


# Chapter 34

## Adriana Varejão: faces of the feminine

 <https://doi.org/10.56238/devopinterscie-034>

### Marcia Costa

(Bolsista CAPES)

Doctoral student of the Letters Course at the State University of the Midwest (UNICENTRO), email: marcia4ever@hotmail.com

### Níncia Cecília Ribas Borges Teixeira

Ph.D. in Letters, Postdoctoral in Literary Science. Associate Professor of the Master of Letters at the State University of the Midwest (UNICENTRO)

Midwest State University, Guarapuava-PR  
email: ninciaborgesteixeira@yahoo.com.br

### ABSTRACT

The research analyzes the works *Mãe d'Água* and *Nascimento de Ondina*, by the Brazilian artist Adriana

Varejão, seeking to interpret how the myth of the mermaid is symbolized in these productions and to understand how they relate to the representation of women. To do so, we will use as theoretical support Julio Pinto (1995) about symbols, Leandro Souza concerning image and the theory of Peircean semiotics (2005) to develop the analyses, as well as Jean Chevalier (2015) in the descriptions of the elements symbolic.

**Keywords:** Symbols, art, Adriana Varejao.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

### In the beginning was the symbol...

Symbols have been present in our lives since the dawn of humanity. Drawings left in caves, gestures, and writings, are all symbols and mean something. From a wave of the hand to the letters of the alphabet, they are forms of expression, they convey something to someone. Therefore, the perception of the symbol depends on the personal repertoire that each one carries with him, and this acts consciously or unconsciously, seeking references to what we have lived or that were told to us by our ancestors.

Júlio Pinto (1995) asserts that the symbol is the sign that will be interpreted as a sign of its object, where its object is already known and represents a law, a habit, a regularity, a convention, and controls its meaning. There are social symbols such as rites, currency in progress in the market, road signs, country flag, and clothing, these are examples, they are what we can call symbolic culture, insofar as it is responsible for behavioral patterns.

Symbols are at the center of imagination, revealing secrets of the unconscious, and opening us up to the unknown. Our day-to-day is full of them, our dreams too. For Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant (2015, p. XIV) "The symbol has precisely this exceptional property of synthesizing, in a sensitive expression, all the influences of the unconscious and of the conscience, as well as of the instinctive and spiritual forces". He not only represents but realizes and annuls at the same time. Introduces a multi-

dimensional order. And every object has its symbolic value, be it natural or abstract, being a real thing or the result of a thought or a dream. It is in the passage from the known to the unknown that the symbolic value is affirmed, which is not acquired forever and is different for everyone, each one sees its meaning according to their cultural, social, and historical knowledge, it is based on themes of variations endless.

## **2 ART, IMAGES, AND SYMBOLS**

The image is composed of several points that attract the eye, lines, plan, color, texture, and movement and can be used in different supports: paintings, computer screens, photographs, and then it is built. The elements used are a portrait of how an artist can organize and interpret his ideas, representing a certain reality whose main focus is to be transmitted to the viewer.

When looking at something that surrounds us, mental images are formed that lead to discoveries and solutions, it is necessary to consider the spectator's repertoire so that he understands a certain image, keeping its meaning at the same time as shared knowledge. Therefore, the images are not made at random, they have an objective and a meaning that is built before it and are taken up again to express ideas, feelings, and experiences. The spectator is the one who gives life to this image, who makes it mean, who causes it to flow, thus sharing knowledge and social relationships, since through them we record and express our way of being and living. That is, an idea or a concept manifests itself through symbols, thus establishing conventional relationships that become common and remake themselves over time.

An image can be seen in several ways, a simple handshake causes a reaction and makes it possible to understand how the person we are greeting is doing, whether he is good, bad, happy, or sad. This is a record of images that surround us, performed concepts. Visual elements hold contextual connections. "The object and the support in communion with the intelligence of man-made possible, from its use, a supernatural relationship, to the point of this relationship elevating the object in question to a symbolic character and duly stylized in the drawings" (SOUZA, 2009, p. 432).

