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## The Man who painted Niemeyer

By **Maurício Assumpção** | For Valor, in Paris

If Stanley Kubrick, in his classic "2001 - A Space Odyssey", had to include the presence of a city, chances are that Brasília would have been his choice - a kind of capital of the planet Earth in a futuristic twenty-first century. A choice that certainly was that of the French painter Jacques Benoit, age 57, who has devoted much of his career to pay tribute to architect Oscar Niemeyer's work.

In his loft, situated in the charming Paris Mouzaia district, Benoit still keeps some of the 60 works created over the past 17 years, vinyl paintings, engravings and prints, all inspired by the achievements of Niemeyer, especially those of the architectures displayed in Brasília's Square of Three Powers.

Born in Algiers, when Algeria was still under French rule, Benoit and his family arrived in France in the 60's, when the military coup in Brazil in 1964 brought an end to the ideological dream of Brasília. An event that left the little boy - then aged 9- not impressed ; instead he discovered, in a magazine that at the time his parents received, the black and white photographs of these strange buildings, built in the middle of nowhere, in a country that he simply was totally unaware of.

"I had no idea where Brazil could be located. But after some research in books, I discovered the country, and especially the names of Niemeyer and Kubitschek. I was intrigued by the exoticism of these names. Someone called Kubitschek... How could he be president of Brazil? And Niemeyer? How fascinating, mysterious these names were, indeed!" recalls Benoit.

The photos of Brasília in the press at the time were not the only reference to the new city for the French. In a sense one could say that it was a film featuring Jean-Paul Belmondo that introduced Brasília to the French masses. In 1963, Belmondo, with director Philippe de Broca's team, were in location in Brazil for the production of "The Man from Rio", an adventure film shot in some of Rio de Janeiro's architectural landmarks, including the Capanema Building, the very one that launched Niemeyer's career. From Rio, the film ended up landing on the Monumental Axis in Brasília. In France, the film was a huge success, attracting thousands of spectators, including Niemeyer himself: the architect attended the screening of "The Man from Rio" in a Paris' movie theater, at a time when he strongly missed his own country (which he had left because of the military dictatorship), and he was very moved when hearing the applause of the audience,



"Mulher", from the Series "Brasília Cinquenta Anos", by Benoit: Nudes are a reference to the sensuality expressed by Niemeyer in his work.

whenever the sequence shot in Brasília appeared on the screen.

"This is a wonderful movie, which helped build the myth of Brasília in my life," says Benoit. "Belmondo running through this enormous site, perched on scaffolding, the bandits chasing him, with the backdrop of the Esplanade of Ministries and the Square of Three Powers: these are the first pictures of Brasília that many French have seen in the 60's".

Despite a constant presence of Niemeyer's work in his inspiration, it is not Niemeyer who led Benoit to painting. His first forays into this art came from visual interpretations of Canadian musician Joni Mitchell's works. Benoit later established, through his painting, a relationship between his muse and some of Niemeyer's themes.

"There is a strong correspondence between Mitchell and Niemeyer," suggests Benoit. "Niemeyer describes the sensuality of clouds passing over the Cerrado landscapes in his biography ["The Curves of Time"], and Mitchell spoke about love while evoking the clouds in "Both Sides Now" [from the album "Clouds", 1969]. And better yet, Mitchell described, in "Paprika Plains" [from the album "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter", 1977] the fate of the indigenous peoples of North America, so similar to the doom that the "Candangos" workers who built the city knew in the end, supported by Niemeyer but expelled from Brasília as soon as the political elite settled there."

Obsessed with Brasília, it was natural that sooner or later, Benoit would go there. In 1994, after spending a few days in Rio de Janeiro, the painter arrived on the central highlands. "It was like a dream. I was very excited when I got onto the Square of Three Powers. I felt like crying. There was

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not a soul in the streets, which only reinforced these images of my childhood. Brasília, a city of the future, as in a sci-fi movie ... it is only later that I understood: this was a Sunday during the Carnival!" \*

The emotional impact of this trip to Brazil was to influence Benoit's career forever. Back in Paris, he devoted himself to the buildings of Niemeyer, brushes and soul. The first paintings were finished in 1996, all strictly faithful to the architectural proportions they depicted, "as a sign of absolute respect to the master," but free in the combination of their colors, all strong and saturated. Human figures, men, women and children, almost always naked, tinted these works with a dreamy tone, being in fact a reference to the sensual curves expressed by Niemeyer in his achievements, throughout his career.

Nine years and several paintings later, Benoit was ready for its first exhibition devoted exclusively to the works of the architect. But not before making a second dream come true : meeting Niemeyer personally. With the help of connections he had in France and Brazil, Benoit managed to launch the production of a film about Niemeyer, aged 97 years at the time. And on a summer morning, Benoit landed in Rio with a team of four, going directly to Copacabana, to the architect's loft overlooking the sea.

"My legs were shaking," admits the artist. "When I shook hands with Niemeyer, all I can say is that I was very, very moved. He was the most gracious of hosts, but he did not pay attention much to me primarily. After all, there were two beautiful women in our team, and he had eyes only for them. It was only after a while that we managed to synchronize ; he then gave me much more attention, and even ended by answering my questions in French."

At the end of the interview, which lasted three hours, Benoit offered Niemeyer the canvas he did for him, "Brasília Airport". It represents the capital's airport such as Niemeyer had projected it should have been built, a vision which was rejected by the military dictatorship -one of the biggest frustrations that Niemeyer experienced during his career.

The documentary projected by Benoit suffered a similar fate : it never came to life, the funding for the rest of the production in France having defaulted. However, the painter's first exhibition in Paris, "Brasília. Flesh and Soul", attracted the attention of the French Communist Party (PCF), the headquarters of which had been designed by Niemeyer during his voluntary exile in France. A new exhibition was organized with the PCF's agreement, to be ready in 12 months. Hastily, Benoit returned to his studio, eager to innovate.

"I did not want to create just sensual and dreamlike nudes, as in the series about Brasília. I also meant to evoke a more direct relationship with Niemeyer. But of course I was not going to paint him in the nude, was I ?" jokes Benoit, in relation to the paintings which represent the architect.

In this second cycle of post Brasília vinyl works, researches were devoted exclusively to the three major buildings that Niemeyer created in the Paris Region: the French Communist Party's headquarters, the Bobigny Trade Union Center and the former headquarters of the PCF's press organ, the newspaper L'Humanité (the offices of which are nowadays located elsewhere). In many of these works, Niemeyer's silhouette appears alone, or accompanied by Lucio Costa, Kubitschek, or even Stanley Kubrick, through the halls of the Party's headquarters.

In 2010, for the official celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of Brasília, Benoit was invited to exhibit his work by the Cultural Center Renato Russo in its galleries in Brasília, in the Federal District, an opportunity which allowed him to present a new series over the period of the construction of Brasília, technically mixed media on large paper formats, and his latest paintings inspired by the capital.

To end this cycle in his career haunted by Niemeyer, Benoit returned to the roots of his inspiration with the painting "The Man from Brasília," a tribute to "The Man from Rio".

"A way to say goodbye to Brasília and Niemeyer, with this symbol of Jean-Paul Belmondo running through the city. Still, the question remains to know whether the man does leave the city... or if he is returning to it!"

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\* Editor's note: Brasília is usually deserted by its inhabitants at the time of Carnival, people joining the Carnival's major coastal poles, such as Rio de Janeiro.