



Lineage Through Landscape

Tracing Egun in Brazil
by Fran Siegel



1. Fran Siegel (b. 1960, New York, NY)
Lineage through Landscape: Tracing Egun in Brazil, 2015–2017
Installation view, Fowler in Focus Gallery
Suspended drawing: pencil, pigment, gold leaf, string, and collage
on cut drafting film, scrim, cyanotype, sewn and printed fabric
Leaves: porcelain
L (drawing): 10.97 m
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2. Artist Unknown
Egungun masquerade ensemble representing an Egun (ancestral spirit) called Baba Xango
Itaparica, Bahia, Brazil, early 20th century
Cloth, beads, cowrie shells, mirrors
L: 1.5 m
GIFT OF MRS. THOMAS DAVIS, X82.1359; FOWLER MUSEUM AT UCLA

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July 23, 2017—December 10, 2017

A richly layered fabric ensemble viewed in the collection of the Fowler Museum inspired Fran Siegel to embark on an intensive research-based artist's project that led to her multifaceted drawing installation *Lineage through Landscape* (fig. 1). The ensemble in question was worn during the worship of Egun, or ancestral spirits central to the Afro-Brazilian religion of Candomblé. The Egun still serve as protectors of society, and ceremonies for them have been regularly held since 1820 in two Candomblé congregations, or *terreiros*, on the island of Itaparica (located off the coast of the city of Salvador in the state of Bahia in northeastern Brazil). The roots of these practices can be traced to the Yoruba peoples of West Africa, who were among those enslaved by the Portuguese and transported to Salvador to work on sugar plantations and to mine gold in the country's interior.

The Fowler's Egungun ensemble is constructed of many layers of fabric—rich red velvet, metallic synthetics, and floral-patterned cotton—which hang from head to foot so that they whirl and spread when the ancestral spirits visit the *terreiro* and dance (fig. 2). These movements expose the “flash and brilliance” of the costume's myriad mirrors and reflective cloth and give voice to the ancestors through jingling bells and beaded strands.¹ The central apron, which identifies the individual Egun, is imbued with sacred ingredients, including ritual herbs and leaves that further assist with its spiritual activation.

Siegel, as a contemporary artist, wanted to embody Egun in her work. She began to study and explore the history and rituals of Afro-Brazilian Candomblé and the role and importance of the Egun on the island of Itaparica. She found aspects of Egun in the sacred leaves that grow in preserves on the island, many of which derive from or are cognates of those from Africa. The vast thirty-six-foot-long, woven drawing that is the centerpiece of her installation gives form to Siegel's layered and fragmented narrative concerning place and history, memory and heritage, spirit and its signifiers. The fragile hand-sculpted and unglazed porcelain leaves make physical what is otherwise traced and sharpen our awareness of Itaparica's powerful botanical legacy. *Lineage through Landscape* considers the potential of Afro-Brazilians to transcend global displacement through ancestral rituals as well as the symbolic systems that keep their connections to Africa alive.

On May 18, 2017, I sat down with Fran to talk about her highly charged landscape, the interwoven components of which are seen and unseen, transparent and opaque, like the lengths of fabric that fan and collapse in the dynamic performance of the Egun. The following text summarizes our long and wide-ranging conversation and reveals how she has combined the observational acumen of an anthropologist with the visual sensitivity of an artist in the creation of her ambitious installation in the Museum's Fowler in Focus Gallery.

Marla C. Berns
Shirley and Ralph Shapiro Director
Fowler Museum at UCLA

An Interview with Fran Siegel

Marla C. Berns: What was it about the Fowler's Egungun ensemble that led you to make it the focus of your drawing project?

Fran Siegel: The Egungun ensemble excited me visually. I had studied Afro-Brazilian and African art history with Robert Farris Thompson at Yale (while I was there for my MFA in painting and subsequently when I traveled throughout West Africa), and I was familiar with its iconography, but I also identified with it in other ways. For example, the fabric panels extend outward when it twirls, making it larger than it initially appears. It is believed that only the ancestral spirit is inside. The central panel has a skeleton made of cowrie shells, so its design reflects the metaphysical. As the physical form of the Egungun expands beyond itself, it activates light and air.

I was curious to learn more about its cultural significance and arcane uses and meanings. I started doing some cursory research, and I happened upon an interview with Emanuel Araújo, an important Brazilian artist and founder of the Museu Afro Brasil in São Paulo, who would ultimately become one of the sponsors of my Fulbright Fellowship. In writing about the work of an artist who had immigrated to Brazil from Lithuania, Araújo said "he understands Brazil even better than the Brazilians. Indeed to understand Brazil, you need to be a foreigner."² I was really inspired by this and also by learning that Itaparica Island was the only place in Brazil where Egun was still the focus of spiritual activities. As it turned out there was an artist residency fellowship there at the Instituto Sacatar, so it seemed that all roads led to Egun and to Itaparica.

