

Relentless Sun: The Images of Clarissa Tossin

Brazilian artist Clarissa Tossin explores poverty with images of heat and earth.

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When Brazilian artist Clarissa Tossin came to Houston in 2010 as a Core Fellow, she was stunned by the heat — Houston is apparently way hotter than her hometown of Brasília. She was also fascinated by the prevalence of tinfoil-covered windows in the city. It took her awhile to figure out that the tinfoil was a direct response to the climate. "Blind Spot," her project for the Blaffer Art Museum's "Window into Houston," came out of that fascination and the photographs she took in Houston's Third Ward. "**Window into Houston**" is located in the old storefront windows at 110 Milam, a building owned by art collector Jim Peterson.



Clarissa Tossin

Brasília by Foot (2009) shows the lines made by people walking.

For the uninitiated, tinfoiling your windows is what you do in the South when you're poor and it's hot as hell. The foil helps reflect the sun's heat off of your house. Reflective skyscraper windows do essentially the same thing, just in a more elegant fashion. Tossin had her photographs of foil-covered windows printed onto roller shades that cover the storefront windows. Using the photographs of ratty tinfoil and crappy window-unit air conditioners, Tossin adorned the windows of a beautifully restored building inhabited by a wealthy collector with the makeshift trappings of poverty. It's ironic in an almost hipster way (I could see them being sold as window shades on Fab.com), but I'm unsure of what that ultimately says.

Artists, particularly photographers, have long been drawn to capturing the aesthetics of poverty. But there is a fine line between WPA photographers recording the impact of the Depression and someone exoticizing poverty. For Tossin, there is also no doubt the tourist element of seeing something unusual in another country. American tourists in Brazil do the same thing, touring and photographing those oh-so-colorful and inventive *favelas*. We're all fascinated with other locales and cultures. But whether someone lives in a favela or a Third Ward shotgun house, does that person really want someone else recording his plight for the photographer's own ends?

Tossin also has work on view at Sicardi Gallery in her exhibition "**Study for a Landscape.**" There's an amazing photo on the wall right as you walk into the upstairs gallery. She culled it from Google Earth; it's a satellite view of a plaza in Brasília. Planned by Lúcio Costa and inaugurated in 1960, the Brazilian capital is legendary for its utopian aspirations and futuristic Oscar Niemeyer architecture, as well as for its notoriously inhuman scale. The "plaza" Tossin presents isn't really that; it's more like a giant median the size of multiple football fields. This vast expanse of grass is dotted with a couple of trees and surrounded by six-lane highways. The fascinating part of this photo, *Brasília by Foot* (2009), is the wonky network of reddish lines worn into the grass by people trying to make their way across the large empty space to the buildings on either side. Seen from the sky, the marks are like Nazca lines created by modern pedestrians instead of mysterious ancient peoples.

As Houstonians, we know what it's like to have to make your way on foot through a city built around the car. (Houston artists like The Art Guys and Carrie Schneider as well as writers like John Nova Lomax have set out to explore on foot a city where walking can be a daunting and almost heretical act.) While Brasília's climate may not reach Houston extremes, it's hot enough. We know what it's like to slog across a vast, treeless expanse in the heat. You look at the picture and feel yourself bending your head to duck a relentless sun.

In Brasília, Tossin set out to retrace the tracks in the photo herself, counting her steps and marking which routes she had taken on a diagram. The Sicardi show includes a series of silk screens Tossin made based on her map, done in the same reddish brown as the tracks worn into the grassy expanse. Tossin used the reddish Brazilian earth as her pigment, mixing it with a binder to create "ink" for her silk screens. The silk screens are interesting as diagrams, and you can see the paths of the artist as she crisscrossed the space without destination, recording the number of steps she'd taken. But ultimately, the Google Earth photo and the lines worn by all those other feet dwarf everything else.

Tossin covered a slender strip of wall in the gallery with reddish earth she had brought from home. The narrow bit of wall reads a little decoratively, but I understand Tossin's affection for the iron-rich hue of her home soil. I grew up with red dirt in Arkansas, and it's amazing how earth can become an icon of home.

Another wall shows the red earth of a Brasília building site from a Google Earth photo. Tossin paired it with a Google Earth photo of Mars, the red planet. They look unsettlingly similar. Just pairing these two images is intriguing in itself. Tossin went on to fold the images into origami shapes — a car for the Brasília image and a rocket for the Mars image. She marked the folds and flattened the images out again. The creases create interesting networks of lines and a slight topography over the images, but the whole origami symbolism may be unnecessary.

On the back wall of the gallery, *Ladrão de Tênis (Sneaker Thief)* (2009) brings in the steps and bodies of others. It's a wall piece with Plexiglas shelves featuring 36 Hydrocal casts from the inside of secondhand tennis shoes. In a talk, Tossin said the piece was influenced by the rise in the early 2000s of young Brazilians murdering each other for status sneakers. The casts convey the shapes of the shoes but also something of the shapes of the individual feet that broke them in. Bits of fabric (and probably DNA) cling to the casts, giving them a forensic quality. The plaster also calls to mind death masks.

Tossin has done some interesting work in the past. I particularly remember a video she showed at Sicardi in 2011 about workers in Brasília continually scrubbing the white marble of the Niemeyer-designed Federal Supreme Court Building — trying to maintain the pristine modernism and utopian promise of the aging structure. It was a seemingly simple video that spoke volumes. Tossin's current work at Sicardi has flashes of that same succinct eloquence, but she's a young artist who is still figuring things out. She just finished her MFA at CalArts in 2009, spent two years in the Core Program and is going on to San Antonio for an Art Pace residency. She's on a fast track, but I get the sense that she's struggling a bit to meet the demands of the opportunities offered her. I don't, however, doubt she will regain her balance.