

## Adriana Varejão Polvo

16 October - 9 November 2013

**Victoria Miro Gallery is delighted to present a new body of work by Adriana Varejão in her fourth solo presentation at the gallery. One of the most original voices in contemporary Brazilian art, Varejão's diverse practice comprises painting, sculpture, photography and installation. Her sources are many, encompassing baroque art, history, architectural ruins, natural sciences and theatre.**

Varejão has long been fascinated by themes of miscegenation and skin colour, and she explores these subjects in a fresh way in this new body of work. *Polvo* addresses the ambivalent notion of interracial identity in Brazil, where historically race has assumed a social and cultural function.

The official Brazilian census categorises people into five different groups according to their skin colour: white, black, red, yellow and brown. In 1976, however, a household survey conducted by the IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) posed the open question 'What is your colour?' The result was 135 distinct terms whose meanings are far more figurative than literal.

For *Polvo*, Varejão has created her own oil paints, named after thirty-three definitions of skin colour taken from the 1976 survey. The artist selected some of the more exotic and poetic terms, including *Fogoio* (Fox on Fire Red), *Enxofrada* (Angry Sulphur), *Café com Leite* (Milky Coffee), *Branquinha* (Snow White), *Burro-quando-foge* (Faded Fawn), *Cor Firme* (Steady Colour), *Morenão* (Big Black Dude), *Encerada* (Buffed) and *Queimada de Sol* (Sun Kissed).

Varejão also presents an installation of eleven self-portraits painted in an academic style using these paints. The skin tones in the paintings range in various shades from dark to light.

The artist has created a brand *Polvo* (Octopus) and a logo for the paints featuring an octopus, a creature famous for using its ink in defense. Octopus ink contains melanin, the same substance that gives colour to human hair and skin.

The artist's initial inspiration for these works comes from *casta* painting, a seventeenth- and eighteenth-century genre characteristic of New Spain and particularly prevalent in colonial Mexico. In the post-Conquest period, *casta* paintings sought to document the varieties of interracial mixing in the New World in an attempt to classify and frame racial diversity and hybridity through a complex *casta* system.

The *casta* system developed by colonial Spaniards helped establish and perpetuate a rigid hierarchical taxonomy based on notions of purity associated with whiteness. The concept was derived from the Latin *castus*, which literally means 'keep pure'. Using more than one hundred categories of racial intermixing, the *casta* system classified a broad spectrum of combinations of white, black, Indian and mixed-race heritage. Those considered 'pure bred' were recognised as part of the nobility and held greater economic and social power. Even at this early stage in Latin American history, those of black and mixed-race heritage occupied less privileged positions.

With *Polvo* Varejão emphasises how colour acts as a language and lexicon. These works allow us to rethink our own systems of chromatic classification and the social processes that are expressed through them.

## Walking List | Victoria Miro No. 14

Clockwise from entrance.



**Adriana Varejão**  
*Polvo Oil Colours*, 2013  
Wooden box with acrylic cover,  
containing 33 aluminium oil paint  
tubes  
36 x 51 x 8 cm  
14 1/8 x 20 1/8 x 3 1/8 in



**Adriana Varejão**  
*Polvo Portraits II*, 2013  
Oil on canvas  
3 parts. Each part 80 x 65 cm  
31 1/2 x 25 5/8 in



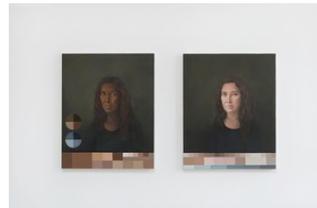
**Adriana Varejão**  
*Polvo Oil Colours*, 2013  
Wooden box with acrylic cover,  
containing 33 aluminium oil paint  
tubes  
36 x 51 x 8 cm  
14 1/8 x 20 1/8 x 3 1/8 in



**Adriana Varejão**  
*Polvo Portraits III*, 2013  
Oil on canvas  
3 parts. Each part 80 x 65 cm  
31 1/2 x 25 5/8 in



**Adriana Varejão**  
*Polvo Portraits I*, 2013  
Oil on canvas  
3 parts. Each part 80 x 65 cm  
31 1/2 x 25 5/8 in



**Adriana Varejão**  
*Polvo Portraits IV*, 2013  
Oil on canvas  
2 parts. Each part 80 x 65 cm  
31 1/2 x 25 5/8 in