

## A SUSPENDED UTOPIA

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Vitória Régia (for Naiah), 2008



Floating on the museum's 15-centimeter deep artificial pond is an Amazonian water lily, genus *Victoria régia*, made of iridescent mirror-like tiles, by Ana Maria Tavares. The huge leaves of *Victoria régia*, which reach three meters in diameter, change from purple to green depending on the angle of the light.

The title of this work, *Victoria Régia (for Naiah)*, 2008, is taken from a Brazilian folktale. Long ago, a young Indian girl named Naiah lived by the Amazon River. Believing that if she touched the moon she would meet the man of her dreams, every night she climbed a tall tree. One night, on seeing the moon's reflection on the river, she entered the waters to try to touch it, and disappeared into the river. The moon, feeling compassion for Naiah, changed her into *Victoria régia*.

This folktale passed down among the Indians recalls the tale of Narcissus who fell in love on seeing his own reflection in a spring and, after wasting away, entered the water and was transformed into a narcissus flower.

This work that bears Naiah's name and is resonant with the tale of Narcissus—the derivation of the concept of narcissism—reflects in its bewitching, artificial iridescence our complex mentality in which longing and despair, desire and uncertainty, are interwoven.

Tavares discovers the desires, uncertainty, and sense of emptiness of people today in the reflective beauty of stainless steel, glass, mirrors, and other industrial materials. In the late 1950s, when Tavares was born, Brazil

was enjoying vital industrial growth and rapid urbanization. It was an age when all that was "new" was most highly admired in politics, economy, and culture. The capital city, Brasília, is truly a product of those times.

Nevertheless, the nation's prospect of a bright future went unfulfilled. The works of Tavares harbor lingering memory of that age when things of all kinds kindled fervent hopes of a better future. Our encounters with her works, in our present-day reality, leave us hanging suspended at the intersection of dreams and disappointment—in an unreal consumer society, no less, where we easily lose sight of ourselves by its desire. We find within us the longing for self, and loss of self, of Naiah's tale.

In Japan, *victoria régia* is regarded as a kind of lotus, and accordingly evokes a utopian image associated with Paradise. Lotus flowers bloomed at the moment of Buddha's birth, and it was a lotus flower that announced that moment's arrival. Buddhists are said to be reborn on a lotus, after dying and going to the Pure Land. The leaf of the Japanese lotus nevertheless has no lip around its circumference, and both its flower and leaf are of modest size compared with those of *victoria régia*. All the more, the Amazonian flower, *victoria régia*, blooming suddenly in a pond at this museum, beguiles us with its mysterious and artificial beauty and seduces us into the illusion of a utopian vision.

Through *victoria régia*, this exhibition has been deconstructed to zero, and through *victoria régia*, it forms a circle with a prospect on the future. "We have left, but we have not yet arrived," Tavares says. During these one hundred years, when we have come full circle through continual migration between our nations, both Japan and Brazil have achieved transformation, politically and economically, and the future remains, as ever, unknown.

