

# KW



**Leonilson**

***Drawn 1975–1993***

**until 2 May 21**



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KW Institute for Contemporary Art is pleased to present the first retrospective in Europe of the Brazilian artist Leonilson (1957–1993). The exhibition comprises a selection of over 250 works in a broad range of mediums and styles, from early paintings to late introspective embroideries. It will later go on show at Malmö Konsthall, in collaboration with Moderna Museet, Stockholm (June–October 2021), and at Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves, Porto (January–April 2022).

Leonilson was one of the major exponents of a generation of Brazilian artists known as *Geração 80* (80s Generation), to which belonged Leda Catunda, Beatriz Milhazes, and Luiz Zerbini, among others. After the overthrow of Brazil's military dictatorship in the mid-1980s, these artists celebrated their newly acquired freedom with a gestural, colorful, and expressive style of painting. While American Pop Art appropriated the symbols of a highly industrialized society in the 1980s, the *Geração 80*'s art was firmly critical of society.

Born to parents from Northeast Brazil, Leonilson was the son of a renowned textile merchant. From 1978 to 1981, he studied visual art in São Paulo, but left university before graduating in order to dedicate himself fully to his artistic production. His first works, created even before his studies, demonstrate the very foundations of a practice that would later be characterized by a refined transformation of everyday materials into sensitive poetic objects. Presented at the beginning of the exhibition, *Óculos* (Eyeglasses; ca. 1974/75), *Untitled* (ca. 1975) and *Mirro* (ca. 1975) show, however, a rougher signature, with materials taken from his immediate surroundings; a pair of glasses with telephone wire rolled around it, a reworked piece of wood, and an assemblage including a piece of a pair of jeans and embroidery. The young Leonilson, not even twenty at the time, began searching for a language and material of his own, in order to artistically express himself.

*Vogue Ideal (Fanzine)* (1976), an appropriated zine version of the magazine *Vogue*, affirms his fascination for fashion, albeit while conveying a discernably critical stance on its traditional construction of gender and the gap between poor and rich. Included in the zine are drawings and photos of people from marginalized communities, whom Leonilson could identify with. Coming from the northeast of Brazil, he always struggled with a sense of belonging, and suffered, too, from the discrimination against homosexuals widespread at the time. Although he was well aware that “Leo can't change the world”—multiple works carry this title—he continuously

demanded that attention be paid to the less privileged. Yet regardless of this critique, high-end, well-manufactured clothing never ceased to inspire Leonilson; he would often undertake close studies of fine fabrics and haute couture techniques for the sake of his own work.

Traveling is a vital motif in Leonilson's work. From 1981 onwards, he would often visit Europe, where he frequented Milan, Madrid, Bologna, Paris, and Amsterdam, among other places, as well as many German cities. These trips turned out to be fruitful in multiple ways, as his work came to be presented in a variety of group exhibitions and gallery shows. Besides that, he became close friends with fellow artist Albert Hien, as the personal and intimate correspondence with whom, exhibited here, tangibly attests. Apart from Eva Hesse and Blinky Palermo, both of whom he met during his travels in Europe, a first major influence was the Italian *transavanguardia* movement. Formed in the late 1970s, *transavanguardia* turned to figuration, ancient mythology, and expressive coloration. Similarly, Leonilson's paintings and drawings from the 1980s show an eclectic subjectivism and an emblematic visual language.

