

SÉRVULO ESMERALDO (1929-2017, Brazil/Brazil)

“Geometry describes everything that you see.”

Sculptor, engraver, draftsman, and kinetic artist Sérvulo Esmeraldo began his artistic career in the late 1940s in northern Brazil, where he attended the open studio of the Sociedade Cearense de Artes Plásticas in Fortaleza. In 1951, he moved to São Paulo to study architecture, his arrival coinciding fortuitously with the first Bienal de São Paulo. Interested in mathematics, geometry, and physics, Esmeraldo also studied mechanics, electricity, and optics; these studies continue to influence his artistic output.

Like many Latin American artists in the 1950s, Esmeraldo moved to Europe to continue his studies and pursue a career; he lived in France from 1957 to 1977. While there, he worked and lived in close contact with an expatriate Brazilian community of artists, including Vicente do Rego Monteiro, Lygia Clark, Sérgio de Camargo, Franz Krajcberg, Arthur Luiz Piza, Flávio-Shiró, and Rossini Peres. He took classes in printmaking at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, and learned metal engraving in the studio of Johnny Friedlaender. During his first years in France, he also made weekly visits to the National Library, where he studied prints by Albrecht Dürer. In 1959, he was invited to participate in the fifth Bienal de São Paulo, marking the growing recognition of his work. He simultaneously pursued commercial work designing book covers, magazine illustrations, and record album covers.

In the early 1960s, Esmeraldo began making paintings and art objects he called Excitables, works, which were activated by the static electricity from the viewer’s touch. “Charges run through them,” he noted, “jumping from element to element, modifying the structure of the composition.” Upon his return to Brazil in 1977, Esmeraldo started making public art projects. He organized two international exhibitions of ephemeral sculptures in 1986 and 1991, in which he invited artists from around the world to send designs for sculptures, to be completed and installed by preparators in his hometown of Ceará, Brazil. The exhibitions were unprecedented events in the history of public art production. Throughout Esmeraldo’s work—whether in printmaking, sculpture, or kinetic projects—a close observation of nature underpins his constructions. He returns consistently to the idea of line as an abstract value, and he observes, “For a question of temperament I was led to the purity of forms, balance, constraint, in short, simplicity...”

Sérvulo Esmeraldo’s works are represented in several major collections including Biblioteca Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Collections Publiques du Gouvernement Français, Paris, France; Museu de Arte Contemporânea de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil; Museu de Arte da Universidade Federal do Ceará, Fortaleza, Ceará, Brazil; Museu de Arte de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil; Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, Italy; and Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil.