The land of her land: Marlene de Almeida takes the soil of Brazil to Europe

At 82 years old, the artist from Paraíba has exhibitions in England and Belgium with works made from Brazilian lands that she has been traveling for six decades

Karina Sergio Gomes 05/31/25 09:05

"I'm very happy. Happy to be a woman who goes into the field, at 82 years old, and to be here showing my work," says Marlene

It all began with a French book about Paul Cézanne (1839–1906). Marlene de Almeida, then a young student at a religious school, barely mastered the language, but she struggled to translate the text and understand enough to be captivated by the image of a solitary painter heading out into nature with a canvas and a box of paints, intent on capturing the landscape.

Cézanne painted Sainte-Victoire, the white mountain with blue shadows in southern France. Marlene dreamed of the hills that bore witness to the interior of Paraíba, where she was born.

Decades later, the artist doesn't just paint mountains: she transforms them into paint. For almost 60 years, Marlene has been traveling through the country's interior—especially the Northeast—collecting samples of red, yellow, gray, white, and green soil. She transforms this soil into pigment herself. "My work begins in the field," she explains to NeoFeed. "It's not when I'm painting, it's when I harvest the soil."

It's not uncommon for her to stop the car in the middle of a road because she spots a patch of soil that's a different color than the soil she's already collected. Always armed with a shovel and a plastic bag, she scoops up a portion and takes it to her studio, where she processes the material into pigment.

Her workspace is like a laboratory. There are thousands of containers—each containing a handful of Brazilian soil transformed into color. She's never counted exactly how many she has. "But there's a lot," she says.

On one wall, a banner hangs announcing: "Museum of Brazilian Lands." "In recent years, I've started calling my collection that," she explains. "It's an invented, artistic museum. It's not an institution—it's a work of art." A work she dreams of one day donating to an institution so that these lands can be seen, studied, and preserved.

This imaginary museum has now traveled with her. On the 26th, Marlene opened her first solo exhibition in Belgium, at the Walter & Nicole Leblanc Foundation. A few days earlier, she opened Acute Earth at the Carlos/Ishikawa gallery in London—an exhibition that also marks the beginning of her UK presence. "I always say I take the Northeast with me. It's a huge joy to bring the Northeast to England, to Belgium," she celebrates.

At 82, the artist born in Bananeiras, 112 km from João Pessoa, is enjoying a moment of international and national recognition. In 2024, she participated in the 38th edition of the Panorama of Brazilian Art at the Museum of Modern Art in São Paulo, opened the solo exhibitions Temporal Landscapes: Perspectives in Evolution at the Almeida & Dale gallery in São Paulo, and Stories of the Earth at the Marco Zero gallery in Recife.

"I'm very happy," she says. "Happy to be a woman who goes into the field, at 82 years old, and to be here showing my work, discussing, sharing all of this."

“Red as Blood”, 2024

“Red as Earth”, 2024

From copies to the production of your own inks

Although she dreamed of painting a landscape like Cézanne, Marlene spent time in her youth copying reproductions of great artists—at the behest of the nuns at her school. “They would place their hands on the print and say, ‘Look, this color of the sky here has to be the same.’ And I would stand there, taking great care to repeat each color, feeling trapped in it,” she recalls.

Penance became a method. Marlene became so skilled at deciphering colors that she began to look at the objects around her as if they were chromatic formulas. She would look at a shoe, for example, and calculate how much green, red, yellow, or white the color contained. What seemed like punishment gradually sharpened her gaze.

Despite her calling, she didn’t pursue art directly. She studied philosophy, then restoration and conservation. It was then that she truly immersed herself in the world of materials. “I learned a lot and began to enjoy this part of the work that comes before painting, the brushstroke,” she says.

Today, in her studio, Marlene works like a Renaissance painter: she cultivates the earth, removes impurities, grinds the grains, transforms the powder into pigment, and only then into paint. All this with her own hands and the help of her family. Her son, artist José Rufino—also a geologist by training—and her husband, Antonio Almeida, a civil engineer, collaborate on pigment research. “We’re a team,” she says.

There was never a lack of support in the family, but in the beginning, the artist remembers that few appreciated the process. “People were skeptical. They said, ‘Is this dye any good? Will it fade?’ And I would reply, ‘My test is 73,000 years old.’”

She’s referring to the mineral pigments used since cave paintings, the same colors found on the walls of Blombos Cave in South Africa. “It’s the same color I use. The same red, the same clay. But that didn’t convince anyone,” she says.

If empirical knowledge wasn’t enough to convince, Marlene turned to science. She won a grant from the CNPq (National Council for Scientific and Technological Development), and with it, the right to occupy laboratories, operate equipment, and access previously off-limits spaces.

“With the scholarship, I became more respected. I received the endorsement, so to speak, of a serious person,” she says. She concludes with a phrase that has crossed generations: “A woman needs to prove herself constantly.”

The landscape inside and outside the screen

If Cézanne painted Sainte-Victoire as a distant, immobile mountain, embedded in the Provence horizon, Marlene does the opposite. She immerses herself in the landscape. She goes to the ground, penetrating the layers of the earth, painting not only what is visible, but what is rooted. Her landscape is not seen from the outside; it is inhabited.

Named “Museum of Brazilian Lands”, Marlene’s studio looks more like a laboratory, filled with containers containing handfuls of Brazilian soil transformed into color.

There’s an almost alchemical gesture to all this. The earth she collects, treats, and transforms into paint is the same earth that appears on her canvases. The landscape isn’t just a theme, it’s a material. The result is a work that flirts with metalanguage: the earth paints itself.

Fabrics dyed with mineral pigments are a constant presence in Marlene’s exhibitions. They are not mere supports; they are relief, geography, and narrative. With them, the artist recreates imaginary topographies: inverted mountains, stalactites and stalagmites hanging as if the ceiling were the floor, as if the cave were turned inside out.

One of their most striking elements are the long tubes of fabric filled with clay or sand. In some, the pigment escapes, staining the surface as if the material itself insisted on emerging to tell its story.

Attached to the ceiling, these pipes run down to the floor. They don’t leak, but rather coil around themselves, forming a tangle of time and matter.

Marlene calls these works “modified hourglasses”: “Unlike the hourglass, the sand doesn’t flow. It’s trapped on both sides. It’s an attempt to contain time—perhaps the greatest human desire. And at my age, this desire only grows.”