

GERALDO DE BARROS

b. 1923, Xavantes, São Paulo, Brazil

d. 1998, São Paulo, Brazil

“A photograph belongs to the one who makes something out of it, not necessarily to the one who took it.”

Geraldo de Barros began his investigations into photography in the mid-1940s in São Paulo. Invited by a friend to photograph soccer teams, de Barros's first camera was built from a kit. Intrigued by the medium, he soon lost interest in pursuing commercial photography. He built a small photo studio and bought a 1939 Rolleiflex and, in 1949, he joined the Foto Cine Club Bandeirante, which was one of the few forums for the city's photography enthusiasts. Members of the group were interested in pictorial photography and de Barros's explorations of abstraction were met with little interest; his photographs were almost never included in the club's exhibitions. That same year, de Barros was invited to create a photo laboratory in the new Museu de Arte de São Paulo, an important gesture toward including photography in contemporary art spaces.

De Barros's work from this period is characterized by scraped negatives, multiple exposures, and an interest in chance occurrences. He met art critic Mario Pedrosa and became interested in Gestalt theory and occupational therapy. Adon Peres writes, “The experience was to prove crucial for Geraldo, opening the way to far-ranging considerations on figure and form in relation to freedom of representation. Geraldo's work, likewise, took on an ethical and human dimension that it was to retain throughout his life.” In 1950, the Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP) invited de Barros to exhibit his photographs, and he showed a selection from his Fotoformas series. The exhibition led to a fellowship opportunity to study abroad in Europe. Ironically, his studies in Europe would redirect his artistic work away from photography. While traveling, he studied painting and printmaking, and met important artists and theorists including Max Bill, Giorgio Morandi, and Francois Morellet.

In 1952, de Barros returned to Brazil, and he became a central figure in São Paulo's Concrete art movement. Interested in industrial design and modernization processes, he founded a collectivist furniture factory, Unilabor, in 1954. “(He) became interested in concepts such as the industrialization of the artistic gesture, the reproducibility of works of art, and, as a natural progression, in design and graphic art,” Peres writes. His work was included in the 1956 Exposição Nacional de Arte Concreta in São Paulo and in the 1960 exhibition Konkrete Kunst, 50 Jahre Entwicklung, organized by Max Bill in Zürich. In the mid-1960s, he left Unilabor and founded Hobjeto furniture factory. He also became interested in the social criticisms offered by Pop Art; in 1964, he showed figurative paintings with Nelson Leirner.

Although internationally known for his innovations in photography, de Barros actively worked with the medium only during two periods of his life: 1945-1951, and 1996-1998. In 1993, his photographs from the earlier period were shown at the Musée de l'Élysée in Lausanne. This series of work, called the Fotoformas, drew from the techniques of engraving and collage.

De Barros made montages, superimposing images from the urban landscape of São Paulo over geometric forms. In failing health in the late 1990s, he returned to photography, creating a series of work called Sobras, in which he used family photographs as his support for collage, montage, and new geometric explorations. De Barros died in 1998.

Geraldo de Barros's works are included in numerous important collections, such as Chateaubriand Museum of Art, Brazil; Cisneros-Fontanals Art Foundation (CIFO), Miami, FL, USA; Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, New York, NY, USA; Contemporary Art Museum, Grenoble, France; Contemporary Art Museum of São Paulo, MAC-USP, Brazil São Paulo Assis; Curitiba Museum, Parana, Brazil; Elysée Museum, Lausanne, Switzerland; Ludwig Museum, Cologne, Germany; Max Bill Collection, Zürich, Switzerland; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH), Houston, TX, USA; Museum of Image and Sound, São Paulo, Brazil; Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, NY, USA; and Pinacoteca of the State of São Paulo, Brazil, among others.