

Tiny and Small Paintings from Brazil

The debut exhibition at Dragon, Crab & Turtle
A new gallery at 2814 Locust Street, St. Louis, Missouri

By Elizabeth Bernhardt

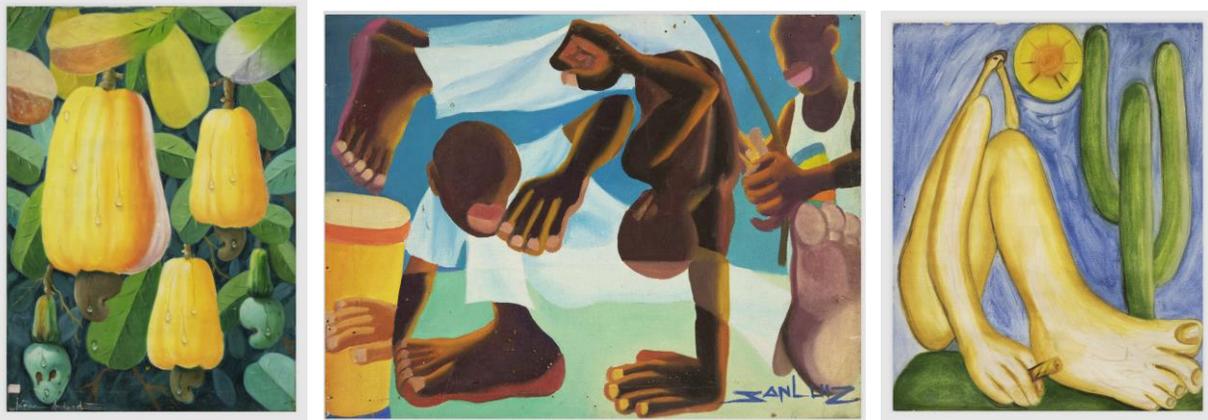
“Tiny and Small Paintings from Brazil” opened in midtown St. Louis sometime in September 2020—but nobody is exactly sure when due to the confusion caused by the COVID pandemic. The show probably ran through November 2020. The paintings themselves have a known origin as they were selected from an enormous group of canvases filling a small shop crammed with works made by different artists. The colorful and dusty *loja* was discovered in Salvador, Bahia, during a visit to Brazil in the summer of 2019.

The trip was part of a month-long *extravagância* based on three different places: the enormous coastal city of Rio de Janeiro, the medium-sized predominantly Afro-Brazilian city of Salvador, and the inland capital of the nation known for its spectacular brutalism: Brasilia. Living a sense of contemporary *tropicalia* and discovering Brazilian life through its art and architecture were some of the main goals of the trip closely followed by explorations of foods, music, street life, reliving Katherine’s AFS experience in Salvador, and visiting a friend of Daphne’s. In Rio we stayed in a fancy hotel with a spectacular view of *Pan d’Azucar* off in the brilliant distance filled with curves and flowers and framed by sunsets. Beyond museums and galleries, we toured the Rocinha *favela*, entering the steep neighborhood on motorcycles. Bahia, on the other hand, was a trip made to commemorate and critique Katherine’s original stay in the early 90s when she left Clayton (declaring, “I’m sick of the Loop”) and went to live with a family and go to Brazilian *escola secundária*. Instead of high school though she hung out in a painter’s shop with an artist named Biggy. Living in Salvador however ended up lasting only a few weeks so part of the experience of our return trip was meant to recreate her moment of running away—something that we were able to relive thanks to a decision to flee a shady hotel. Katherine and all of us packed our bags and reenacted the flight down a treacherous staircase and out the door without telling anyone or saying anything to the man at the front desk. It felt weird, exciting, and cathartic; it gave a sense of closure and comic relief to an awkward 90s exchange program.

One day we went looking for the art studio where Katherine had spent free time years ago. She had taken a photo of the place in the 90s that she had with her. We found the place and even the same guy in the picture, Biggy, who just happened to be painting there in the same studio thirty years later. We also came across a place that sold paintings, all kinds of original paintings, and hundreds of paintings. Katherine found tens of them that she liked and bought. These tiny and small paintings represent many elements of Brazil and its fascinating culture—and these are the works featured in this exciting debut exhibition at her new St. Louis gallery.

A few of the larger small paintings look like copies of the work of a master of Brazilian modernism, Tarsila do Amaral (1886-1973), including a version of her dripping rainforest fruits,

here signed by Isaac Andrad. The Amaral-like disproportioned *capoeira* fight with drums and instruments is signed by SAN LUIZ; and a white cannibal sitting on grass with an extremely long arm and leg next to a cactus and under the sun is a near exact copy of Amaral's 1928 *Abaporu*, which had originally been made as a birthday present for Amaral's husband.



Several of the tiny postcard-sized paintings are portraits. Here below we see a tiny portrait of a young Black man before a sunset signed by NB and a tiny portrait of an old Black man smoking a pipe signed by Sirloa. We also have a woman dressed in the traditional Salvador costume: a *baiana de acarajé*. Her layered costume is a blend of early modern European baroque elements including trimmings with white lace; the inside layers recall Candomblé, a syncretic religion formed out of Yoruba and Roman Catholicism. The look also includes lots of gold jewelry and a textile headdress that appears more Islamic and African; the work is signed by WLexil. Another more stylized portrait features a Black woman sitting next to a gigantic slice of watermelon and another huge whole fruit and signed by icaro BA. Another small painting features two fancily dressed women, both *baiana de acarajé*, as they balance jugs on their heads. Finally we see a naked Black heterosexual couple--both with long eyelashes and wearing silver jewelry—who are having sex.

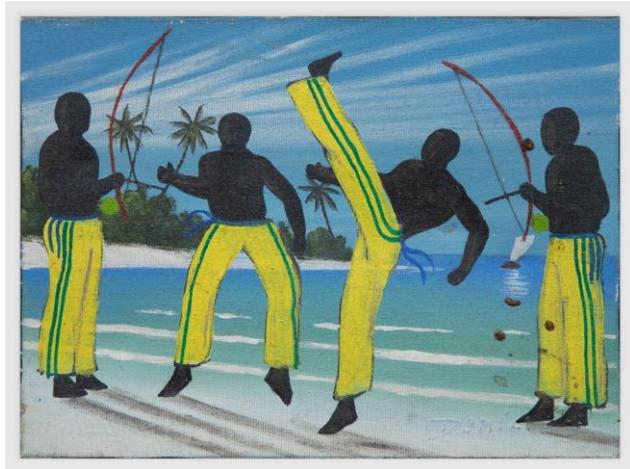
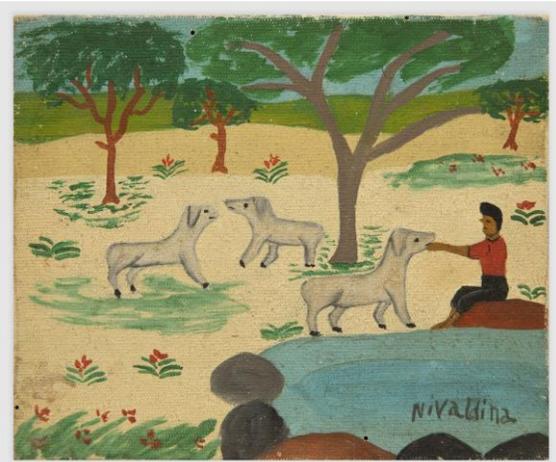




One of the star portraits, somewhat larger than many of the other tiny ones, is of an *Yemanjá* (also *Iemanjá* or *Yemoja*). She is a patron spirit of waters, the ocean, rivers, etc., and associated with the moon and moonlight. She is motherly and protective of her children as well as women's life experiences including fertility, childbirth, conception, parenting, child safety, love, and healing. She is Queen of the ocean, patron saint of fishermen and survivors of shipwrecks. She can easily rise above water and hover magically under the moonlight. This *Yemanjá* wears a sophisticated yellow dress and yellow headdress with yellow ribbons and a white smock. Her entire costume is outlined in gold glitter. Rocks beside her feature a waterfall, various symbols, and bird spirits while flying fish jump out of the water near her feet. She is celebrated in Bahia on 2 February, a day dedicated to *Nossa Senhora dos Navegantes*. People leave her offerings, often explicitly female offerings, like perfume, jewelry, combs, lipstick, mirrors, etc., at her shrine at Rio Vermelho. Fishermen then take the offerings out to sea for her. She is celebrated again on 8 December, also called the *Festa da Conceição da Praia*. Soonafter, on New Year's Eve, Brazilians go to the beach dressed in white, watch fireworks, and throw white flowers and other offerings into the ocean for her.



The next couple of paintings feature people in landscapes: one includes a boy sitting on a rock next to three animals, four trees, a pond, flowers, grass and five other rocks. It is signed Nivaldina—whom we were told is a famous painter. The second tiny portrait features four men practicing *capoeira* on the beach in their Brazilian-colored matching long pants and is signed by Dania. A tiny painting of the Brazilian flag with the words ORDEM E PROGRESSO has been left unsigned.



Another group of small paintings features flora and fauna of Brazil. We have a 3/4 profile portrait of a parrot in Brazilian flag colors signed by GUI/A.BA. We have an incredible tiny still life masterpiece showcasing tropical fruits on a warm pinkish glowing background. We have one with a monkey eating a watermelon and watching a toucan in flight with a tree and flowers in the background; and we have a lily pad with trees, grasses and a snake signed by GUI/A. An unusually cute painting features an anthropomorphic drink in a striped can with a matching striped straw next to an anthropomorphic coconut with open arms looking admiringly at the drink; this unsigned piece is titled “Best Friends.”



Two Salvadorian paintings close out the show: one is a stylized “touristic” looking painting featuring the cityscape and the incredible blue church of Pelhourinho: *Igreja da Ordem Terceira de Nossa Senhora do Rosário dos Pretos* (The Church of the Third Order of Our Lady of the Rosary of the Black People). In the foreground Black people are dancing in the streets in front of this church built by Blacks between 1600 and 1700. The dancing scene perhaps featuring *bossa nova* is reminiscent of 1995 when Michael Jackson had Salvador closed down in order to record his video “They Don’t Care About Us” (directed by Spike Lee). The final painting features beautiful traditional Bahian women carrying fruits in baskets on their heads in front of this same famous blue church. When we visited this church we participated in an African/Bahian mass packed with the faithful as well as with plenty of music and dance. We had popcorn thrown on us as we received a popcorn blessing outside the main door. The experience was refreshing and awesome—and we hope you will view this entire show in this same exciting new colorful light.