Thus, the reading of images is relevant for understanding the world, and in this, the role and strength of the Visual Arts, after all, we live as never before an intense and profuse flow of transit and visual diversity. We have identified in artistic productions throughout history, the symbolic force of images, not only in the first sense of 'meaning' replacement but of creation from and on the symbolic plane (SOUZA, 2009, p. 435).

A sign presents and represents an object, based on a relationship of similarity. From a certain culture, new ways of making art are created, therefore, various types of representation, give the sign different meanings. From this, contemporary art gains new purposes, being autonomous, it uses this displacement of the sign to make use of materials and ideas different from the traditional ones. Breaking these rules also allows for the mixing of materials or techniques, creating a hybridized art, as we will see in Adriana Varejão's dishes, which mix painting and sculpture. Other techniques such as computer graphics, photography, and architecture, also mix, talking to each other and creating new artistic concepts,

transforming what is known as art into something that goes beyond the ordinary and awakens new readings and new constructions of meanings for contemporary art.

A symbol must be recognized and reproduced to be effective. To identify the dove with a branch as the symbol of peace, the public needs to be educated about it. A symbol does not exist only in language, it goes beyond and must be part of a group or idea. "Not only in painting but at any level of visual expression, the problem will always be the same. The pictorial or visual is determined by the observed visual information, by the interpretation and perception of data and visual cues [...]" (DONDIS, 2002, p.133). The visual input is affected by the subject's motivation and mood, the mental influence and state of mind lead us to see what we want.

Many objects are used to identify and honor the memory of a being or a group, often becoming universal, but almost always more discreetly. And most visual materials produced are intended to preserve, record or identify. These visual modes are of great value for teaching, whether values or traditions and identifying people and places that might not be known if it weren't for such objects.

An image indeed needs to be a symbol to represent an object, referring to it. Therefore, the look is related to the past, having a connection with reason and emotions, and may or may not be accepted. Thus, it is necessary to perceive the image to interpret it. When this image represents it fulfills its role exercising its function as a symbol and being a symbol it is a metaphor, satisfying and surprising, and then a new organization may emerge seeking references in the old ones, and the more significant it is, the more associations are possible. It is necessary to read the image as one reads a poem going against aesthetics and being transformed by this encounter. "A large part of our experience and many of our competencies are called upon to intervene and can be seen transformed by the encounter. The aesthetic attitude is restless, inquisitive, experimenting - it is less attitude than action: creation and recreation" (GOODMAN, 2006, p. 256).

Any art that works with symbols takes us to the interpretation of the real after going through several transitions, having a transcendent condition, transforming itself into an idea without freedom and measure and should not be interpreted with the form that is immediately shown, since it is necessary to take into account all possibilities of meaning and expression. In this sense, the image goes beyond representation, with content that does not need to be in communion. A symbol must be a sign. Meaning content need not keep its abstract side, it can also be concrete.

The symbol can designate several meanings through connections that go beyond the expected. For example, a bull can represent itself, or metaphorically represent strength and courage, the image always provides several meanings. When talking about symbolic art, we must start internally to act subjectively, and then move on to a broader and more universal external reading. It is enigmatic, as its universal meaning reaches intuition, so which form it should take is in doubt. Art takes intuition as a symbolic form representing itself by its particularity and also manifests itself beyond the singular object, with a more absolute meaning, remaining as a requirement to have its interior deciphered.

In the work of art, such recognition is not assimilated at first sight. It is part of what needs to be complemented as a whole. Making art is not copying something, but rather representing something in a way that becomes sensorial admitted, without necessarily being related to other things. That is, it is necessary to recognize what is represented. The representation in the work of art does not represent something that it is not and does not show something to make us think otherwise, it contains what it has to say. Art demands a communicative trait from us.

