

nara roesler



AGORA
RIGHT NOW
BERNA REALE

NARA ROESLER SÃO PAULO

OPENING MAY, 11PM—5PM

EXHIBITION MAY 28—JUL 23, 2022

CURATED BY CLAUDIA CALIRMAN

**berna reale,
agora: right now**
claudia calirman

Life changes in the instant

The ordinary instant

—Joan Didion¹

AGORA: *Right Now* portrays the violence-infused present that is everywhere, desecrating and devastating the here and now. The exhibition is marked by a sense of urgency, especially in light of the escalating social injustices inflicted by police brutality, violence against women, misery, wars and hate crimes against minorities. By creating portrayals of extreme situations, Berna Reale's work is playful at the same time that it borders on the absurd, causing astonishment and bewilderment.

For over a decade, Reale has performed the dual role of artist and criminal expert, working for the last two years at the CRF (Women's Reeducation Center) women's prison in Greater Belém, where she had direct contact with prisoners confined in various conditions: inmates in the secure wing—those who cannot live with the main prison population because they have committed crimes that are inadmissible under the prison law—prisoners who have already been convicted, those who are still awaiting trial and those living in semi-open conditions.

As a place of seclusion, the prison arouses curiosity. This closed world, surrounded by guards, barbed wire and surveillance cameras, provokes fascination and fear. Berna is an eyewitness to the reality behind the walls, turning her sharp and attentive gaze to the violations carried out on the bodies of the inmates.

In *Cabeça Raspada* and *Cabeças Raspadas*, prisoners are seen from the back, only from the shoulder up, with their light and dark skin and hair in buns held together by a handcuff. In these images, the inmates are not only captives of the prison system, but they are also stripped of their individuality.

In the prison system, braiding hair, painting nails, or wearing makeup is not permitted. They are symbols of femininity that, considered to be vain, are denied and abolished, obliterating self-esteem and any form of individualization. In this environment, apparatuses of power are at play to subjugate, humiliate and violate personal dignity with the aim of dehumanizing and objectifying bodies.

In *Acorda Alice*, a crossed female leg—reminiscent of the crucifix and therefore sacrifice—is tied to an electronic anklet. In it, you can see a tattoo, a stigmatized mark of prison culture. In *Vigiar e Punir* Michel Foucault notes that the detainees' bodily inscriptions are part of an inventory related to the 'semiology of crime', reinforcing the stigma of the criminal and their subculture.

Tattoos both reinforce the exclusion of prisoners from society and function as signs of resistance and an insistence on their own individuality. Instead of using banal feminine images such as hearts, arrows and cupids, in *Acorda Alice*, we see the figure of Alice in Wonderland.

In this paradoxical image, the tattoo is suspended between the real and the imaginary, the literal and the playful. At the same time that the tattoo points to a situation of incarceration, it escapes from that frame. In the image, Alice holds a magic potion, revealing a dreamlike moment, the desire to create some form of escape.

Ambiguity is also present in *Ligadas*, where three pairs of female legs are crossed, each with an electronic anklet. Immersed in a swimming pool, these devices can either allude to the semi-open

¹ DIDION, Joan. *The Year of the Magical Thinking*. New York: Vintage International, 3

prison conditions or the violence of the home; the role of women as domestic hostages.

With their vivid and saturated colors, Berna's images are reminiscent of the excesses of Pop Art. They operate in the space between theater and performance. Berna bets on the immersive power of the show to evoke intensity and shock.

Her images are carefully planned, scripted and rehearsed, with no room for chance. Props, hairstyles, costumes and choreography—everything is calculated down to the smallest detail for maximum effect.

In *Mina*, the artist herself appears with her face and torso marked by bruises and swelling. A red polka-dot ribbon around the mouth, nose and ears and a bow in her hair invokes the suggestion of Minnie Mouse. The title 'mina' has a double meaning, as it can either refer to the diminutive of 'girl' (menina) or to explosive mines.

In both cases, Berna invokes traps created under the sign of violence. With her face deformed, Berna sarcastically comments on female objectification, where women of all ages follow the same ideal standard of beauty. Instead of an enchanted world, what one finds is imprisonment and pain.

Violence against women is also present in disturbing images such as *Orfã*, where a girl is seen wearing a sacred print dress raised to her thighs, and in *Borboleta*, where panties made of bubble wrap try to protect what cannot be protected.

