

Philadelphia Exhibits Spotlight Historic Women Architects

BY ILANA HERZIG

Lina Bo Bardi—A Marvellous Entanglement
Philadelphia Museum of Art

A swirl of red fabric flashes across a screen in a video installation, foregrounding the helical staircase of architect Lina Bo Bardi’s Museu de Arte Moderna da Bahia in Salvador, Brazil that mirrors the curving stairs opposite in the Frank Gehry–designed Williams Forum at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (RECORD, June 2021). It is on one of a pyramid of nine screens there across which Isaac Julien displays the life and work of Italian-born Bo Bardi (1914–92), in an arrangement suspended within the cathedral-like space. Entitled *Lina Bo Bardi—A Marvellous Entanglement*, the London artist and filmmaker’s 40-minute video homage to this giant of Brazilian Modernism opened in late January and runs through May 29.

Interweaving past and present, *A Marvellous Entanglement* showcases Bo Bardi’s unorthodox architectural forms in Brazil, as well as her various manifestos on everything from design to politics. The video—scored by German-Spanish composer Maria de Alvear and edited by Julien’s longtime collaborator Adam Finch—revives Bo Bardi’s works as props, dialogue, and stages for theatrical presentations in the multiscreen video installation.

Born in Rome as Achilina di Enrico Bo, the architect, designer, and scenographer—known for her humanist design approach and bold forms—championed functionality and adaptive reuse. Her projects span the Brutalist Social Service of Commerce (SESC) Pompéia (1982), a drum factory turned multiuse cultural center; Museu de Arte Moderna da Bahia (1960), a project relocated to a 17th-century colonial estate; the glass and concrete São Paulo Museum of Art (1968); the street-theater inspired Teatro Oficina (1994); and Restaurante Coati (1990), the “modern ruin” of a housing complex and café perched on what was deemed the Slope of Mercy by enslaved Africans in Salvador.

“I wanted to make a poetic meditation on her work,” says Julien, “a film that would emerge from the process of filming itself.” Julien first encountered Bo Bardi’s work in the 1990s through the Goethe Institut, which would later grant him entry to the previously inaccessible Coati and then, more formally, in



Bo Bardi, as played by Fernanda Torres, at a Brazilian museum (above), from the series *Um maravilhoso emaranhado/ A Marvellous Entanglement*, which has accompanied other versions of the installation now in Philadelphia (left).

2012, when he showcased his installation grappling with geography and identity, *Geopoetics*, at SESC Pompéia.

Julien reinterprets Bo Bardi’s architecture in São Paulo and Salvador through performances by actresses Fernanda Montenegro and her daughter Fernanda Torres, Brazilian art collective Plataforma Araká, and Balé Folclórico da Bahia dance company. Against the backdrop of SESC Pompéia’s cave opening—inspired windows or Oficina’s narrow, scaffolding-lined corridor, the Brazilian mother-daughter duo reenact the Modernist’s musings on the complexities of museum spac-

es. Within the corrugated concrete of Restaurante Coati, Araká and choreographer Zebriinha portray Bo Bardi’s meditations on “Poor Architecture” and simplicity of form using clay and mirrors. Upon the wooden steps of MAM-BA, Julien’s team directs the spiraling motion of Balé Folclórico dancers.

Clips of archival elements are interspersed with the performances, elucidating Bo Bardi’s response to Afro-Brazilian diasporic histories and the slave trade as well as engaging with Julien’s reparative reinterpretations. Footage of Pierre Verger’s 1950s photographs of Bahian culture projected on billowing textiles

PHOTOGRAPHY © ISAAC JULIEN 2019 (TOP); TIMOTHY TIEBOUT, COURTESY PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART (BOTTOM)

and Candomblé religious processions interlace with images of the 1964 fascist military coup in Brazil and artist Goya Lopes's commemoration of Black queer activist Marielle Franco, killed in 2018.

Entanglement introduces a conversation between architects and forms. Parallels emerge between communal spaces that invite everyday integration with art, sinuous stairs, and porous apertures contributing to a sense of place. According to PMA curator of contemporary art Erica Battle, Bo Bardi's revolutionary exhibition displays at São Paulo's art museum—glass easels buttressed by concrete plinths—also informed *Entanglement's* arrangement of screens, suspended from theatri-



The New Century Club of Wilmington in Delaware (1893) was converted into the Delaware Children's Theater.