Peirce (2005) registers that the symbol transforms and incorporates new elements, getting rid of the old ones. And every symbol is an image that means something or is a metaphor. The sign, or representamen, is something that represents something to someone, when it develops in the person's mind, that is, when it is created, it becomes an interpretant of the first sign, thus representing its object. The idea of this object, and not the object itself, Peirce (2005) calls the foundation of the representamen. This idea is very common in everyday speech and has a platonic meaning, the ideas that arise are similar and not new.

The representamen is linked to the foundation, the object, and the interpretant and is divided into three branches. The first is pure grammar, it determines what is true in the representamen and incorporates any meaning. The second branch is that of logic, it is the science of the almost necessarily true in the representamen and can be applied to any object to make them true. The third branch is that of pure rhetoric, it determines the laws by which one sign gives rise to another sign, and causes one thought to give rise to another.

The word sign denotes a perceptible, imaginary, or still unimaginable object. Peirce (2005) gives as an example the "star" sign, which is something imaginable that can refer to a star full of light or a celebrity or even mean luck. To be a sign, it has to represent an object, and a sign can have more than one object.

For Lucia Santaella (1983, p. 05) "The name Semiotics comes from the Greek root semeion, which means sign. Semiotics is the science of signs". As symbolic beings, we communicate through verbal and non-verbal language (images). The author says that culturally we only work because language is also a phenomenon of communication. All cultural and social practices only work because they are significant practices, that is, practices for the production of languages and meanings. To understand semiotics, we have to understand internal phenomena (a pain, a desire) and external phenomena (a knock on the door, thunder, a smell), because everything around us is a phenomenon, what we imagine to be real or not.

### **3 ADRIANA VAREJÃO: FROM SIGN TO SYMBOL**

The world of art is multifaceted, full of discoveries and many mysteries. When we come across an artist who explores various styles, we have a cultural immersion in each work presented. Full of references, whether from movies, books, poems, or travel, Adriana Varejão manages to be art in person. Restless, she does not allow herself to stand still, she is always in search of new possibilities and rediscovers herself every minute. Attentive to everything around her, Varejão conveys pieces of history, the lives of people,

female memories, and much more in each of her pieces, whether painting, sculpture, photography, or installation.

Adriana Varejão is a Brazilian visual artist with prominence in the contemporary scene, mainly abroad. Born in 1964, in Rio de Janeiro, she began her career in the 1980s. Between 1981 and 1985, she attended free courses at the Escola de Artes Visuais do Parque Lage, and had her first exhibition in 1988, at the Thomas Cohn gallery. She went to study engineering and in the meantime, took art courses and says: "I think one day I woke up and became an artist". She rented a studio and started producing.

Silvino Santiago (2009) states that the space of representation in Adriana's paintings seeks the spectator's polysemic gaze, which happens a lot in theater and cinema, witnessing a discursive performance in motion. In Adriana's case, such staging has the simultaneous weight of the composite image, which delegitimizes the discourse of stagings, but without losing the narrative. [...] " the decentering - both of the notion of artistic property and the weight and value of originality - driven by the predictably unpredictable potential of intertextual play. Staging in Adriana is an art of centrifugation, it should be added" (SANTIAGO, 2009, p.78).

The author points out that the artist's works also awaken the unconscious, in which the other reader discovers meanings that even Adriana had not thought of for her work, but the observer creates images that are particular to him, formed through the spectator's repertoire.

Adriana's art is inclined not to accept a consensual planetary order, not to take Eurocentrism as her own, which (she believes) is no longer relevant in modernity. On the other hand, every set of centralized artistic and socio-political values is updated, reorienting them with a view to new circulation paths. Adriana's art is inclined not to accept the Eurocentrism that, however, is worth taking possession of her illusory images (SANTIAGO, 2009, p. 82).

For Luiz Camillo Osório (2009), Varejão's painting was never afraid of excess, making them leap from the canvas to the eyes, as if it were almost possible to touch it, this pictorial relationship between looking and touching shifts to the viewer's perception, from an imaginary where the universal is constantly pressed. "There is in Adriana Varejão's painting a desire for theatricality, for non-specificity, for suspension of the eye's ability to identify what is being seen" (OSÓRIO, 2009, p.222). This makes the viewer always go beyond what he sees.

