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The Brazilian Artist Who Listens to Minerals

At SculptureCenter in Queens, Luana Vitra's show "Amulets" draws you in with its beauty. Then it drives home the tragic underpinnings of mining.

Luana Vitra is one of Brazil's fastest-rising young artists, and "Amulets" is one of her largest installations to date.

By Siddhartha Mitter

Reporting from Belo Horizonte, Brazil

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Leer en español

The car sped southward from Belo Horizonte, the highway climbing out from Brazil's third-largest city into the surrounding hills. Red dust from oncoming convoys of heavy trucks drifted onto the windshield. On board, Luana Vitra — one of Brazil's fastest-rising young artists and the offspring of a long lineage of manual workers in this rugged, iron-mining region in the southeastern state of Minas Gerais — was offering a quick précis of the land and local temperament.

"We have a culture that is made from iron," Vitra said. "What our ancestors lived inside the mines made us the way we are now." People in Minas Gerais, she said, were shaped by a legacy of watching out for others and forming survival strategies in mines where labor was exploited and collapses were frequent. Her grandfather, she added, attributed his longevity to the prayer to Saint George — who is associated in Afro-Brazilian religion with Ogun, the spirit of iron and metallurgy — that he kept tucked in his helmet. "Iron is very much in my history," she said.

The daughter of a carpenter and a teacher, Vitra grew up in Contagem, a city in the Belo Horizonte agglomeration known for its concentration of heavy industry. Now, at 30, she has emerged as one of the most visible and distinctive — in Brazil and abroad — of a wave of young Black Brazilian artists who are finding new languages with which to explore their histories and connect to the world.

She places her region's materials — particularly iron ore and copper — at the heart of elegant, often room-scaled installations, their characteristic reddish tones set against deep blue fabric or painted backgrounds. The compositions extend to beads, ceramics, glass and clean-drawn lines on various surfaces. They favor symmetry, with a ritual feel that nods to Afro-Brazilian religion — the metal arrows, the talismans — but also to broader and nonspecific sacred geometries.

Shaping every installation, she said, is an “equation” — not mathematical but metaphorical, calibrating the emotional architecture that results from particular material combinations, as if working from “a periodic table with feelings connected to minerals.”

Two of Luana Vitra’s works at SculptureCenter: “Dança” (“Dance”), foreground, and “Terremoto” (“Earthquake”), background, both from 2025.Credit...Elliott Jerome Brown Jr. for The New York Times

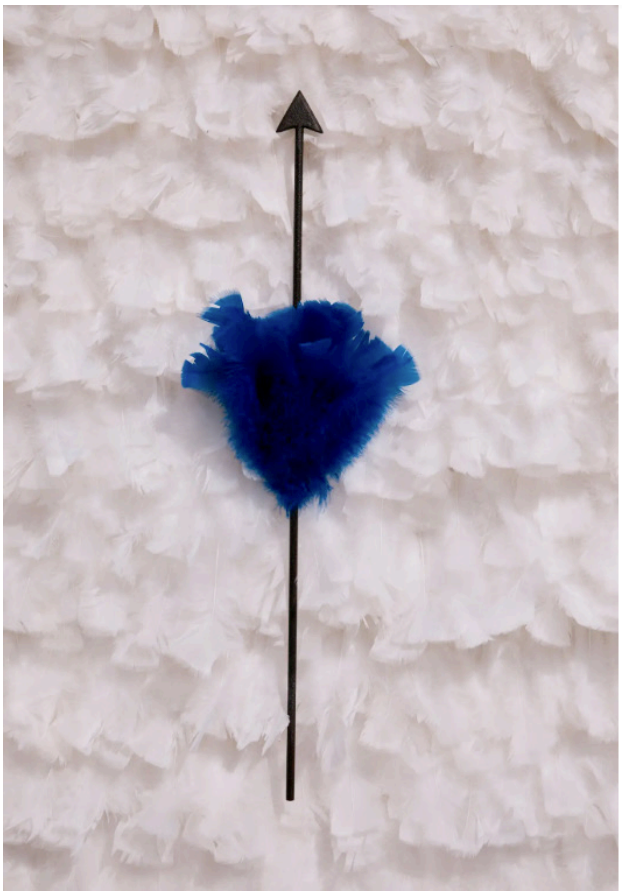
This season, Vitra — who has already shown in prestigious venues like the 2023 São Paulo and 2025 Sharjah biennials — has taken over the main space of SculptureCenter in Queens, through July 28, with "Amulets," one of her largest installations to date, and one that is characteristically precise.

