

## Laura Belém

Laura Belém (b. 1974, Belo Horizonte) is a poet in three-dimensions, transforming emotions, memories, legends, and language into tactile sculptures and installations. Her oeuvre is dynamic and diverse. As an artist, she embraces the materiality of the world around her to create evocative works. Whether it is two boats mounted with searchlights longingly seeking one another in the canals of Venice (*Enamoured*, 2005) or the haunting beauty of the artist's retelling of an ancient legend consisting of one-thousand silent, shimmering clear glass bells suspended within a neoclassical shrine (*The Temple of a Thousand Bells*, 2010)—Belém elegantly renders sentiment with understated potency.

*Veneza do Brasil* (*Venice of Brazil*, 2007), Belém's contribution to the exhibition, was created during a residency in Recife, located on the northeast coast of Brazil. The city has an extensive canal system, built when the Dutch colonized the region in the seventeenth century. The work consists of a large water tank on which nine houses float and are gently moved over the water's surface by the force of four small fans mounted at each corner of the tank. The artist was inspired to create the work by the rich history of Recife and its architectural contrasts: once beautiful but now abandoned houses in the center of town, new architecture, and the homes of the poor and working classes, known as *palafitas*, which are made of inexpensive materials and are raised to stand above water. To create the floating houses, Belém worked with a local artisan known as Elizangela das Palafitas, a former resident of the *palafitas* who now earns her living making miniature *palafita* houses for tourists. In addition to the obvious local reference to Recife's nickname, "the Venice of Brazil," the work evokes a sense of loss, fragility, and transience. In an email to the Wexner Center, Belém explains: "I thought the floating houses would give the impression of displacement, of living nowhere, or of having to adapt oneself to conditions that are always changing, never stable—a situation which a lot of the Brazilian population still confronts.... I decided to call the sculpture *Venice of Brazil* because Recife is called that by people who live there. Of course it has a critical tone as well, and one that questions our own behavior as a country that was colonized and exploited yet mirrors itself in Europe in order to find its own identity."

Here, Belém reaches out to her predecessors of the *tropicália* movement of the 1960s, in which Brazilian artists consumed Euro culture and reinterpreted it as their own. Recife's Venice, seen through the artist's eyes, is both enchanting and unsettled. The glittering Venice we stereotypically imagine is here replaced by beautifully executed yet fundamentally fragile and ephemeral houses that stand as silent witnesses to the current struggles in her home country.

Belém lives and works in Belo Horizonte, located in the southeastern region of Brazil. She received a BFA from Escola de Belas Artes–Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, in Belo Horizonte (1996) and an MFA from Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design, in London, UK (2000). Her work has been exhibited in group and solo shows since 2000 throughout Brazil and internationally, including Spain, Italy, England, Portugal, Canada, Japan, and the United States. She has been the recipient of numerous grants including the Bolsa Pampulha (Pampulha Award) from Museu de Arte da Pampulha in Belo Horizonte (2003) and an emerging artist grant from the CIFO Grants and Commissions Program of the Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation, Miami (2011).

C. M.

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**Veneza do Brasil (Venice of Brazil)**, 2007 (detail)  
Wood, cardboard, polystyrene, water, metal, acrylic,  
and fans  
66 7/8 x 118 1/4 x 78 3/4 in. (165 x 300 x 200 cm)  
Courtesy of the artist and Galeria Luisa Strina, São Paulo