



# CALLAN PARK GALLERY

For Self-Taught and Outsider Art

## José dos Santos (1904-1996)

José dos Santos claimed that, 'The Portuguese are the greatest sculptors in the world and I am the greatest sculptor in Portugal.' But his gravestone has on it a photograph of him playing a guitar and describes him as *fadista* (fado singer).

He lived with his wife in the small village of Arega, in the Leiria region of Portugal. His small-holding was extremely primitive, and for very many years he was relatively unaware of the realities of modernity, 'living in a remote part of a remote place'. He attended mass regularly in the local parish church and, besides his later preoccupation with the creation of an idiosyncratic and powerful sculptural oeuvre, led an apparently unremarkable life. There was a clear visionary bent, though, to his faith. He claimed to have received the stigmata and 'that it was God who told him what to release from the natural forms of the vine, pear, olive, and other local woods which were his main raw material.' His sculpture, then, must be seen as much as divine revelation as anything else.



He claimed in 1991 that in old age he no longer slept, but also that in the time when he used to sleep, it was in the manner of the crucified Christ of his carvings. 'José dos Santos believed that women were essentially the seat of human creativity to the extent that, for him, this was so exclusive a characteristic of the female sex that they even represented creativity and in this, as in many other respects, were much stronger than men.'

Dos Santos' work falls broadly into three parts: human figures, animals and musical instruments. At times the figures are enmeshed in utilitarian objects, such as canes. At others, reduced to sexual parts. Indeed, in most of his figures and mammals the genitalia are emphasised. However, the human figures are usually clothed ('with the precise lineage of each garment traceable through several generations of ownership in the village of Arega'). This practice, Dos Santos claimed, was to avoid shocking the black-clad women of the village. Yet, Adams and Vallejo point out that, 'A visitor having even the slightest acquaintance with Portugal will be aware of a rather more robust attitude to public manifestations of sexuality than those which maintain in the rest of Europe.' In short, Dos Santos' work was rather less shocking to even more staid audiences in Arega, than perhaps it might be here in Australia.

In spite of the quality of his work, which undoubtedly places him in the first rank of self-taught and outsider sculptors, until last year Dos Santos had only been seen in the single major exhibition of his work mounted by Hugh Adams and Rojelio Vallejo in Cardiff, Wales in 2000. Happily, a number of pieces made an appearance in Peter Fay and Glenn Barkley's 'Without Borders' exhibition in Melbourne and Campbelltown in 2008, which proved the catalyst for

negotiations that eventually resulted in the acquisition of almost the whole of Dos Santos' surviving oeuvre for the University of Sydney through an act of great generosity by Peter Fay. Safely anchored in the University as the foundational artist of a specialised research collection, Dos Santos is poised, thirteen years after his death to enter the world stage. This exhibition presents a new selection of work from the collection, none of which was shown in 'Without Borders'. One room is devoted to music, including a group of large musicians and three hand-made instruments that demonstrate the bricoleur's art at its best. The other room brings together some major figure sculptures, including the highly enigmatic Janus-faced hermaphrodite, with his canes and some small animal pieces.

If Peter Fay is the one who ensured Dos Santos' relocation to Sydney, Adams and Rogelio must be saluted as the people who found the artist and first recognised the importance of his work. Most of the text here, including quotations, is derived entirely from their essay in the comprehensive catalogue produced for their show: *The Greatest Sculptor in the World, José dos Santos: Artist, Visionary, Outsider* (Cardiff: Howard Gardens Gallery, 2000)

José dos Santos will be on display until Friday 24 April 2009.

**Gallery hours:**

Saturday, 11am to 4pm

By appointment on other days

**For further information please contact:**

Professor Colin Rhodes, Dean

Sydney College of the Arts

The Visual Arts Faculty of the University of Sydney

[callanparkgallery@sca.usyd.edu.au](mailto:callanparkgallery@sca.usyd.edu.au) / +61 2 9351 1001



José dos Santos  
Installation views, Callan Park Gallery, 2009  
Photos: Colin Rhodes



The University of Sydney