Just as the artist subverts the baroque, the historical narrative highlights the construction of an anthropomorphic space, supporting issues that transit between times and spaces – whether playing with parody, allegory, formlessness, and eroticism, or dialoguing with the presence in some modern works of mapping the pictorial surface in an orthogonal grid -, the approach of his work also seeks to multiply points of view without, necessarily, reducing himself to non-existent linearity in the theoretical conception of his paintings (CERQUEIRA, 2009, p.23 )

According to Cerqueira (2009), Adriana articulates the fragmented, the unfinished, the ruinous, the accumulation, and the repetitiveness and her works bring the relationship between past and present. Without worrying about originality, the artist navigates between cultural and artistic images, recovering tradition

through painting. "The artist shows many ways of affirming painting as an end in itself and also as a means" (CERQUEIRA, 2009, p.144).

The value of Varejão's artistic operation operates through the metaphor between symbolic objects in confrontation, plays with excess, illusion, and detachments, revealing thoughts and deviations from paths that, produced in discontinuity, have their questions reprogrammed, just as their canvases are divided and multiply in versions, between materiality and fiction (CERQUEIRA, 2009, p.144).

Figure 1 – Mother of water



Source: <http://www.adriavarejao.net/br/imagens/categoria/10/obras>

Adriana Varejão, using the myth of the mermaid in her works, brings a new look to the role of women, placing them in power in the face of patriarchal ideology. The Plates series represents naked bodies and seeks in mythology a way to expose themes related to women, such as motherhood, for example, with a different look, treating women as the center of attention in the paintings in which they are portrayed.

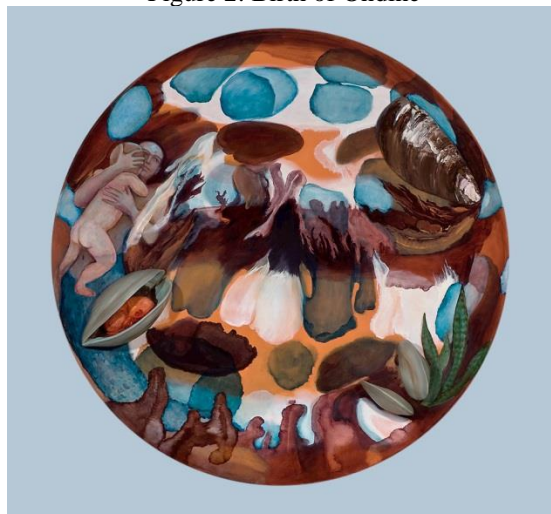
Specifically, in *Mãe d'Água* there is a female figure as a black mermaid in contrast to the male one. The black mermaid appears at the top of the plate, taking a position above the man, who appears with white spots that refer to a miscegenation of races, mingling with sea foam. It is as if the woman transformed the male body, giving it part of her color, so we have a break with racism since there is this mixture of skin colors.

According to Jean Chevalier (2015), the ocean is boundless by its extension, it is also a symbol of the upper waters. "All waters flow into the sea without filling it; all waters come out of the sea without emptying it" (TCHUANG-TSE apud CHEVALIER; GHEERBRANT, 2015, p. 650). We are faced with an issue of equality, which we can transfer to the feminist struggle, as only women fight for equality in all institutional fields of society.

In the center of the plate are jaboticabas, inviting the spectator to taste the work. Chevalier; Gheerbrant (2015, p.452) states that the fruit is "a symbol of abundance, which overflows from the cornucopia of the goddess of fertility or the bowls at the banquets of the gods... many fruits acquired the

symbolic meaning of sensual desires, the desire for immortality, of prosperity”. All these desires can be found in the myth of the mermaid.

Figure 2: Birth of Ondine



Source: <http://www.adriavarejao.net/br/imagens/categoria/10/obras>

In *Nascimento de Ondina*, there is a resumption of the myth of the mermaid, in which one of the women holds a baby, as a result, there is a paradigm shift about motherhood, passing on the idea of the experience of many women who play the role of father and mother. , as she finds herself alone and ends up becoming the heroine of the story.

