

HOW A BRAZILIAN ARTIST FOUND INSPIRATION IN WEST TEXAS PREHISTORY AND DEEP ECOLOGY

Solange Pessoa's new exhibition at Ballroom Marfa, 'Longilonge,' is rooted in archaeology and human psychology.

By Michael Agresta



A view of several pieces in "Longilonge," Solange Pessoa's new exhibit at Ballroom Marfa.

The more our bustling cities along the Texas Gulf Coast and the I-35 corridor grow and sprawl, the more the quiet, open spaces of far West Texas—from the soaring vistas of Big Bend to the pupil-dilating starscapes at McDonald Observatory—seem to offer necessary antidotes to urban life in the Lone Star State. This quest for a more profound relationship to the earth, the cosmos, deep history, and oneself that occasions so many cross-Texas road trips is also the life-long obsession of Brazilian sculptor Solange Pessoa. Her show of new and recent work, "Longilonge," now open at Ballroom Marfa, grapples with distinctly West Texas themes.

Pessoa is well known in her home country for

installations that sag and bloom with the heft of organic materials, including sinuous weavings of human hair that fill entire rooms, monumental sculptures bursting with dirt and seeds, and wall hangings adorned with the feathers of chickens that the artist raised and consumed at her farm in rural Minas Gerais. Outside of Brazil, Pessoa's star is rising fast and relatively late in her career, though she's been making art since her student days. The 58-year-old had her first solo gallery show in the U.S. in 2017, in Los Angeles, followed quickly by a New York show the following year. "Longilonge," whose title stems from a Brazilian poem and evokes a horizontal landscape that goes on and on, marks her first solo show at a U.S. museum.

Tiny Marfa might seem like an inauspicious spot for an international coming-out party. But for Pessoa, who hails from a similarly huge, open-skied, extraction-economy-dominated Brazilian state, the boot fits. She's an oddball, DIY landscape-whisperer who sees dinosaurs and saber-toothed cats where others see empty ranch land. "I can't look at a horizon in Minas Gerais or in Texas without seeing the megafauna walking around," she says.

Pessoa, who taught sculpture for 22 years at a leading Brazilian art school in Belo Horizonte, is also a keen student of twentieth-century U.S. art, including the Marfa-bound works of Donald Judd. "So much American art is defined by the relationship to the vast expanse, to the horizon, and you feel that very much here," Pessoa says of Marfa. At the same time, she refers to the West Texas art hub jokingly as the "land of men," noting that to be a female sculptor in such a place is in itself a radical act.

With "Longilonge," Pessoa presents powerful, mysterious sculptures that trace a solemn connection between womb and tomb. To the viewer's right upon entering Ballroom Marfa is the massive "Untitled (Version Minas-Texas)," a 2019 re-creation of a work she first exhibited in Brazil in 1994. Much like its earlier incarnation, it's made up of many dozen bags of jute (a material similar to burlap, used to transport coffee beans), rising from floor to ceiling in the center of the room in a towering, gridlike arrangement. Each sack is filled with earth, plants, stones, seeds, pigments, or bundles of paper featuring anthropological texts and poetry.

Many of the natural materials in this work were gathered locally, selected by the artist as she toured the region earlier this year and met with local experts on plants and archaeology. Pessoa also brought materials from her home region of Brazil. These local species and nonnative interlopers are spread out on the ground, around the vertically arranged bags in a sort of field of detritus—mesquite seed pods, feather grass, desert willow, cinnamon,

coyote squash, geodes, the bones of pigs and cows. Visitors are invited to gently handle the elements, or even take a poem home with them. At the opening, some celebrants painted their faces with the pigments.

"Untitled (Version Minas-Texas)" inspires sadness or mourning at all this dead and broken-open material, coupled with a reminder of the regenerative power of the earth and of the still-potent seeds. A similar mixed sentiment follows viewers outside to Ballroom Marfa's sculpture garden, where Pessoa has arranged a series of untitled soapstone sculptures in the shape of bowls or hollowed rocks, some with snake or spiral-like shapes within. Pessoa carved these with the help of Afro Brazilian artisans in a quilombo (a community descended from escaped slaves) near her farm in Minas Gerais. She leverages the quilombolas' traditional hewn carving technique, where the marks of the pick are visible, to create shapes suggesting skulls, fossils, and Bronze Age pictographs. These sculptures are intended to collect rainwater and perhaps eventually teem with life of insects and small plants. Several of these sculptures may remind Texas viewers of the ancient mortar rocks visible near the cave paintings of West Texas's Seminole Canyon, used for grinding food and pigment.

Ballroom's South and Center Gallery features more Pessoa sculptures, this time made of feathers, bronze, hair, and clay, that might suggest to viewers wings, sexual organs, undersea organisms, and indigenous Amazonian capes and headdresses. Pessoa herself is mum about the figurative meaning of her works. "This work is just an unfolding, just a searching," she says. "It comes from something darker—the unknown. The comprehension comes from you, the public, seeing the work and telling me."

This statement is particularly apt concerning the last, innermost sanctum of her Marfa show: a series of brown-red paintings on canvas using homemade iron oxide paint—the same material used, if not in all ancient rock and cave paintings, at least in those

hardy enough to survive until the present day. The subjects of Pessoa's paintings here are animals, plants, and fossils, depicted in simple representational sketches. Many are identifiable as armadillo, salamander, or starfish, while others are harder to define—which may be pointing to either extinct or undiscovered species. Pessoa says she thinks of the room as a sort of tomb. It feels prescient given our contemporary age of extinctions, but it also is more broadly suggestive of the earth beneath our feet, rich in unknown fossils and the lost, still-breathing history of our human ancestors and the megafauna that preceded them.

Those of us who live in the eastern half of the state are unlikely to keep in mind such hidden realities

as we speed or crawl across the face of the earth in the course of busy lives. A visit to far West Texas often offers a precious opportunity to reconcile ourselves with the very elements that cities are built up to ignore. Ballroom Marfa has an interesting recent record of exhibitions that welcome such intrusions from deep history and the natural world, from last year's "Hyperobjects" to this spring's overlooked "Candelilla, Coatlicue, and the Breathing Machine." "Longilonge"—on view until April 2020—is an important addition. Stop in to rediscover your place in the ever-more paved and perforated Texas landscape and to follow an artist actively working, in her words, toward "mining the gold of time."



Pessoa's sculptures, pictured in Ballroom Marfa's outdoor space.