MCB: Like your other intensive drawing projects, it seems that your practice starts with digging deeply into the history of a place.

FS: I have long used residency fellowships to do that. These isolated experiences allow me an almost anthropological way to delve into a new culture, apart from the visual baggage of my home studio. Itaparica is important for its re-connection with another place. Within the diaspora, the Egun are not only about ancestry but about connecting to the ancestors in Africa. My work often takes on issues surrounding diaspora because it reflects my own family history. I am looking at what happens when a culture is removed, often violently, from its place of origin. Scholars of Candomblé, like J. Lorand Matory, have written that even if the thread from the Old World to the New World gets weakened, the religion gains strength from its current surroundings. I thought it fascinating that people on Itaparica still worship Egun in practices that draw from a deep past.

MCB: Can you describe your research in Brazil and how your time in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro fed your thinking about a drawing project?

FS: My first stop was Rio, and as a part of my Fulbright I lectured at the University and then conducted research on the city's Afro-Brazilian connections with a group of students from Escola de Artes Visuais, in the national archives. I was interested in why Salvador lost its position as the Portuguese colonial capital to Rio in 1763. Rio asserted its power by building an overland route, the Strata Nova, to connect its port to Minas Gerais, the site where gold was mined. Enslaved Africans and gold could then be transported more directly from Rio than from Salvador (fig. 3). The Strata Nova





4. This patched section of wall tiles is typical of those seen in churches in Salvador and Cachoiera.

PHOTOGRAPH BY FRAN SIEGEL, SALVADOR, BAHIA, BRAZIL, 2015.

5.

is depicted in gold in the center of *Lineage though Landscape*. I became interested in gold as a symbol of power. Gold is also used in Candomblé to create a reflective surface, and it appears in the dress and regalia of certain deities, like Oxum, the goddess of fresh water, to suggest her relationship to water. I explored this double meaning of the reflection, and felt that the mirrors on the Egungun ensemble similarly reflect the ancestral spirit. I found out later that these mirrors also were used to deflect negative or harmful spirits.

The second part of my Fulbright was spent in São Paulo at the Museu Afro Brasil, and an amazing team of researchers helped provide background history and context for my work.

MCB: You describe your research journey as meandering and speak about the work being fractured. Can you explain this notion of fracturing and how the accumulation of experiences and knowledge come together in the work?

FS: The idea of fracturing first came up when I went to Brazil a year before the Fulbright in 2014. I was inspired by the Portuguese tiles I saw inside churches, mostly in Salvador and later in Cachoiera (fig. 4). They were completely disjointed. The scenes they depicted were incomplete, and tiles that did not match had been inserted. This coincides with my long-standing interest in Cubism and also refers to non-linear memory. Looking at a subject in multiple ways became an opportunity. The grid is a non-hierarchical format, and the process of weaving would be a simple way to reveal and conceal things in the drawings, just as the layers of the Egungun ensemble are not always revealed simultaneously. This also gave me a chance to think about the Egun spirits, which appear in the present but refer to the past.

MCB: Did this idea of fracturing also help in visually representing Egun?

FS: My idea was never to illustrate the Egun. My goal was to embody it in some way, and I began to see the direct connections from one place to the other—a summoning up of Africa through Brazil. Seeing leaves on the floor of the *terreiro* during ceremonies



