
THE BOX

January 3–31, 2017

Jonathas de Andrade

O caseiro (The Housekeeper) (2016)



Jonathas de Andrade, *O caseiro* (The Housekeeper), courtesy of the artist

O caseiro (The Housekeeper)

Working in installation, photography, and video, Brazilian artist Jonathas de Andrade blends fiction and nonfiction, history and personal memory to create powerful and timely commentaries on contemporary social and political issues in his own country. One of the most memorable works in the Wex's 2014 exhibition *Cruzamentos: Contemporary Art in Brazil*, de Andrade's installation *O que sobrou da primeira corrida de carroças do centro do Recife* (2012–4) highlighted the contradictory laws surrounding urban labor by documenting a fictional horserace that the artist orchestrated in Recife. In his recent video, *O caseiro* (The Housekeeper), de Andrade once again mines Brazil's complicated history to offer new perspectives on its current social and political climate.

The video appropriates an existing short documentary from 1959, *O mestre de Apipucos* (The Master of Apipucos) by Joaquim Pedro de Andrade (no relation), a well-known director of Brazil's Cinema Novo movement. *O mestre de Apipucos* neatly presents a day in the life of renowned Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre (1900–87). Freyre was famous in part for his influential 1933 book *Casa grande e senzala* (*The Masters and the Slaves: A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization*), which radically reimagined Brazilian society by suggesting that the country's history of slavery and systematic miscegenation was actually a positive force in the country's development, claiming it created a racially democratic society. While his work was seen as progressive at the time and helped to build a sense of uniquely Brazilian identity, his overly idealized depiction of the paternalistic relationship between masters and slaves is clearly problematic.

The 1959 film highlighted the illusory nature of Freyre's concept of a racial democracy, depicting his privileged, upper-class intellectual lifestyle in his own *casa grande* (master's house), surrounded by manicured gardens and books and attended to by his wife and servants. In *O caseiro*, Jonathas de Andrade makes that subtle criticism explicit by using the same structure of the original film to imagine a day in the life of one of Freyre's servants and displaying them side by side. Shot in Freyre's same country house in Apipucos, he fashions an almost shot-for-shot remake of the original documentary, with subtle differences creating a sense of distance between the two films. While Freyre glides through his surroundings with a certain sense of remove—from the natural world, from labor, from the people who work for him—the fictional housekeeper occupies the same spaces in a more physical and tactile way. Both men take strolls through the garden but while Freyre prods a leaf with his cane, the housekeeper caresses a palm frond with his bare hand. Freyre lies on the beach—a place that only the upper class would visit during the workday—but the fictional housekeeper must refresh himself with water from a garden hose. The two men both enjoy fish for lunch—Freyre looking over the shoulder of his cook as she prepares his meal; the housekeeper cooking for himself, mixing manioc (yam) flour and water with his hands.

Despite the critical stance of his film, Jonathas de Andrade's interest in reinterpreting Brazilian culture by looking to its past is ironically similar to Freyre's, whose work came at a time when Brazilians were looking to Europe as the cultural standard. Freyre argued that Brazil's specific mixture of races and regional cultures was its greatest strength. De Andrade, whose work most often draws from very specific references to the northeastern region of Brazil, reveals a view that is far more fraught with complexity.

Jonathas de Andrade was born in 1982 in Maceió, Brazil, and lives and works in Recife. Recent solo exhibitions include: Museu de Arte do Rio, Rio de Janeiro (2015) and Kunsthalle Lissabon, Lisbon (2013). He has participated in the Bienal de São Paulo (2010 & 2016); 11th Dakar Biennial, Senegal (2014); Lyon Biennial, France (2013); Istanbul Biennial (2011); and the New Museum Triennial, New York (2012). De Andrade is the recipient of a 2013 Wexner Center Artist Residency Award in visual arts. His newest film O peixe (The Fish) (2016) was supported through a residency from the Film/Video Studio Program and premiered at the 32nd Bienal de São Paulo. O peixe will be on view at The Power Plant, Toronto, and the New Museum of Contemporary Art in the winter of 2017; it will also be shown at the Sharjah Biennial 13, United Arab Emirates (2017).

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O caseiro (The Housekeeper), 2016

7 mins., video

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