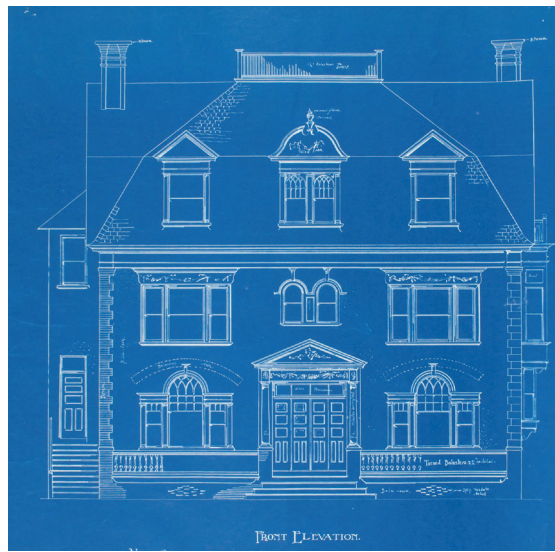
cal rigging or supported by wood blocks at the Williams Forum. “We tried to work site-specifically,” says Julien, “with the verticality of the atrium to reveal more of the choreography and to highlight, pictorially, the curvature of the stairs and presentation of the screens.”

Julien's installation reimagines Bo Bardi's adaptive-reuse projects, in conversation with Gehry's work at the museum, incorporating new themes and introducing those excluded from institutional histories. His tribute to Bo Bardi excavates the architectural history of her adopted country, reanimating projects she constructed while adding his own art forms and actors to reclaim and reveal once-obfuscated narratives.

“The real Lina Bo Bardi has an enigmatic presence in the work,” Julien says. “Through our research, reconstruction, and performative rearticulation, we tried to contemporize her for a new audience.”

Minerva Parker Nichols: The Search for a Forgotten Architect *University of Pennsylvania*

“I've always been interested in the ways women have shaped the built environment,” says Molly Lester, an architectural historian and associate director of the Urban Heritage Project at the University of Pennsylvania. Lester's decade-plus of research underpins a survey of architect Minerva Parker Nichols, presented by the Architectural Archives at the University of Pennsylvania Stuart Weitzman School of Design. Nichols was the first woman in the United States to practice architecture independently. Alongside photographer Elizabeth



Drawing School and the Pennsylvania Museum and School of Industrial Art. These early experiences navigating residential spaces informed her architecture, which became her specialty.

Garnering the attention of the press, she opened her Philadelphia office by early 1889. Though “novelty only got her so far,” Lester insists. “Beyond that, she actually had to prove herself—and she did.” Lester credits Parker Nichols and her Philadelphia contemporaries with setting architectural standards along the Pennsylvania Railroad route, in areas not yet recognized as formal towns.

Her work soon grew to encompass spaces instrumental in the suffrage movement and related social causes.

Moving within a mosaic of suffragist leaders on the national stage, Parker Nichols designed flexible spaces and scaled-up residences for gathering and organizing. In the 1890s, she completed a pair of New Century Clubs, one in Philadelphia and one in Wilmington, Delaware—the first women's club designed by a woman—and suffragist Rachel Foster Avery's house, which featured grand pocket doors that opened to connect rooms for large meetings.

“She's not taking the platform herself, but making suffrage possible in these spaces,” says Lester.

Despite a prolific career, mentions in more than 600 international newspapers, and a headlined *New York Times* obituary following her death in 1949, Parker Nichols faded from memory. Lester suggests this might have been due to the lack of a university or organization to do the remembering (Parker Nichols came up through apprenticeships and never joined the AIA).

“Within the established canon of who's worth remembering, she didn't fit,” says Lester. Yet her success, which paved the way for many others, has finally brought her story into the spotlight.

Accompanied by a publication containing Parker Nichols's catalogue raisonné, *The Search for a Forgotten Architect* will be on view and free to the public through June 17. ■

Felicella and curator William Whitaker, Lester has documented many of Nichols's over 80 known projects, to “create an archive in the absence of one.”

Opening March 21 at the Harvey & Irwin Kroiz Gallery, *Minerva Parker Nichols: The Search for a Forgotten Architect* will showcase Felicella's photographs of surviving works, in concert with archival images, drawings, and documents provided by the architect's descendants. In her role as cocurator and lead scholar, Lester aims “to stitch Minerva's story back together and make the case that she's significant, despite the fact that you haven't heard of her yet.”

Born in 1862 in Timber Township, Illinois, and raised by a single mother, Parker Nichols moved from Chicago to Philadelphia, where she worked as a governess while attending classes at the Franklin Institute

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