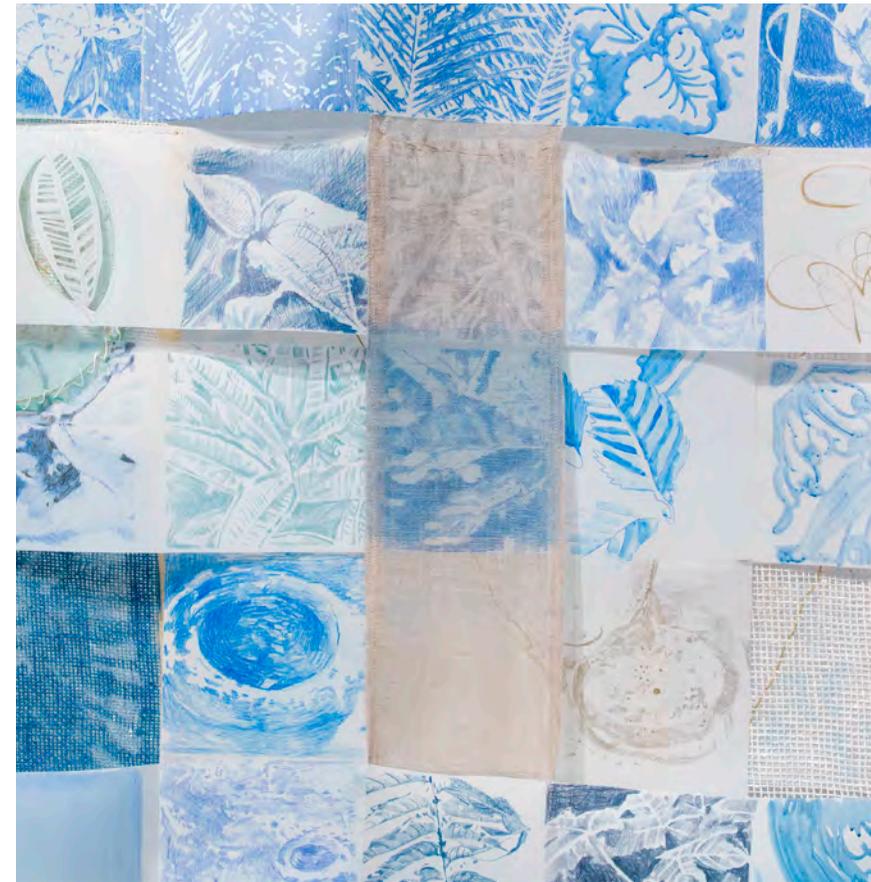
and in the markets where ceremonial supplies are sold helped me realize that they could become this connection. Itaparica was the place for this since plants brought from Africa now grow there, as do cognates that are surrogates for plants that can't survive on the island. Afro-Brazilians have relocated the African landscape to Itaparica Island (fig. 5). Plants are important to Candomblé, and each *orixá*, or deity, has particular plants associated with it, which are required for ceremonies. Every Candomblé adherent identifies with an *orixá* and its plants. This work is really trying to talk about the power of the landscape and how it can embody the Egun who connect Brazil to Africa.

MCB: So, the plants can be considered personifications of the spirit world?

FS: Exactly. There are also leaves that are used for medicinal purposes and herbs used for spiritual cleansing. I found local plant knowledge to be amazing and was accompanied on several informative visits to a sacred preserve. So, I began to focus on Itaparica's plants.³ The island was a landscape of ancestry, and it embodied the Egun. Every Egun has an *orixá*, so the connection to Candomblé is there. I was interested as well in the fact that these leaves showed up in tiles, church decoration, textile designs (including the fabric panels of the Egun), and iron grills and gates (fig. 6). Leaves not only had sacred meanings but were embedded in the iconography of daily life.

6.





7, 8.

MCB: Your work resembles a huge weaving with vertical elements that function as the warp and horizontals as the weft. Why are the warp strips a kind of diaphanous fabric?

FS: I used theatrical scrim fabric for the warp to create a practical structure for hanging. Its open weave partially conceals the layer of drawings underneath. I used a translucent drafting film for the horizontals, which also allows you to see another layer through it (fig. 7).

MCB: I do see the work as a weaving, but I also see it as a large tile mosaic. The discontinuity in the tile-work repairs on Portuguese colonial buildings in Salvador reflects what you have done with your drawing as a whole. The irregularity of the drawn and interwoven elements breaks things apart.

FS: I was really interested in referencing the tiles to suggest Portugal's role in bringing enslaved Africans to Brazil. The fractured tiles create an intriguing narrative: there are places where somebody has two heads or a plant becomes a person after the repair. There are also accidental juxtapositions. I started working with this in the drawing—unexpected juxtapositions and intentional disconnections.

MCB: Sometimes one of your leaves will neatly fit in one or more “tiles,” and other times drawings are disrupted or incomplete (fig. 8). Interspersed among plant forms are more literal drawings, fragments that contribute to your sketch of Portuguese domination.



9.

FS: The central area of the work deals with gold and Rio de Janeiro (see fig. 3). These drawings came from documents my student research assistants and I found in archives in Rio. I've included drawings of the Portuguese seal used on gold shipments, and the thick gold squiggly line refers to the Strata Nova and veins of gold in rock (fig. 9). All kinds of strange and disparate visual connections emerge.

MCB: To the right of center is a large "X" that crosses over many of the tiles. What is it?

FS: Two crossed wood switches taken from branches of the *iroko* tree. These switches are used by priests to control and invoke the performing Egungun. During several ceremonies I saw them crossed to keep it from getting too close to the living. I was told that if the Egungun touches someone, death would be immediate. The priest's job is to form a barrier with a branch, and it became a visual structure within the drawing.

MCB: Let's talk about your porcelain leaves, which take *Lineage through Landscape* beyond a two-dimensional work.

FS: The bone white of the porcelain leaves mounted against the blue wall functions like a reverse tile (fig. 10). I wanted to model leaves in clay to understand better their many different configurations, each with its own purpose and association. I could not achieve this physicality through drawing. The leaves are also skeletal-like structures that reference the Fowler's Egungun ensemble.



10a.



10b.

MCB: Actually, I am struck by the variety of techniques you have used in this work. You are weaving, sewing, drawing, cutting, appliquéing, collaging, and modeling (fig. 11). What have you learned through a practice with so many different dimensions of making?

FS: As an artist I'm just very curious and seek to explore the properties of multiple materials simultaneously. Each brings with it something else. For example, I am using cyanotypes here as a way to capture the actual leaf form with the exposure of the sun. The fabric that I bought in the market in Salvador introduces everyday representations of leaves, and I noticed some of the same sacred leaves represented. The other multicolored "jumpy" fabric came from a Carnaval store in Rio. Each medium has its own associations, which I try to coax out.

MCB: I would like to ask how you were able to gain such extraordinary access to ceremonies and such deep insights into the traditions, and especially the Egun, so quickly?

FS: First of all, I had great introductions. I was able to communicate that my presence was about my own artwork and that I was not writing a book. My connection with the Sacatar Institute was also critical. Augusto Albuquerque, the program manager at Sacatar, really took an interest in facilitating my project. My enthusiasm about the subject coincided with his curiosity about his own roots, and we formed a lasting friendship. Augusto is a truly wonderful person, and everybody loves him. He could call someone and say, "You need to take this person to a ceremony and...you need to watch out for her." I was really given the opportunity of a lifetime. I think that because I was open and had no agenda other than my own curiosity, it was understood that I wasn't going to misrepresent anything. It is a very small community, so to have befriended Augusto and others at Sacatar made a big difference.

MCB: So, you were not photographing or drawing anything during ceremonies, right?

FS: Nothing. I would never want to draw the Egun, one has to find a way around that. My question was: What does the Egun embody? The Egun embodies the landscape. The Egun embodies history. That is what drew me. On a practical level I could photograph and draw the landscape in a way that I could not draw or photograph the Egun. The Egun ceremonies could go on for ten hours. I kept trying to remember everything, so I captured in my mind the succession of events and then when I got home I took notes about each part.

MCB: So you never even took a note while you were there?

FS: Never. I never, ever touched paper. I only experienced it.

Notes

1. Mikelle Smith Omari, *From the Inside to the Outside: The Art and Ritual of Bahian Candomble*, Monograph Series, no. 24 (Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, UCLA, 1984), 44.
2. "A conversation between Adriano Pedrosa and Emanuel Araújo around Afro Brazil" in *C&M, Manifesta Journal*, no. 17 (March 26, 2014). <http://www.contemporaryand.com/magazines/manifesta-journal-17-a-conversation-between-adriano-pedrosa-and-emanoel-araujo-around-afro-brazil/>.
3. Two books were especially helpful to my research on sacred plants: Robert A. Voeks, *Sacred Leaves of Candomble: African Magic, Medicine, and Religion in Brazil* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997). Pierre Fatumbi Verger, *Ewé: O uso das plantas na sociedade iorubá* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1995). An English translation *Ewé: The Use of Plants in Yoruba Society*, is available online at <http://www.blackmadonnaenterprises.com/ewe.html>.



Artist Biography

Los Angeles-based artist Fran Siegel received her BFA from Tyler School of Art at Temple University and her MFA from Yale University School of Art. She is currently a professor in the School of Art at California State University, Long Beach. She has participated in numerous solo and group exhibitions at ACME, Los Angeles; Lesley Heller Workspace, New York; Williamson Gallery, ArtCenter College of Design, Pasadena; and the Museum of Arts and Design, New York, among others. In 2007 Siegel represented the United States in the IX International Biennial of Cuenca, Ecuador, and in 2013 she did a solo drawing project at the Art, Design, and Architecture Museum, UC Santa Barbara, which was the subject of a feature article in *X-TRA Contemporary Art Quarterly* (2014). Her recent wall-sized drawings are in the collections of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and the Yale University Art Gallery.

Articles on Siegel's work have appeared in *The Los Angeles Times*, *Art in America*, *ArtCritical*, *ARTnews*, *Asian Art News*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *Art New England*, *ArtWeek*, *LA Weekly*, *Arts*, and *Sculpture*.

Siegel received the Orange County Contemporary Collectors Fellowship in 2011, a mid-career Individual Artist Fellowship from the California Community Foundation in 2010, and the City of Los Angeles Individual Artist Fellowship (C.O.L.A.) in 2005.

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— Fran Siegel

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