

INTERNATIONAL Valor

The poetics of iron

Drawing on metal as a symbol of her roots, Luana Vitra is gaining growing international recognition—and is already preparing for the next Thailand Biennial

By Nina Rahe — São Paulo

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Luana Vitra. Photo: Vicente Otavio

When Luana Vitra was setting up “Pulmão da Mina” (“Mine’s Lung”), her installation at the 35th São Paulo Biennial in 2023, she was caught off guard by an earthquake. A multitude of strings from the piece—featuring small bird sculptures paired with metal arrows—intertwined three columns of the pavilion so tightly that two of them actually shifted.

The scare wasn't too serious: the structures were reinforced with tie rods, and when the columns moved, they stabilized in their new position, although a few cables snapped. While the exhibition team rushed to run calculations and assess the risk of heritage damage, Ms. Vitra, 30, saw that there was no danger and interpreted the movement as something almost spiritual.

Now exhibiting at the Sculpture Center in New York and preparing for the upcoming Thailand Biennale, the artist has long understood the power of minerals, seeing them as a medium for storing and transforming energy.

Born and raised in Contagem—one of the many cities in Minas Gerais shaped by mining activity—Ms. Vitra creates works that are deeply tied to her family's history. In "Pulmão da Mina," for example, she references how miners used canaries to detect air quality, interpreting the birds' silence as a sign that toxic gases had overtaken the environment. Her great-grandfather died of silicosis, a disease caused by inhaling dust linked to mining work.

Due to this biographical connection, most interpretations of Ms. Vitra's work focus on the relationship between her objects and her personal narrative. But what interests her above all is something more elemental: understanding what draws iron dust to a magnet, or how metal melts when fused with another.

For Ms. Vitra, origin doesn't necessarily mean Minas Gerais, but rather the element itself—iron, which forms the core of Earth and other rocky planets, and is found in asteroids and interstellar dust. "When I think about where I came from, I think about iron," she says. "And since it is present all over the world, if I have it nearby, I know I am home."

While living in Belo Horizonte, Ms. Vitra would often walk through the iron-rich mountains, observing the path of the element from its natural form to its industrialized version—visible in the manufactured goods circulating through the city.

While iron is often defined by its power—its capacity to build and uphold structures—Luana Vitra's initial fascination with the material stemmed from an opposite trait: its fragility as it begins to oxidize and decompose.

"I understood that iron was perhaps the material closest to the Black body, mainly because of the relationship of exploitation imposed on both," she says.

Throughout her artistic research, displacement has served as a tool to explore how minerals are perceived across different regions and cultures. Indeed, Ms. Vitra has not had a fixed address in five years, moving through a series of exhibitions and artistic residencies across Brazil and abroad.

Since 2019, when she won the Artistic Creation Residency Award and spent three months in Teresina, the artist has completed 12 such residencies, from Serrinha do Alambari in Rio de Janeiro to Durban in South Africa.

During the six months she spent in the African country between 2023 and 2024, Ms. Vitra studied Zulu love letters—crafted from beaded necklaces whose colors and patterns convey messages—and reinterpreted these techniques in her 2024 work “As Contas do Meu Rosário São Balas de Artilharia” (“The Beads of My Rosary Are Artillery Shells”), where the repetition involved in its making takes on, for her, the quality of a prayer.

The knowledge she gained in South Africa also shaped her exhibition currently on view at the Sculpture Center in New York through July 28. There, Ms. Vitra presents works that reference sacred ritual objects of the Kongo people, incorporating iron ore, sodalite, kyanite, selenite, and blue quartz—alongside fabric, feathers, and ceramics—to build a setting in which these materials are honored for their spiritual significance, functioning as amulets. She works from the premise that, in religious contexts, stones are revered rather than subjugated.

From the beginning of her career, the artist has said that she understands her own body as a kind of trap—a notion echoed in her work. The piece “Zanzado em Trama É Armação de Arapuca” (“Zanzado in the Weave Is a Trap”, 2021–2022), composed of 65 fragments of dismantled traps, stands as the most literal expression of this concept. Throughout her life, Ms. Vitra’s father taught her various fishing techniques from a young age, but his lessons extended beyond that. In every situation she encountered, he offered tools for protection and defense. He once suggested, for instance, that she fill her bag with fishhooks to injure the hands of anyone who might try to steal from her.

On her first research trip to Phuket—the island that will host the Thailand Biennale beginning in November—Ms. Vitra set out to understand the region’s history, which has ties to tin mining, and visited the village of Urak Lawoi to learn about local fishing traps. However, due to the large size of the objects used in these traditional practices, she has, for now, set aside the idea of developing a work based on them.

While parallels can be drawn between the extractive economies of Brazil and Thailand, what most intrigued the artist was discovering that, in the Asian country, the arrival of Chinese laborers to work in the mines had historically been welcomed, fostering a deep cultural exchange between the two communities.

“What attracted me to Luana Vitra’s practice was the fact that her work deals with the materiality of mining, but not from an anti-extractivist position. Instead, her work asks what we can do to honor the extracted mineral,” says Hera Chan, one of the curators of the Biennale.

And although the artist is currently looking to settle in Salvador—with the idea of trading the infinite view of the mountains for the endless horizon of the sea—she is already planning a new season in Phuket. “What draws me to moving is the possibility of thinking in new ways and finding in another culture the opportunity to transform myself. Thailand is a country that will certainly transform me a great deal.”