Both images refer to victims of child prostitution, pedophilia within the church and child trafficking. In *Gêmeas*, a Muslim woman covered from head to toe and a half-naked Indian woman are side by side, in front of a barbed wire fence. Despite coming from such different and distant cultures, both are still

living under patriarchal violence and oppression.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, in the face of her own confinement, Berna dedicated herself to painting. In *Cordeiro*, *No Quintal*, *Desistir*, *Ela Disse Não*, *Mulher Maravilha?* and *Olhe Pra Mim*, the images are raw and direct, exposing domestic brutality, gender intolerance and the atrocities of war.

In *Mulher Maravilha?* Berna depicts victims of rape and femicide. The colors of the American flag are stamped on the victim's underwear and boot. Bern asks: 'where is the empowerment of women in the face of so much violence?'

On a communal table similar to that found in prison cafeterias, aluminum cakes display images of knives, the most common weapon used in domestic violence crimes. Instead of sugar and affection, what you find is emptiness, loneliness and helplessness.

In *As Prisoneiras*, Dráuzio Varella describes that of all the torments of prison, abandonment is the one that afflicts the inmates the most. Permeating the exhibition is the creaking sound of cutlery on an aluminum plate, an allusion to hunger and misery. In *Blitz*, the artist personifies a policeman sucking an acrylic gun.

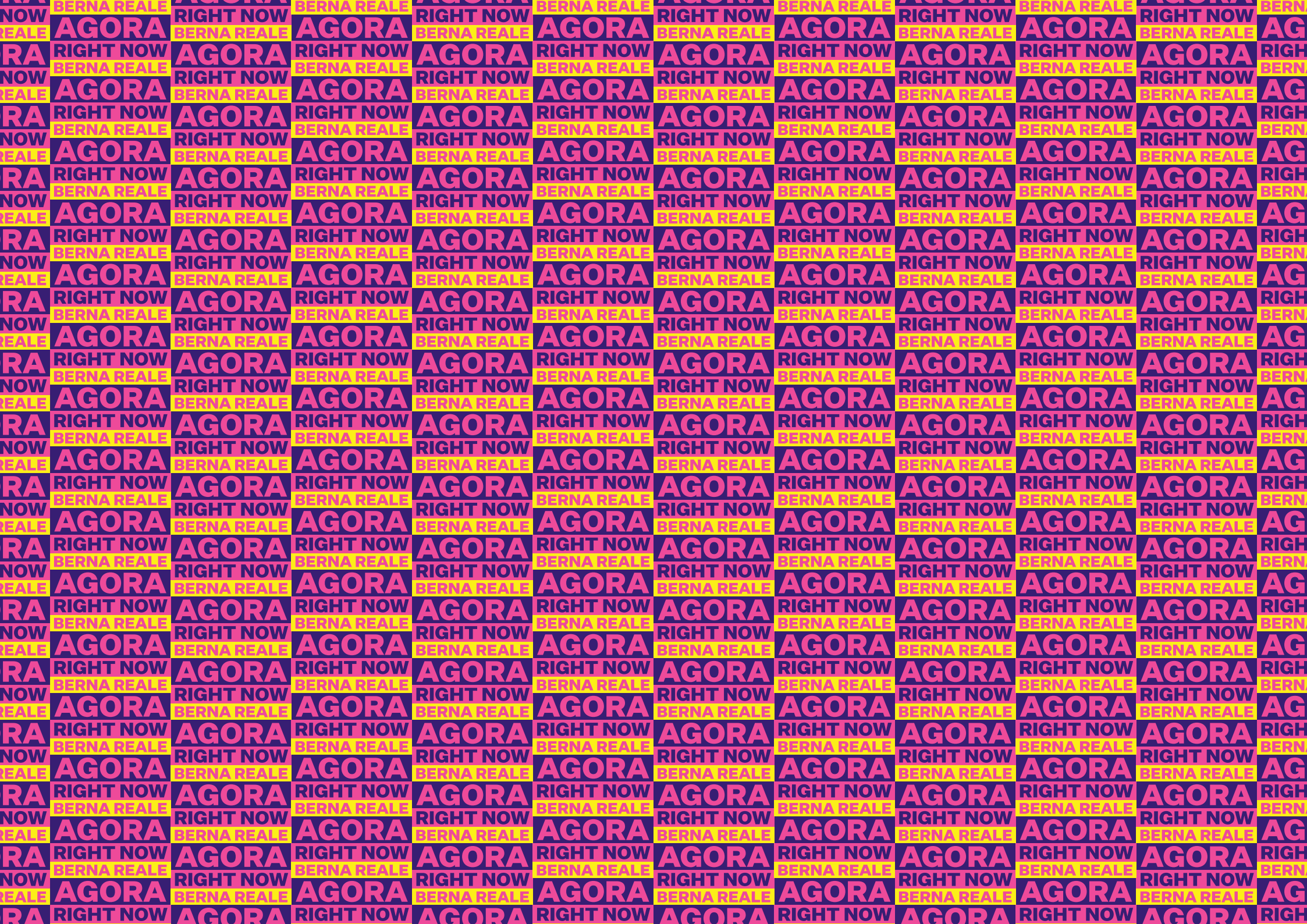
The image is again ambiguous: is he enjoying playing with the gun or is he ready to shoot himself? In *Playground*, a police officer is crouched amongst toy guns, a reference to the toxic masculinity instilled from childhood. Cartridges used by the police take the form of suppositories suggesting excrement.

