

# ARTFORUM

MARCH 2015 INTERNATIONAL

## REVIEWS

## NEW YORK

## R. H. Quaytman

GLADSTONE GALLERY

In *Tristes Tropiques*, Claude Lévi-Strauss recalls how little he knew of Brazil before he moved there. “In my imagination,” he writes, “I associated Brazil with clumps of twisted palm trees concealing bizarrely designed kiosks and pavilions.” Oddly enough, a painting in R. H. Quaytman’s exhibition “*O Tópico*, Chapter 27” included a silk screen of just such an image, a Polaroid she took of Hélio Oiticica’s *Penetravel Magic Square no. 5 De Luxe*, 1977. The work’s stark geometry cuts through the foliage at Inhotim, the vast art park in Minas Gerais. The contents of Quaytman’s show were headed there as well. Angled partition walls and curved swaths of beige fabric approximated the floor plan of the nautilus-shell-shaped pavilion that will house the paintings permanently on the park’s grounds. There and then, the Oiticica silk screen will mirror its environs, but for this show they were pure prolepsis, rattling the New Yorker’s habituated confidence that all good art—like friends who decamp to Los Angeles—will return in time. The circumstances added urgency, even poignancy, to looking close.

By now, the principles of Quaytman’s practice are well known: that she designates each suite of paintings as a chapter in an ongoing book; that the paintings are prepared on modular plywood panels with beveled edges; that they are often displayed on shelves or in storage racks; that they employ a consistent grammar of materials, such as gesso for the ground, silk-screen ink for photographs and Op-art grids, diamond dust for textured sparkle, and oil paint for trompe l’oeil wood strips. Whereas most chapters respond to a preexisting architectural setting, Quaytman and her collaborator Solveig Fernlund designed the Inhotim pavilion from scratch. Its nautilus spiral—a function of the golden ratio, like the dimensions of Quaytman’s panels—provided the paintings’ running motif. Gentle curves in gesso segmented surfaces into patches of pattern, image, and pigment.

A simple question dogs all considerations of Quaytman’s work: If she’s assembling a book, what kind? *Tristes Tropiques*, which Quaytman has acknowledged as a reference point for “*O Tópico*,” makes for a compelling model. In it, Lévi-Strauss layers the genres of travel story, memoir, and anthropological study. Purple prose abuts scientific observation, interspersed with drawings, diagrams, and photographs. Though still in progress, Quaytman’s book is already equally variegated.

“*O Tópico*” alone possesses flashes of art history (the Oiticica silk screens); memoir (a portrait of her peer Dawn Kasper); reverie (a photo of a nun taken by the poet Elizabeth Bishop); and ethnography (an oil painting of Amazonian lace). What holds together Lévi-Strauss’s and Quaytman’s projects both is the forward thrust of a full itinerary.

*Tristes Tropiques* is not without its detractors. Clifford Geertz asserts its final message “is that anthropological texts, like myths and memoirs, exist less for the world than the world exists for them.” The same charge could be leveled against Quaytman’s book. As much as Lévi-Strauss insisted any society could be reduced to a structure of oppositions and isomorphisms, Quaytman has filtered every chapter’s context through the same system. “*O Tópico*”—“matter” in Portuguese—showed Quaytman incorporating substances resistant to her formal language’s flattening effects. Slathers of encaustic mimicked muddy soil or, when smeared over the image of a teenage girl leaning against a sculpture by Jarbas Lopes, pink flesh. Urethane foam coated in paint stuck to panels like chunks of cooled lava. In *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist approach fails him when he reaches the Mundé, a tribe that had never before encountered Westerners. “If the inhabitants were mute,” he muses, “perhaps the earth itself would speak to me.”

—Colby Chamberlain

R. H. Quaytman,  
*O Tópico*, Chapter 27,  
2014, encaustic,  
gouache, oil,  
silk-screen ink, and  
gesso on panel,  
24 3/4 × 40”.

