

CAZUMBA'S CARETAS

By: Marco Antonio Lima, Director of Lima Gallery

At midnight on June 23, the eve of Saint John's Day, the festivities begin, which last until June 30, the celebration of Saint Marçal. During these days and nights, São Pedro is also celebrated, and the bumba-meu-boi festival, which moves thousands of people, prevails in Maranhão. The cities are taken over by arraiais, by "rodeos of the ox", where people sing and dance. The rhythms of the music are called "accents", and in one of them - the Baixada Maranhense accent - the figure of Cazumba emerges, who draws attention for his brightly colored clothing and, especially, for the mask, the grimace that hides the face of the reveler.

The "masks" of Cazumba, also called "Caretas" - a more appropriate and correct terminology - provide support and identity to the character and play an important role in the Boi game. Through them, Cazumbas (the character) and revelers (the individual) establish strong connections and differences. According to researcher Angela Mascelani, "the Cazumba character is perennial; his reveler is mortal." She further states: "The celebration and its regular and ancestral cycles reproduce the regularity of collective life. Cazumba denies social death and presents the uncontrollable nature of life through his performance." Angela concludes by saying: "This enigmatic character brings the imponderable, the unpredictable, to the festival scene. The same type of appearance, of improvisation on the real and the sensible, that art allows."

For a Cazumba, it is important that each year the grimace surpasses that of the previous year, changing expression, showing more invention and "strangeness". To liven up the festival, anything goes - especially mixing animal features, inventing crazy colors in the hair of the grimaces, and anything else that occurs to the artist in charge of creating these figures.

Researcher Daniel Bitter also affirms that "from an ethnographic point of view, what seems to most singularly characterize masks (caretas) is their transformative power. Their full meaning can only be achieved when worn and set in motion by a person, a reveler. Moreover, it must be added that almost always the masks are associated with a garment that entirely covers the body and represent totemic animals, supernatural beings, personified forces of nature, or even humans, and these figures, in certain contexts, are not interpreted by their users and spectators as being images, but as their concrete manifestation."

Although the grimaces can be interpreted as objects-witnesses of a tradition, a practice of collective life, they also mark the individuality of their authors, who, moved by the opportunity of the festival, give shape - always new, always original - to their creations. In the completed grimaces, we find their own marks, which repeat or renew themselves, allowing for the assertion of singular aesthetics of their creators.

With the artist Eusimar Gomes, Zimar, it could not be different. His grimaces are easily recognizable for their characteristic strength and ancestry. He is Cazumba in the Turma de João de Pixilau, known as "Turma da Sede", in the municipality of Matinha, located in the "Baixada Maranhense". Born in the village of Cutia, he always worked with agriculture, planting cassava, and only recently has he devoted himself exclusively to making his "grimaces," as he saw the craft as a "Saint John's play." A self-taught artist, when asked

where his inspiration comes from, he replies: "... They ask if I look at any magazines, if I watch those movies and he says no.

I don't even have a TV... We start by cutting the material and then we think, 'I'm going to make a face like a horse, like a pig, something like that...' I imagine I'm going to make this one with a crooked chin, this other one with a scar, and another with a crooked mouth... I'm going to put a tumor on it, to show that it's a tumor, because for a grimace to be good, it has to be ugly. That's good for me."

Zimar began his craft by making wooden masks out of jequitibá or paparaúba, but due to a stroke at a young age that left him with no strength in his hands, he saw the production of his masks with the available material found in the trash and from everyday discards on the streets of his city - plastic - as the only viable alternative.

In general, Zimar works the base of the mask with discarded motorcycle helmets, and adds details that his imagination allows. They are molded by fire, and using saws, sharp tools, knives, he cuts the jaw, saws the teeth, and pierces the eyes, giving life and identity to his masks.

The artist's creative process treads the fine line between the everyday and the dreamlike imaginary: "It's at night, while dreaming, that I see the masks, and also on the walls, I see animals in the stains and marks of time. Mold reveals images of monstrous faces."

The available materials - the helmet, the carnival wig, the fan blades, the used toothbrushes, the aluminum plates, the Christmas tree ornaments, the accessories and parts of motorcycles, and the flows of nature - influence the imagination and productivity of the artist.

Angela Mascelani concludes in her research that the masks accentuate in humans what causes us astonishment. "At first, in the Cazumbas, the individual is erased in favor of collectivity, because clothes and masks are meant to do that: to cover up their author, and highlight the character. However, in a second moment, it is precisely this effort to disguise, to cover up the person who plays, that will allow for the recognition of the player, or even the author of this garment, based on their own creation. The use of specific materials, different dramatic effects, hues and colors, in short, the emergence of what is conventionally called style - will illuminate its author."

Zimar is one of the countless "artists," from various areas, who inhabit Maranhão, whose richness of plastic interpretations of his creation differentiate him and elevate him to the category of "Masters."