A visit to an exhibition of textiles produced by the Shakers in New York in 1986 would become a key moment in Leonilson's early career. This Christian American sect focused on labor and craftsmanship embroidered maps of its estates, and further decorated them with symbols referring to nature, life on earth, and a spiritual realm. This approach influenced the artist profoundly in two intertwining ways. On the one hand, it convinced him to embrace fabric as a central medium and embroidery as a technique. On the other, it inspired him to consider the body adorned with embroidered images as a map of a vulnerable territory, which in Leonilson's eyes would be the self. His adventures abroad and these creative ventures may have sprung not only from curiosity but possibly also from his experience of displacement and discrimination, and loneliness in the wake of failed romantic relationships. Cartographic references in *Norte* (North; ca. 1988) and *A ruas da cidade* (The City Streets; ca. 1988) not only refer to time spent elsewhere but also symbolize self-reflective forms of mapping. The approach of mapping one's own universe through embroidery was only to be amplified after an encounter with the work of Arthur Bispo do Rosário (1909–1989, BR) a couple of years later. As a psychiatric patient, Bispo do Rosário lived in a mental health institution for 50 years, where he made richly-textured textiles for himself that meticulously articulate his everyday life observations of a world in isolation from the mainstream, oscillating between reality and delirium.

When Leonilson was diagnosed with Aids in 1991, his visual language changed significantly. His last

years were shaped by his declining health and a preoccupation with death. In *O apaixonado, o zig zag, 5 minutos* (The enamored one, the zigzag, 5 minutes; 1991) his struggle with life and the ephemerality of love become apparent. The works convey a sense of melancholy, as is the case with *Puros e duros* (The pure and the hard; 1991), where the hard material of the stones becomes an antithesis of the deteriorating human body. The seven drawings of the series *O perigoso* (The dangerous one; 1992), on whose first drawing Leonilson trickled a drop of his HIV-positive blood, were a subversive public declaration of his sexual orientation and his personal struggle—a conceptual emancipation that was considered exceptional within Brazilian art at the time. At a later stage, Leonilson was physically able to work only with fabric, needle, and thread. Embroideries from this phase are less autobiographical in comparison to his earlier paintings and drawings, but can be understood as self-portraits, with the lightweight fabric predominantly used embodying a life fading away.

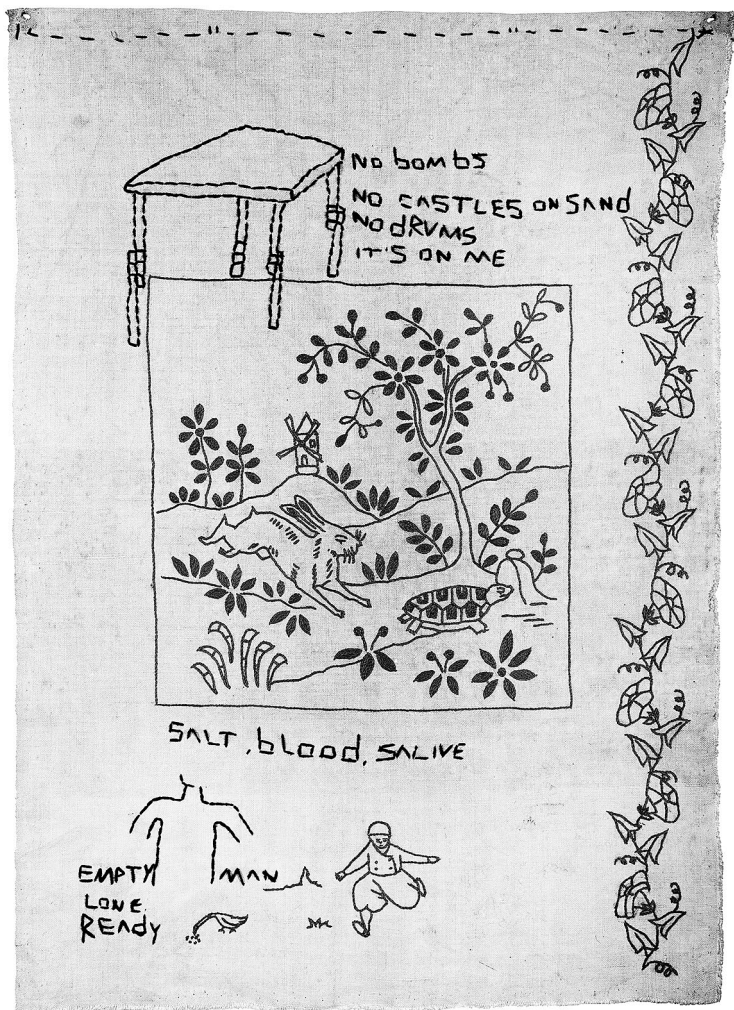
In that same year, Leonilson started to make drawings illustrating a weekly column in the *Folha de São Paulo*