Berna's work exposes apparatuses of necropolitics, a term used by theorist Achille Mbembe to denote a world plagued by growing inequality, militarization and terror, as well as the

resurgence of racist and fascist forces determined to exclude and kill those who are considered 'surplus, unwanted' or 'illegal' by society.

By drawing our focus towards various forms of social injustice, Berna has a clear aim. As disconcerting as they are, her images are no more brutal than the violence that surrounds us in the Now.

Claudia Calirman is an Associate Professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York, in the Department of Art and Music. She is the author of *Dissident Practices: Brazilian Women Artists, 1960s-2020s* (Duke University Press, 2023) and *Brazilian Art under Dictatorship: Antonio Manuel, Artur Barrio and Cildo Meireles* (Duke University Press, 2012/Reptil Editora 2014), which received the Arvey Award from the Association for Latin American Art (ALAA). Claudia is an Arts Writers Grant recipient from the Creative Capital/Warhol Foundation. She has curated several exhibitions including *Basta: Art and Violence in Latin America* (Anyar and Andrew Shiva Gallery, NY) and *Antonio Manuel: I Want to Act, not Represent!* (Americas Society, NY).



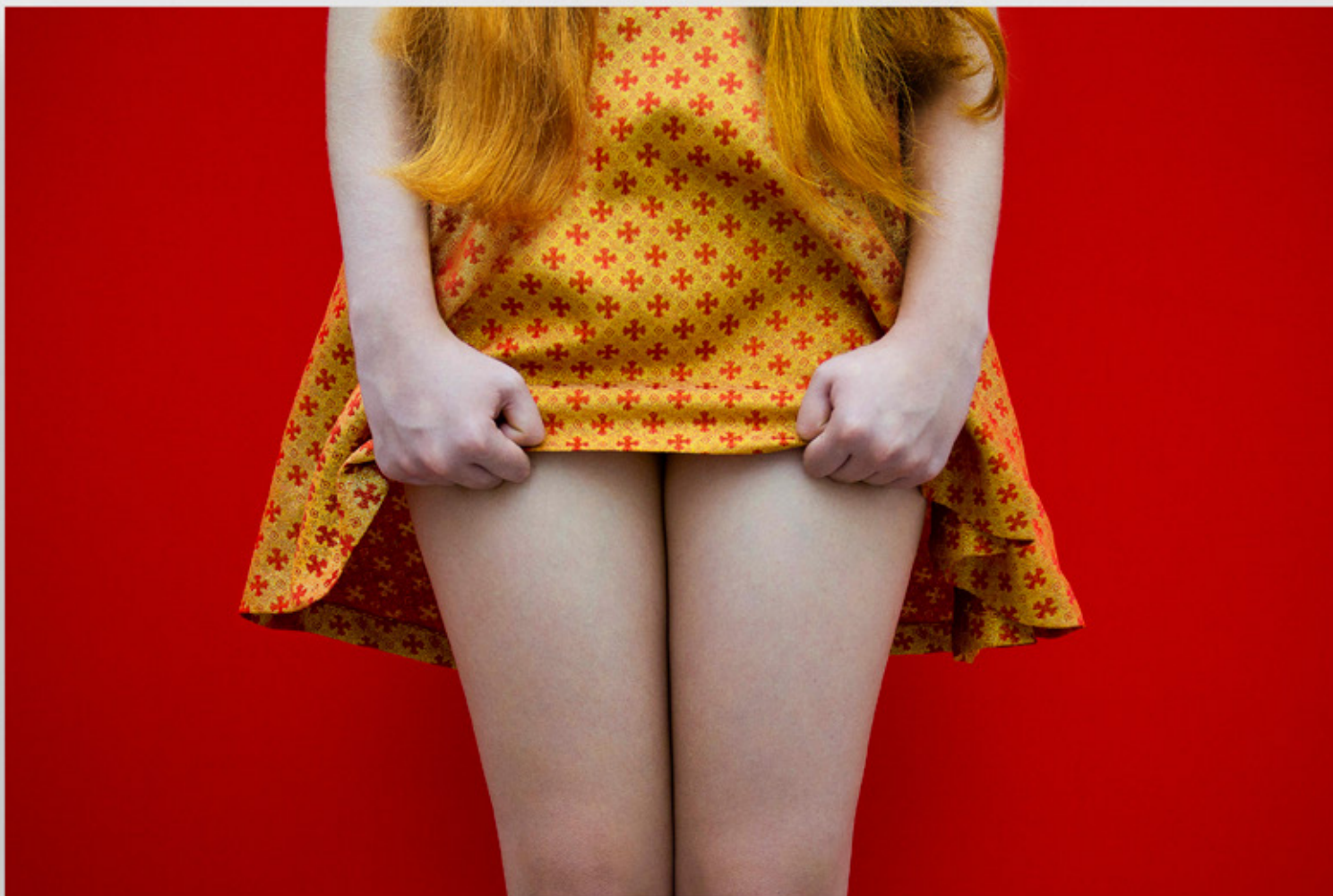


Gêmeas, 2022
print on cotton paper,
plexiglass face mounted
edition of 5 + 2 AP
100 x 150 cm | 39.4 x 59.1 in





Borboleta, 2022
print on cotton paper,
plexiglass face mounted
edition of 5 + 2 AP
100 x 150 cm | 39.4 x 59.1 in