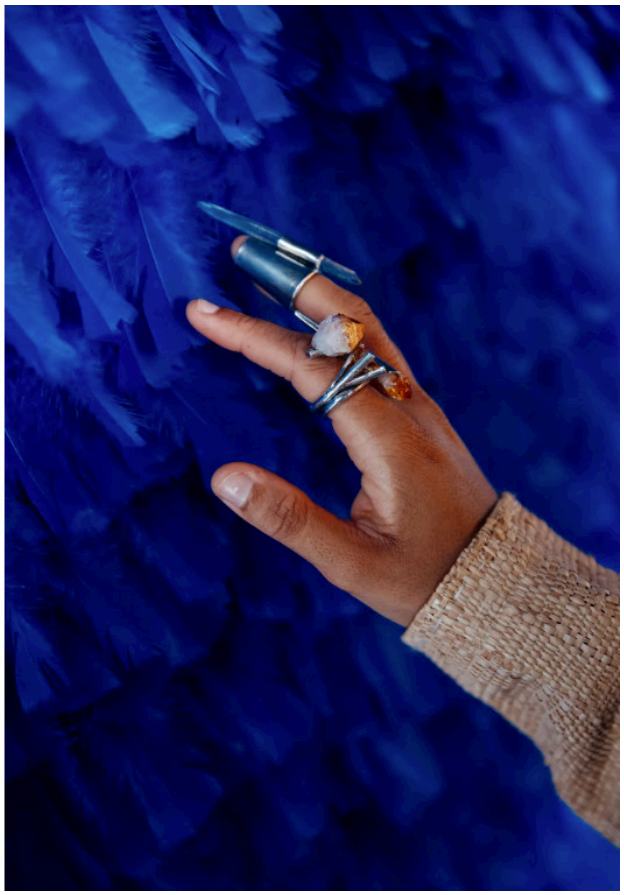
Metal arrows rise from urns or dangle from textile-swaddled stems. They pierce iron rocks or hold the center of anchor bowls set with crystals and stones. Clay vessels are wrapped in white fabric and studded with nails. Iron, crystals and gemstones — selenite, sodalite, kyanite — are arranged on rectangles of sand. Walls of feathers, dyed white and deep blue, soften the space.

Though the materials were assembled on site, they were shipped from Minas Gerais — a prerequisite for Vitra, for whom local minerals carry histories as specific as her own. Her region's iron tells its own distinct story; her position is to listen and channel this information. "I'm interested in the perspective of the matter," she said. "I'm thinking about its desire, trying to understand its subjectivity."

For Jovanna Venegas, the SculptureCenter curator who organized the show, it's Vitra's insistent commitment to her terrain that makes her art resonate beyond the region. "So much of Luana's work is about Minas," Venegas said. "It departs, of course, into other dimensions, of materiality and sculpture and spirituality. But it was important that the iron come from there." (Only the sand was sourced in New York, Venegas said.)

On the road, Vitra noted a row of trees along the highway. They concealed an enormous open-pit iron mine, Capão Xavier, one of many in this area, known as the Iron Quadrangle, whose scale is undeniable on satellite images even if hidden at ground level.





“They’ll plant trees to block it,” she said. For all the verdant beauty, she said, many of the surrounding mountains were similarly ravaged. “That’s the reality of the landscape here,” she said. “Everything is super beautiful, but completely destroyed.”

The minerals, she noted, were here long before humans intervened. “The minerals exist,” she added. “Sometimes I think that all we do is disorganize everything. Other times I think we are part of it: We have these minerals inside us. Still, when I look at the mines, I can get a bit angry about humanity.”

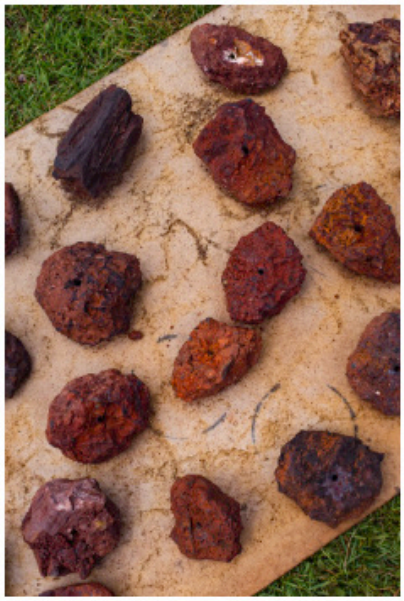
Minas Gerais — the name means “general mines” — has been an extraction zone since its first gold rush in the 17th century. It became Brazil’s largest destination for enslaved labor, a practice that was only formally abolished in 1888. Today the region produces half of Brazil’s iron, plus gold, zinc, lithium and niobium. The environmental fallout includes horrors like the Brumadinho dam disaster of 2019, where 272 villagers perished in a toxic surge of liquefied iron-mining waste when an iron-ore tailings dam collapsed.

Vitra won't look away. But where some artists might channel such material into visual investigations rich with documentary footage and interactive databases — think of the work of Forensic Architecture on petrochemical pollution and its disproportionate racial impact in south Louisiana, for example — her method is at once more personal and more abstract. Minerals, she argues, shape us in more ways than economics or public health can grasp.

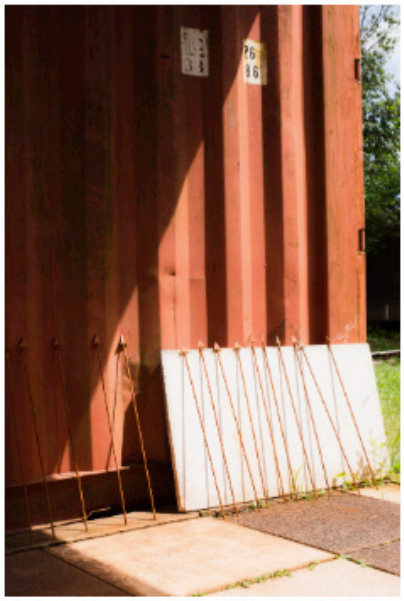
For Hélio Menezes, former director of the Museu Afro Brasil in São Paulo and a curator of the 2023 São Paulo biennial — where Vitra's installation included silver and copper canaries, alluding to both the danger of suffocation in mines and dreams of freedom — she has "dismantled in a very sophisticated way" any remaining art-world assumptions that work by Black artists — particularly Black female artists — be principally figuration or self portraiture.

Instead, Menezes characterized her work as a way to imagine a relationship beyond exploitation for humans and minerals. "When she researches metals and minerals, she thinks of them not in economic terms, but asks if we could speak their language, what would they tell us? She opens a speculation on how to create a vocabulary, a common language between metals, minerals and us."

Vitra prepared the SculptureCenter show in residence at JA.CA, an art center in Nova Lima, outside Belo Horizonte, built from colorfully accessorized shipping containers; one served as her apartment, up a staircase with a mine view. When we met in April, the work was en route to New York, but she pointed out leftover materials — chunks of hematite rock, rust-red with gray speckles — and she estimated their iron content and where on the mountain they came from.