newspaper. They are satirical and poignant reflections on the major political, social, and cultural upheaval wrought in a period of Brazil's recent history by student movements, the HIV/Aids crisis, the freshly reinstated democratic system, and the expansion of globalization. From today's perspective, the drawings serve as a parameter for reflection on similarities and differences between the sociopolitical realities of then and now. Although closely related to the content discussed in the weekly columns, the drawings depict Leonilson's unfettered imagination, rife with symbols of globes, volcanos, towers, fires, and geometric shapes.

Christian iconography recurs throughout Leonilson's practice, partly because of his education at a religious school. This becomes ultimately clear in his *Instalação sobre duas figuras* (Installation on two figures; 1993), conceived for his last exhibition at the Morumbi Chapel in São Paulo. It consists of pieces of his own shirts and bed sheets, which he placed on chairs or hung on a clothes rack like anthropomorphic figures. The embroideries on the pieces fuse ideas of wholeheartedness, the hypocrisy of the Church, desire, and Lazarus—the Biblical figure who symbolizes resurrection.

Along with the exhibition *Leonilson: Drawn 1975–1993*, the extensive eponymous catalogue is launched, which brings together new reflections on the work and life of Leonilson. It includes writings by Leda Catunda, Albert Hien, Yuji Kawasima, Lisette Lagnado, Ivo Mesquita, and Adriano Pedrosa. In addition, curator Krist Gruijthuijsen has written a letter to Leonilson, as well as having conversations with the artist's closest friends, Jan Fjeld and Eduardo Brandão. Together the texts offer new perspectives on a compelling artistic practice, positioning it in the context of today.

The catalogue is initiated by KW Institute for Contemporary Art, and is produced in collaboration with Moderna Museet (Stockholm, Sweden), Malmö Konsthall (Sweden) and Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves, Porto (Portugal). The catalogue is published by Hatje Cantz Verlag.



Leonilson, *Empty man*, 1991, embroidery / thread on embroidered linen, Courtesy Projeto Leonilson, Photo: Rubens Chiri

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### Opening Hours

Wednesday–Monday 11 am–7 pm  
Thursday 11 am–9 pm  
Closed on Tuesday

### Admission

8 € / reduced 6 €  
berlinpass holder 4 €  
Free admission to visitors up to and including 18,  
Friends of KW and Berlin Biennale, and KW Lover\*  
cardholders  
Free admission to all visitors on Thursday evenings  
from 6 to 9 pm

### Tours with KW Guides

During regular opening hours, visitors of KW can  
participate in short introductions to the exhibitions by  
the KW Guides. Please reach out to our staff at the  
ticket counter. Participation is free of charge.

### Public guided tours through the exhibitions

Every Saturday at 4 pm in English  
Every Sunday at 4 pm in German  
Participation only after prior registration with  
Museumsdienst Berlin. Limited capacity.

Museumsdienst Berlin  
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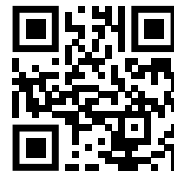
### Hygiene measures

In accordance with the applicable standards of the  
State of Berlin, comprehensive hygiene measures  
have been taken to protect visitors and staff. The total  
number of visitors permitted into each exhibition floor is  
limited, so that the minimum distance of 1.5 m can be  
maintained. Wearing a nose-mouth protection is  
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dispensers are available for you at the entrance.

Please only visit KW if you feel healthy. We look  
forward to your stay!

### Public Program

Due to circumstances revolving around the COVID-19  
virus, please visit KW's website for current information  
on the public program of the exhibition.



### Impressum

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