in plantations and indigenous peoples were being exterminated.

A century later, with the slave trade generating fortunes, tourist adventuring grew more extravagant. In a Subcontinent French cotton taez from MASP's collection, the New World is a fever dream of excesses, with tiger-streaked black slaves picking their way through organic profusion of fruit and flowers. Exoticizing the unknown was a way of controlling it, making it ripe for taming. "Negro Jazz," a near-abstract painting of a dark-skinned furnzian Indian by another Dutchman, perhaps a European, does not point to a textbook case of ethnographic sex panic. Everything — a spear, a tree, an elephant trunk, the man's head — is a phallic.

EdKlein's 1814 picture is in a section of the "Afro-Atlantic Histories" at Sao Paulo Museum of Art, above left, Sidney Amaral's "Who Shall Speak on Our Behalf?" 2016. Above right, the unsigned "Woman From Bahia.

In the context of this visually taught moment in Brazil, it needs no political statement. Many images in the show do. And some are laid to rest. One picture is of João da Mata Nascimento who, in 1718, led a profoundly black rebellion demanding the end of slavery and Portuguese rule. The other is of a woman known only as Zelotina, who, brought to Brazil from Angola, established a runaway slave community in Bahia, and plotted as armed rising against the white population.

For Afro-Brasilians both are martyrs to the slave trade, though official history looks barely mention them. They represent a long tradition of resistance to the racism that is hard-wired into the social and political structure of that country, as is the role of the Afro-Atlantic world. And the exhibition is fundamentally about resistance, and black sovereignty. It's about change, not chains. They live different but overlapping perspectives, we see that dynamic, images of everyday Afro-Atlantic life, urban and rural, by artists like Caetano Boulanger in Haiti, Geraldo Vaz in South Africa and Benny Andrews in the United States. At the Tomie Ohtake Institute, we see it in work by the Sao Paulo artist Sidney Amaral (1913-2007), who promoted black power awareness.

And his resources could be severely curtailed, depending on how the Oct. 28 presidential election goes. The very presence of "Afro-Atlantic Histories" at a time when all art is at some level immigrant culture — is anathema to Mr. Bolsonaro and his supporters. And at least one work in the show, by the New York City-based African-American artist Isaiah Thomas, could confirm his deepest fears. Titled "A Place to Call Home," it's a wall-size black silhouette map of the Western Hemisphere, with the South American continent replaced by Africa.