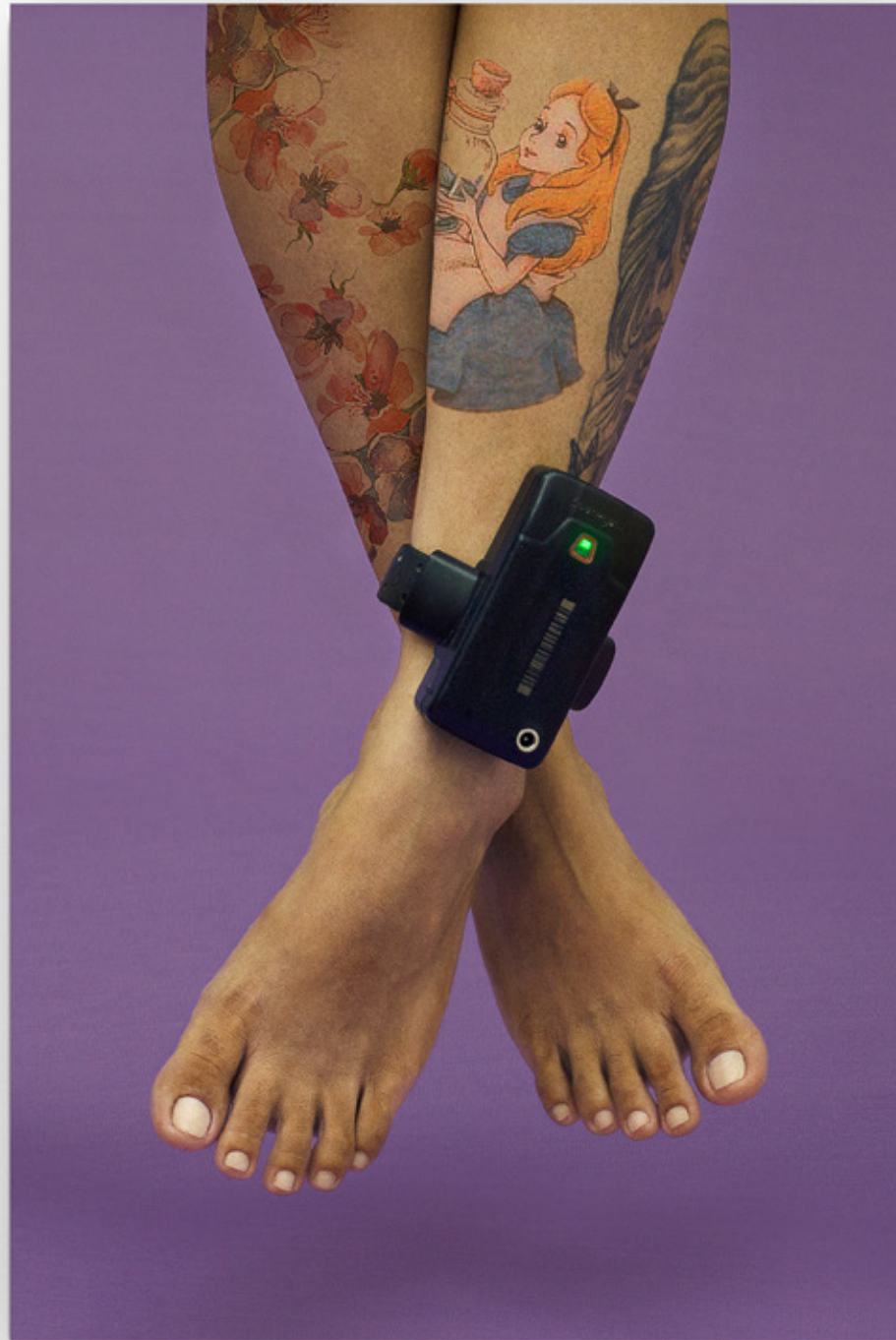


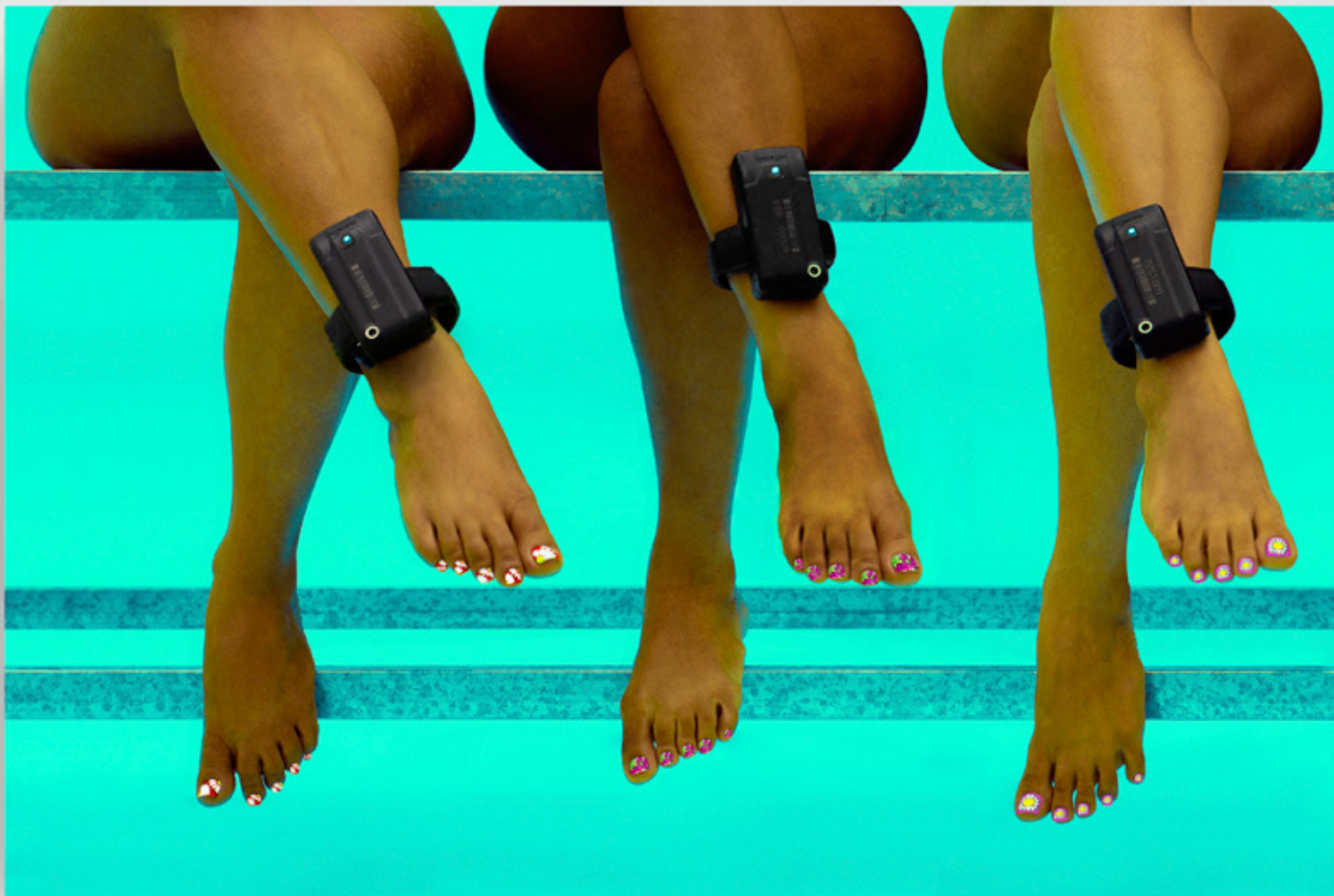
Órfã, 2022
print on cotton paper,
plexiglass face mounted
edition of 5 + 2 AP
100 x 150 cm | 39.4 x 59.1 in