Chevalier; Gheerbrant (2015) assert that undines are spells of water and love, hence the man-woman relationship, but there is a danger of seduction where men lose control. The author compares them with nymphs and says that they engender and educate heroes. “Divinities of birth, and especially of the birth of heroes, do not cease to tint a veneration tinged with fear [...] They symbolize the temptation of heroic madness” (CHEVALIER; GHEERBRANT, 2015, p.636). Men want to show themselves as warriors, but they end up getting lost in the eroticism of such a being, with women once again holding power.

The corals that occupy the entire plate participate in the “symbolism of the tree (axis of the world)... p.283). Once again we find the myth of the mermaid in the work of Adriana Varejão, whose feminine beauty comes to show the strength of women with men, occupying spaces and standing out in the foreground.

#### 4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

An image is composed within a certain support in which the artist organizes and interprets his ideas and transmits them to a spectator who forms mental images that are discovered and understood, the meaning of which is linked to the ideas, feelings, and experiences of each one.

Working with the symbol, the meaning that emanates from it is what Adriana Varejão does in the series Dishes, many of the works refer to the sea and the myth of the mermaid, as in *Mãe d'Água* and

Nascimento de Ondina. In Varejão's productions, women hold power over men, who allow themselves to be carried away by their fascination and seduction. There is, then, the breaking of the social paradigm that the woman is submissive to the man and needs to do what he wants. With her works, Adriana shows that these women's places are in evidence and that they can use their beauty and seduction in any way they want, without being seen as an object women, as they had been treated for many years. Even when the subject is maternity, Varejão's perspective is different, giving a strong position and showing that mothers can occupy the spaces they want, going beyond the walls of a home.



## REFERENCES

- CERQUEIRA, Fátima Nader Simões. **Memória e persuasão na pintura de Adriana Varejão** / Fátima Nader Simões Cerqueira. – 2009. 174 f.: il. Orientadora: Almerinda da Silva Lopes. Dissertação (mestrado) – Universidade Artística Federal do Espírito Santo, Centro de Artes.
- CHEVALIER, Jean; GHEERBRANT, Alain. **Dicionário dos Símbolos:** (mitos, sonhos, costumes, gestos, formas, figuras, cores, números). 28ª ed. – Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 2015.
- DONDIS, A. Donis. **Sintaxe da Linguagem Visual.** 3ª edição. Martins Fontes Editora. São Paulo SP, 2002.
- GOODMAN, Nelson. **Linguagens da Arte:** uma abordagem a uma teoria dos símbolos. Tradução: Vitor Moura e Desidário Murcho. 1ª edição. Gradiva Publicações. Lisboa, 2006.
- OSÓRIO, Luiz Camillo. **A profundidade da Superfície.** In: VAREJÃO, Adriana. Entre carnes e mares. Editora Cobogó, Rio de Janeiro, 2009
- PEIRCE, Charles Sanders. **Semiótica.** Tradução: José Teixeira Coelho Neto. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2005.
- PINTO, Julio. **1, 2, 3 da semiótica.** Belo Horizonte: Editora UFMG, 1995.
- SANTAELLA, Lucia. **O que é semiótica?** São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1983.
- SANTIAGO, Silvino. **A ficção contemporânea e visionária de Adriana Varejão.** In: VAREJÃO, Adriana. Entre carnes e mares. Editora Cobogó, Rio de Janeiro, 2009
- SOUZA, Leandro. A representação simbólica nas Artes Visuais. **III semana de pesquisa em artes** – UERJ – RJ, 2009. Disponível em:<  
[https://www.ppgartes.uerj.br/spa/spa3/anais/leandro\\_souza\\_427\\_436.pdf](https://www.ppgartes.uerj.br/spa/spa3/anais/leandro_souza_427_436.pdf)>. Acesso: 23.06.2002.