

Miracles, Spiritualism and Fantastic Reality: The Art of Gretta By Willoughby Sharp

Brazilians say that Brazil is a country of miracles. The African slaves and European migrants who, together with the indigenous Indians, created this country in the mid-Sixteenth Century had a belief in Spiritualism. Today, the African cults, Umbanda and Candomblé, exercise enormous influence over a large segment of the population. On New Year's evening, hordes of candle-carrying Brazilians flood the beaches to ask Iemanjá, the Candomblé Goddess of the Sea, for good health, luck, and prosperity. This January, the Sarney Government, plunged in a severe economic crisis, with an almost unserviceable R\$113 billion debt and 386% annual inflation, issued a release, written by Getúlio Bittencourt, the Press Secretary and an astrologer, with a favourable prediction by an Umbanda priest.

In this context, almost any significant art is miraculous.

Gretta Sarfaty discovered her artistic talent when she was a São Paulo schoolgirl. During dull lecture classes, her mind would wander and her pencil took control. Her notebooks became overrun with nervous graphic drawings of her girlfriends. In 1964 she got married at seventeen, and quickly had three children – Victoria, Pedro and Rafaela. But she was not happy as a housewife, and in 1972 she started taking art classes with Ivald Granato and Walter Levi. The former taught her to trust her own instincts and “be free”; the later some fundamental techniques of modelling the human figure. Basically self-taught, she worked hard, often twelve to fourteen hours a day, producing extremely vivid and original aquarelles in a dynamically energized style that immediately found critical favour. Her first group show, the 1st Salon of Sorocaba, Brazil, 1973, resulted in a prize. Then came the “BIG BREAK. Franco Terranova, Owner of the Petite Gallery, Rio de Janeiro's centre of advanced art, was visiting São Paulo, and Gretta got him to visit her studio. Terranova bought everything Gretta had produced – about 100 pieces – and invited her into his gallery, scheduling a show for the following year.

Gretta's *oeuvre* falls into six major categories: METAMORPHIS; TRANSFORMATIONS; EVOCATIVE RECOLLECTIONS; METAMORPHIC RECOLLECTIONS; SELF-PORTRAIT OF BRAZIL; MY SINGLE LIFE IN NEW YORK; and most recent series; REINCARNATIONS. All of these works, to one degree or another, exhibit a deep commitment to figurative reality dynamically and energetically rendered. They are also endowed with subtle layers of mystery, spiritualism and fantasy.