Mina, 2022
print on cotton paper,
plexiglass face mounted
edition of 5 + 2 AP
100 x 150 cm | 39.4 x 59.1 in

Acorda Alice, 2022
print on cotton paper,
plexiglass face mounted
edition of 5 + 2 AP
150 x 100 cm | 59.1 x 39.4 in





Ligadas, 2022
print on cotton paper,
plexiglass face mounted
edition of 5 + 2 AP
100 x 150 cm | 39.4 x 59.1 in



Cabeça raspada, 2022
print on cotton paper,
plexiglass face mounted
edition of 5 + 2 AP
100 x 150 cm | 39.4 x 59.1 in

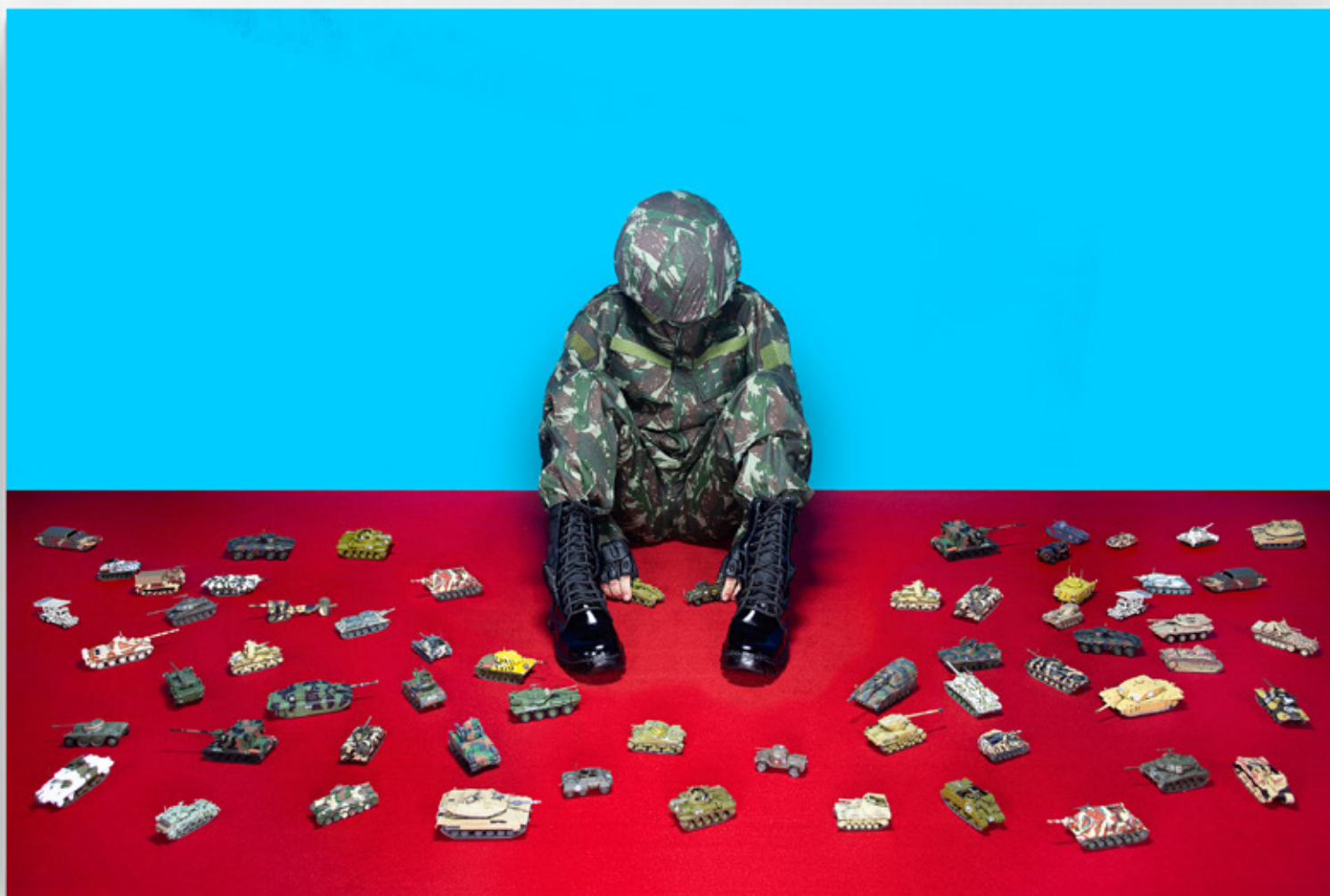


Cabeças Raspadas, 2022
print on cotton paper,
plexiglass face mounted
