

Rogério Duarte
15 October–14 November
The Narrows
Melbourne, Australia
Reviewed by DAN HONEY

It is impossible to comment on the work of Rogério Duarte from a purely visual perspective. It carries complexities that you can't begin to grasp until you first understand the environment in which it was created. Duarte was born in Brazil in 1939. He is a graphic designer, poet, songwriter and professor and recognised as an intellectual force of the Tropicália movement of the late 60s, dominated by musicians such as Gilberto Gil and Caetano Veloso.

Pre-Tropicália, Brazil's identity was defined by bossa-nova classics such as The Girl from Ipanema, depicting an idyllic paradise full of beautiful women, love, flowers and freedom. The reality away from the sun and surf was substantially different. In March 1964, a military-led coup overthrew President Joao Goulart, thrusting Brazil under military rule. In the decade to come, the military became increasingly oppressive, quieting opposition through censorship, imprisonment and torture.

During this time, artists began searching for a more authentic tone of voice – one that represented the working-class realities of life in Brazil. In 1967, named after the favela installation by contemporary artist Helio Oiticica, a new movement of resistance called Tropicália emerged. Unlike pre-existing resistance from the left, Tropicalists unashamedly mixed international and popular culture in their art, music, films and poetry. For example, musicians combined electric guitars and psychedelic pop rock with homeland sounds and instruments. Using their artforms to circulate ideas, the leaders of the movement were increasingly targeted by the military in an era of violent repression.

This autumn, The Narrows in Melbourne, Australia showed an insightful retrospective of Rogério Duarte's work with curators Warren Taylor and James Hibbard carefully positioning the collection within this broader context. The exhibition vibrantly brought together iconic works created during the Tropicália movement and included record covers created for resistance musicians Gilberto Gil, Caetano Veloso and Gil Jorge, original posters designed for experimental Cinema Novo films, book covers, poetry and other media.

Rogério Duarte was a victim of the oppressive dictatorship that gave rise to Tropicália and his work of the time is a visual manifestation of the principles of the movement. Duarte chaotically mixes styles and influences. He cannibalises and re-elaborates popular-culture references. Duarte devours and spits out The Beatles' Let It Be cover for Veloso's 1975 album, Qualquer Coisa, and his artwork for Gilberto Gil's self-titled release is heavily influenced by Peter Blake's Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band (but features Gil in military-style art-school uniform).

Installation views from Rogério Duarte, showing album sleeves (1968–75) for Gil Jorge, Jorge Mautner, Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil. Photography by Tobias Titz

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Poster, A Grande Cidade: ou as aventuras e desventuras de Luzia e seus 3 amigos chegados de longe, 1966. Courtesy of the artist and Cinemateca Brasileira

His artwork assembles organic handdrawn elements and photography with colours ranging from duotone to kaleidoscopic. Infused with Duarte's highly experimental approach is a modern international style. Duarte studied under Otl Aicher and Max Bill, expounding the Swiss typography and ordered structure particularly prevalent in his early film posters.

Duarte's ability to engage with the youth of Brazil through his thought-provoking designs and his position within Rio's artistic underground was deemed threatening by the authorities, and in 1968 he was arrested and tortured.

The study of Duarte's work comes at an interesting time for Australian graphic designers who have been collectively critiqued as having no distinguishable national style. Australians, like the Tropicalists, have become efficient in the task of taking in and subsequently mixing broad international influences. Duarte pioneered a new Brazilian style through his exciting ability to intelligently integrate iconic national exports, popular culture imports and regional experimentation. His work highlights how the process of antropofagia (mixing influences to create something unique) can be best used to create a distinct voice and how integral the incorporation of regional aspects, icons (whether it be through parody or adulation) and ideas are to this uniqueness. Duarte once said his work was not about making statements but opening doors, and perhaps the exhibition will incite some local discussion and provide some new avenues for Australian designers in their quest for a unique quality.

Deficient technology in Brazil during the 1960s is another defining factor of Duarte's work. The exhibition exposed an obviously lo-fi process in which very poor-quality imagery is used and overlaid with typography and handmade graphic elements. As curator Taylor suggested, "It seems like we are looking at work from the 1950s." In this way Duarte's work defines the socialist aesthetic. To Duarte's bemusement, designers today, when creating socially inclusive works, use a variety of techniques in an attempt to replicate this style. I recall recently driving from one 7-11 to the next trying to find a dodgy photocopier that would reproduce my image crappily enough for a poster I was working on. Duarte's work in this regard was not a deliberate statement but a reflection of the production limitations in Brazil at the time. When Taylor set about designing the exhibition catalogue, he requested a higher-resolution portrait image of Duarte. He was denied – after all, Duarte spent a decade working with these limitations, surely Taylor could survive them to design one poster?

Once again, The Narrows has shown a wonderful contextual exhibition that extends beyond a portfolio collection of works. Taylor's main challenge "was to present an exhibition which not only highlighted Duarte's contributions to Brazilian art and design, but also introduce a new audience to his philosophies and process". The curatorial angle of the popular Tropicália movement as an access point exposed the work and significance of Rogério Duarte to broad artistic audiences and provided an interesting timeline of design developments outside major design centres.