Véxoa Nós Sabemos: A powerful exhibition of Brazilian Indigenous art at Tufts University Art Galleries

The exhibition puts Indigenous communities and perspectives in dialogue with one another.

An artwork featured in Véxoa Nós Sabemos at the Tufts University Art Galleries is pictured.

By Ellora Onion-De
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Upon entering the Tufts University Art Galleries’ exhibition of Véxoa: Nós Sabemos, you are greeted by a vibrant variety of colors, mediums and sounds. Véxoa, originally showcased in the Pinacoteca de São Paulo in Brazil, found its new home at Tufts this September.

The exhibit, curated by Naine Terena, features the work of 22 contemporary Brazilian Indigenous artists from a wide range of regions and peoples. Terena herself is a member of the Terena people of Brazil, making Véxoa the first art exhibit in Brazil to be curated by an Indigenous person.
Claudia Avolese, a senior lecturer in the visual and material studies department at the SMFA, has led the project through its transition from São Paulo to Medford as TUAG’s guest organizer of Véxoa.

“I moved to the U.S. in 2019. When I was still in Brazil, as a professor at the University of Campinas in São Paulo, I was following the whole process of putting together the concept of the exhibition, the invitation to [Terena],” Avolese said. “So when I moved and was hired at Tufts, this was in my mind because Boston … is the place with the largest Brazilian community outside of Brazil.”

Avolese worked closely with Terena to bring Véxoa to a new space while preserving its main principles and artworks.

Véxoa means “we know” in the Terena language. Avolese said that the title conveys that the Indigenous artists of this exhibit are speaking for themselves.

“They know what they need. They know what they want, and it is about opening a space for their voice,” Avolese said.

Véxoa showcases many different styles of art, ranging from Buriti fiber masks and hanging textiles to massive, vibrant paintings and documentary-style film. This is in part supported by the diversity of the artists, who hail from completely different peoples and regions of Brazil.

“To [Terena], this is a space to put different cultures from these different Indigenous perspectives in dialogue,” Avolese said.

For Avolese, a hanging installation by Kya Agari particularly stands out.
“The textile, the way it hangs and when you start to walk through them, they kind of move and become alive,” she said. “So if you’re looking at it far away, it seems like abstract drawings, and when you start to relate to it, this idea of the corporeality of the work and the performativity of the work becomes more and more present to you.”

Agari made this textile piece specifically for the TUAG installment of Vêxoa. The untitled work originally appeared painted on the walls of the São Paolo exhibition.

“When we asked [Agari] if we could reproduce the work, she said she actually wanted to change it and do a different work,” Avolese explained.

Some Tufts students may have viewed Vêxoa independently on a self-led walk, but some have experienced a course-specific tour led by Elizabeth Canter, manager of academic programs for TUAG.

“Studio art classes might be really interested in the process and materials that are being used in the exhibition, whereas [an] anthropology of the environment class was maybe thinking more about how these Indigenous artists are simultaneously artists and activists really engaged in the fight for their Indigenous rights and their Indigenous land,” Canter said.

Canter added that students see and connect to the various pieces of art in different ways.

“I’m always sort of amazed at what students see in different pieces and in the work and the connections that they make and how that makes me see things differently,” Canter said, “And I hope that works for them too.”

Tufts students are not only viewers of Vêxoa but are also involved behind the scenes.

Muri Mascarenhas, a junior double-majoring in education and child study and human development with a visual arts minor, is part of the TUAG Student Programming Committee.

“I lived all my life in Brazil before coming to college,” they said. “Coming here to Tufts was my first time abroad, and my goodness how I miss Brazil.”

In September, the Tufts Portuguese department hosted an event with Vêxoa in which Mascarenhas introduced the panelists to students. The panel included Avolese as well as two of the artists whose work is featured in Vêxoa: Denilson Baniwa and Daiara Tukano.

Mascarenhas also created a booklet that interacts with the exhibition and a musical listening guide.

“I curated a playlist of 40 songs from Brazilian Indigenous artists, and it’s there at the exhibition to listen [to] and available online. It’s good jams for all tastes from heavy metal, Indigenous [artists] from Brazil, ... to pop, reggaeton, to everything,” they said.

Mascarenhas emphasized how special the exhibition is to them and how much work their colleagues put into presenting Vêxoa at TUAG.

However, they also expressed disappointment in its reception from the community so far.
“I can tell you it’s been a little frustrating. The outreach to the local Brazilian community has been very weak. This was such a special opportunity, and I don’t think the local population of Brazilians came to the exhibition, or the local schools with Brazilian kids,” Mascarenhas said.

They also added that it seems as though many local Brazilians have not heard of Vêxoa or the fact that it is free and open to the public.

Much of the Boston Brazilian population has historically voted for right-wing Brazilian candidates, including former President Jair Bolsonaro—though he was predicted to be less popular in the 2022 election than in 2018.

These politics, Mascarenhas contends, tend to go hand in hand with apathy toward expanded Indigenous rights. Mascarenhas expressed that they wished more local Brazilians had come to the exhibition to challenge their perceptions and open their perspectives of Indigenous life.

Avolese spoke warily of the misconception that if Indigenous peoples are not isolated, then they lose their identity.

“[These cultures are] not trapped in the past. They’re dynamic and they’re being transformed, and that doesn’t make them less Indigenous. ... Most Indigenous populations in Brazil, they’re living at what you could call sort of the border between two cultures. ... The majority of Indigenous people are living in urban centers,” Avolese said.

Vêxoa’s run at TUAG continues until Dec. 10, 2023, when a final event will mark the exhibition’s closing. The event will involve a tour led by Avolese and a talk in both English and Portuguese.

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By Coalition for Palestinian Liberation at Tufts  |  November 17
How Somerville’s ‘rat czar’ is fighting the city’s rodent problem

Samantha Eng reporter

On Sunday, the city of Somerville will begin its annual rodent control campaign, targeting the rats that have been thriving in the city’s South End neighborhood. The campaign, known as the Somerville Rodent Control Program, will involve a series of traps and bait that are designed to trap and kill the rats.

The campaign will run for about a month and will involve a team of experts from the Somerville Public Health Department and the Somerville Police Department. The team will be made up of experts in rodent control, entomology, and public health.

Somerville’s Department of Public Health is working with the city’s Public Safety Department to ensure the safety of residents during the campaign.

The campaign will involve the use of poison bait, which is designed to kill the rats. The bait will be placed in traps that are strategically located throughout the city’s South End neighborhood.

Somerville’s Department of Public Health is hoping that the campaign will reduce the number of rats in the city and improve the overall quality of life for residents.

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