edition of 5 + 2 AP
100 x 150 cm | 39.4 x 59.1 in



Mesa posta, 2022
print on cotton paper,
plexiglass face mounted
edition of 5 + 2 AP
100 x 150 cm | 39.4 x 59.1 in





Playground, 2019
print on cotton paper,
plexiglass face mounted
edition of 5 + 2 AP
100 x 150 cm | 39.4 x 59.1 in



Blitz, 2022
print on cotton paper,
plexiglass face mounted
edition of 5 + 2 AP
100 x 150 cm | 39.4 x 59.1 in

Ela disse não, 2022
oil paint on steel
122 x 100 cm | 48 x 39.4 in





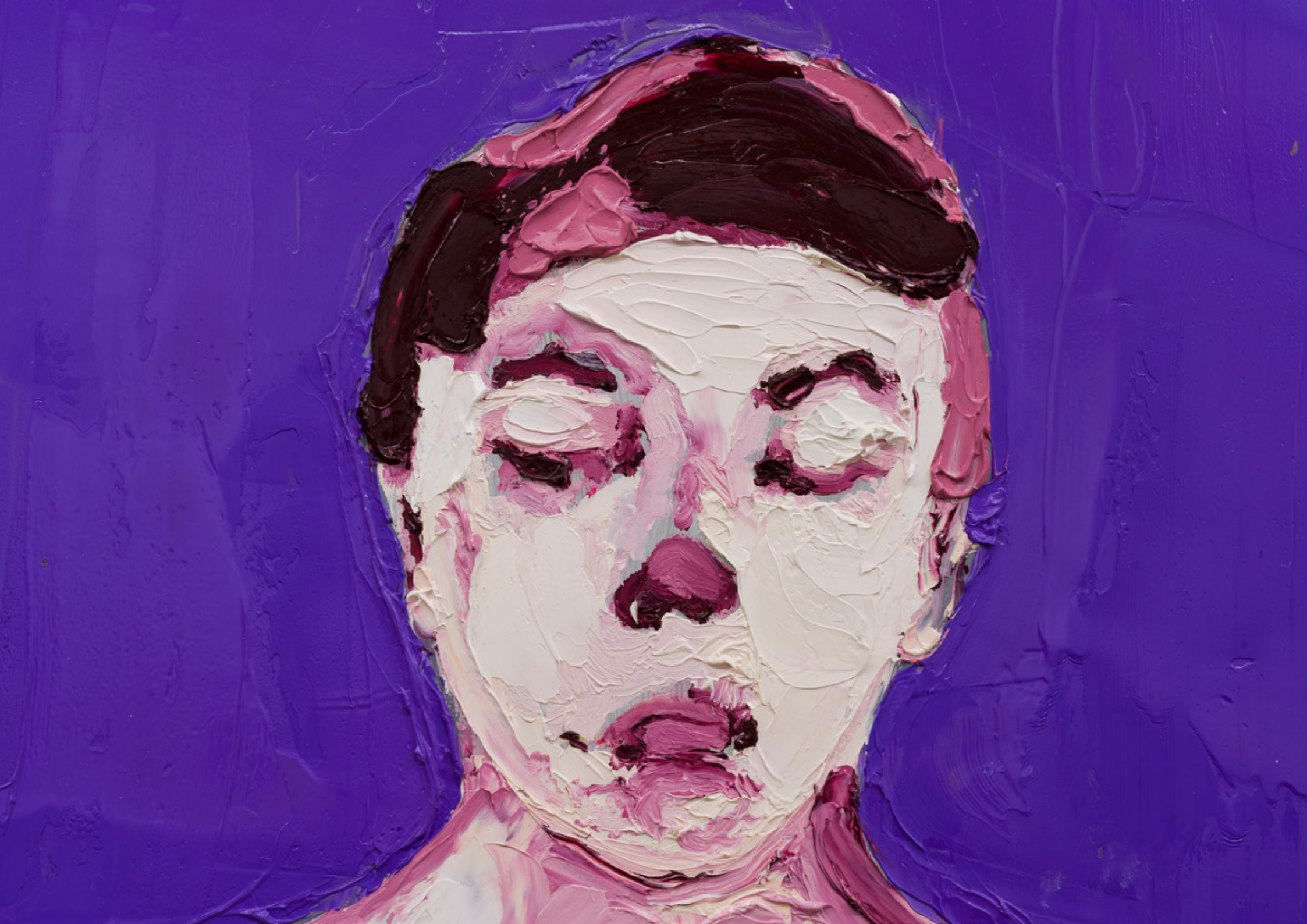
Mulher Maravilha?, 2022
oil paint on steel
60 x 200 cm | 23.6 x 78.7 in