Iron-rich rocks used for Luana Vitra's sculptures, seen at the art center in Minas Gerais where she prepared her new works. via the artist; Photo by Nina Morais



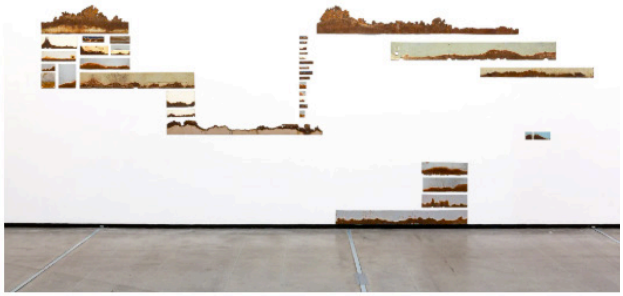
A supply of metal arrows, a frequent element in Vitra's installations. via the artist; Photo by Nina Morais

The Minas Gerais terrain and history have inspired distinctive art practices. One of Vitra's teachers at the art school of the State University of Minas Gerais was Solange Pessoa, whose sculptures often refer to the area's natural materials and its architecture and archaeology. Around town, Vitra often saw Paulo Nazareth, the multidisciplinary artist who journeys by foot and bus across the Americas when not in Palmital, a hardscrabble hillside settlement where he hosts community gatherings; he became a mentor and friend.

But as Vitra's own visual language took shape, she found a key prompt at home. Amid her father's bric-a-brac on their terrace were rusted metal cans — improvised planters from a project he once envisioned of planting trees in the neighborhood. Years of oxidation had left them jagged; when they were flattened, Vitra found, they resembled ridges and tree lines.

It was as if the manufactured product, now decaying, yearned to go home. This insight — part material, part poetic — would birth "Desejo-Ruína" ("Ruin Desire"), a series of works debuting her artistic engagement with iron. "When natural materials are removed from their origin," she wrote in a description of that series, "they carry within themselves a desire for ruin, which is what returns them to their original state."

Installation view of “Giro,” 2023, Luana Vitra’s ongoing exhibition at Inhotim, the contemporary art museum and botanic garden in Minas Gerais state, Brazil. Victor Galvão



The series “Desejo-Ruina” (“Desire-Ruin”) is made from rust-eroded metal cans that Luana Vitra flattened into wall-mounted pieces, having observed that their jagged forms recalled mountain ridges and tree lines. It marked the start of her work with metals and minerals. via Tomie Ohtake Institute

Nowadays Vitra operates at large scale. (In addition to SculptureCenter, she has an ongoing installation at Inhotim, the art institution and botanic garden outside Belo Horizonte, that fills a former wood shop; later this year she will appear in the Thailand Biennale, in Phuket.) But her relationship to the materials remains intimate, attentive to the poetic and spiritual possibilities connecting them.

“Copper is softer than iron,” she said, as an example. “When you touch it, if your hands are warm, it will warm very fast; iron will not.” Properties like density, resilience, conductivity, carry meanings far beyond economic use. Thus, to connect copper with clay is to join a material that is conductive to one that isolates. “Both energies are necessary for transcendence,” she said.

The artist, walking through her installation, “Amulets,” through July 28 at SculptureCenter. “I want to understand how the invisible moves,” she said. Elliott Jerome Brown Jr. for The New York Times

Running through Vitra's project is the belief that relations among beings and with nature can be far richer and more reciprocal than the violence of extraction. This is, in some ways, an age-old notion in many traditions. But for Gabi Ngcobo, a South African curator who runs Kunstinstituut Melly in Rotterdam — where she held an exhibition by Vitra in 2024 — it's also a growing interest, driven by young artists in the Global South.

"Luana has an ability to translate ancestral intelligences," Ngcobo said. "I see that as a movement of a lot of artists, in Brazil but also on the continent in Africa, who are not shy to go toward these questions in order to understand something about the future." "It's very futuristic to use these technologies that were stripped away from us to reconnect or remember," Ngcobo added.

Having refined her method in Minas Gerais, Vitra is exploring other knowledge systems — of Zulu bead-makers in South Africa, weavers in Ghana. "I want to understand how the invisible moves," she said, paraphrasing the Brazilian philosopher Denise Ferreira da Silva: "Our work is to return complexity to the world."

Siddhartha Mitter writes about art and creative communities in the United States, Africa and elsewhere. Previously he wrote regularly for The Village Voice and The Boston Globe and he was a reporter for WNYC Public Radio.