

A Shadow Dreams of Light

Light and shadow, image and word, memory, dream, and experience intertwine to create Eliane Velozo's *Sonho Branco*. The artifact that you hold in your hands is one possible array of its strands. We friends and companions of the artist who have watched their weaving have puzzled and marveled with her as they took various forms: photographs, dreams, journeys, journals, and finally this meeting place, this book.

The distances the artist travels, with hard work and sacrifice, and the distances she bridges, seemingly without effort in dreams or through communications networks, arrive at a common destination in these words and images. This is a work about cotton and the labor of raising cotton, or a work about slavery and freedom, or about family and ancestors, or about spirituality—or it is all of these and none of them and may fall apart if we try to unravel its separate strands and follow them back to their origins. For *Sonho Branco* tells a story of origins, where the trace of lived time recedes beyond memory. The artist remembers her family raising cotton. In the family house, where cotton was piled high in a corner of a room that served as a school, the letters of the alphabet tangled in tufts of cotton. The brilliant white of cotton and the deep black of its seeds inform her photographs. Words and images are seeds in luminous time. The artist's longing for the ineffable, ancestral contact into the past and into the future, into the present-as-future-immediate, ultimately holds the fabric of her work together—and nothing really falls apart under our probing urge to understand. Step close and the fabric reveals its individual strands; step back and the pattern of the whole emerges.

The pattern emerges, but exceeds our vision. There is a complexity in *Sonho Branco* that will not yield its secret. It is the complexity of lived experience, folded over and over in generational memory, and it is the complexity of human society, branching out and looping back in dense root systems: consciousness distributed over time and space. What should astound us more: the dream where the artist hears the question—"Who was Catherine Kitten?"—that initiates her journey to the red dirt cotton fields of Texas or the fiber that connects the dream to reality, the extended nervous system of the Internet where she finds a trace of a person named Catherine Kitten? Whether we adopt the terms of spirituality or of cognitive science in our speculations, or consider the artist's pilgrimages a manifestation of *l'hasard objectif*—in the theory of surrealist André Breton, a reconciliation of natural and human forces in the guise of chance—the intuitive leaps that have guided Eliane across three continents should give us pause. Pause to marvel and move on: the power of *Sonho Branco* lies not in the tale of its origins, but in its seamless splice of metaphor and manifestation. This work that testifies to the continuity of human experience grows out of that continuity. With a lifetime's skill, the artist forms her experience of that continuity into a fabric that veils and protects but also reveals the hidden interconnectedness of human experience.

Rather than dwelling on the narrative of the artist's creative process, let us consider the stories told by the images and words. We see common themes from three different continents: agricultural landscapes, laborers, hands of laborers, farm and textile

machinery, stem, leaf, tendril, flower and boll of cotton, and the soil that nurtures cotton. Many histories, many courses of time are caught within these images. Most immediately, they document an agricultural commodity over recent time—the experiential time of the photographer. But other times bound up in the near present convey their stories, too. There are family stories that belong to what the artist calls “blood time,” memories related by one’s immediate family. Eliane’s family farmed cotton in Pernambuco. The Kitten family settled in Texas and farmed cotton. Beyond the stories that families hand down lies historical time, constructed through documents but also recovered from narratives handed down through entire cultures. The Ewe cotton farmers in Togo have their family stories to tell, but also know the lore of ancestors who were violently abducted and sold, many of them to cotton plantations in the New World, where still other stories were handed down through generations. Cultural time operates within a deeper layer that the artist calls “ancestral time,” a time that converges on Africa as the land of human origin. Dream time and the time of creative imagination, both of which open landscapes of potential action, mediate the different concepts of existential time.

Through the images and words of *Sonho Branco*, a complex web of interconnected times emerges. Awareness of the web of times forms the inner vision of the work. The artist, who suffers from macular degeneration, relates an increase in her awareness to the loss of her eyesight: “I don’t need many things in my life—when I discovered this, I could see the planet better.” An earlier work, *Travessão*, records a walk along the rail line from Ouro Preto to Belo Horizonte, where no trains run any longer, where “we see what we are not seeing,” things missing because of economic change. In the photographs and installations of *Tempos de Tempo* she asks how people experience time, posing photography as a kind of suspension of time and portal on our awareness of time.

As we move from the narratives of the images and their different times to the suspended time of each photograph, we discover an artist who possesses a full range of skills honed over a lifetime, *plenos poderes*. She commands her skills and her remaining eyesight to realize her inner vision. In the play of light and shadow in these images, it is not hard to imagine the artist’s perception of the world, her very real struggle to see, as a force that forms the images. The extreme closeup shots, the counterpoint of blur and focus, the flood of light and shadow and the sudden emergence of detail can be read as indicators of the act of seeing, where the whole image and the illusion of continuity are not simply given but must be hard won. Neither eyesight nor insight arrives unbroken. Art adumbrates but cannot construct the continuity of the world. Like the artist, we struggle to form these images, these shadows fixed on paper, to project them back into the light of their origins. Perhaps we are the dreams that connect them to the web of light and time.

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