Cordeiro, 2022
oil paint on steel
127 x 91 cm | 50 x 35.8 in





No quintal, 2022
oil paint on steel
122 x 100 cm | 48 x 39.4 in







Desistir, 2022
oil paint on steel
121 x 101 cm | 47.6 x 39.8 in







berna reale

b. 1965, Belém do Pará, Brazil, where she lives and works

Berna Reale is one of Brazil's most important contemporary artists. She is mostly known for her performance based work, which she has been developing since the 1990s. She first received public attention in 2006 at the 25th Art Salon of Pará, following her presentation of *Cerne*. The work consists of a photographic intervention carried out at the meat market located in Ver-o-Peso, a traditional center for street markets and stands bustling with tourists and local shoppers in Belém, Brazil.

Since then, the artist has been exploring and developing the idea of using her own body as the central aesthetic element of her images and performances, through which she aims to denounce social problems and injustices. Her work critically engages with the theme of violence, exploring its symbolic and physical representations, and the inevitable shadow of censorship, as a means of revealing the importance of image-making when it comes to maintaining freedom of thought. The strength of Berna Reale's imagery lies in eliciting a desire to get closer, countered by a sense of repulsion - an ambivalence reminiscent of the irony in Brazilian society's fascination for and disgust of violence. Importantly, Berna Reale's work has come to heavily depend on photography as a tool for not only registering, but also perpetuating and disseminating her actions once the performance is over.

selected solo exhibitions

- *While You Laugh*, Nara Roesler, New York, USA (2019)
- *Festa*, Viaduto das Artes, Belo Horizonte, Brazil (2019)
- *Deformation*, Bergkirche, Wiesbaden, Germany (2017)
- *Berna Reale – Über uns / About Us*, Kunsthaus, Wiesbaden, Germany (2017)
- *Berna Reale: Singing in the Rain*, Utah Museum of Contemporary Art (UMoCA), Salt Lake City, USA (2016)
- *Vazio de nós*, Museu de Arte do Rio (MAR), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2013)

selected group exhibitions

- 3rd Beijing Photo Biennial, China (2018)
- 56th Venice Biennale, Italy (2015)
- *Brasile. Il coltello nella carne*, Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea Milano (PAC-Milano), Milan, Italy (2018)
- *Video Art in Latin America, Il Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA (II PST: LA/LA)*, LAXART, Hollywood, USA (2017)
- *Artistas comprometidos? Talvez*, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian (FCG), Lisbon, Portugal (2014)

selected institutional collections

- Instituto Itaú Cultural, São Paulo, Brazil
- Kunsthaus Wiesbaden, Wiesbaden, Germany
- Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM-SP), São Paulo, Brazil
- Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro (MAM Rio), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

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