

LISSON GALLERY

Press Release

Hélio Oiticica

17 September – 1 November 2025
Los Angeles

Opening: 17 September, 6 – 8pm

In the first major exhibition in Los Angeles dedicated to the art of Hélio Oiticica (1937–1980), Lisson Gallery presents a selection of the artist's seminal compositions, including vibrant gouaches, and dynamic suspended sculptures, and a rare oil painting. Highlighting the formative years of Oiticica's career, the exhibition charts his trajectory from early geometric abstraction to immersive environments that transformed the viewer's experience with art and space.

While living in Washington, D.C., from 1947 to 1949, Oiticica was first introduced to the art and theories of Paul Klee, Kazimir Malevich, and Piet Mondrian at the National Gallery of Art. At sixteen, he began studying under artist Ivan Serpa at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro and soon joined the Grupo Frente (1954–56), a collective of innovative artists led by Serpa. Oiticica's earliest works—gouache on cardboard—reflect both his fascination with European modernism and his engagement with Grupo Frente. United in their rejection of academic and figurative Brazilian modernism, the Grupo Frente embraced experimentation and explored diverse abstract and constructivist visual languages. Their approaches emphasized color, structure, and technical innovation—sometimes diverging sharply from one another. Among the works in the exhibition is a rare Grupo Frente-period gouache on masonite painting by Oiticica, exemplifying the visual strategies and material processes that defined the collective.

Throughout 1957–58, Oiticica continued to analyze the roles of color, structure and space in the production of his iconic series of *Metaesquemas* (a title that translates roughly as 'metaschemes' or 'metastructures'). These comprise multiple variations upon a basic structure – usually rectangular or rhomboid shapes arrayed in a tentative grid over a single underlying color. Only six *Metaesquemas* were made in oil on canvas, and of these, only four survive. *Metaesquema* (1958) is a single vertical instance, consisting of two columns of rectangles arrayed in brick-like tiers against a grey-blue background. The individual shapes tilt in defiance of the grid, as though the ordering logic of the composition was beginning to unravel. The semblance, in this painting, of a real-life edifice – its spatial depth tentatively implied by the vertical centreline – anticipates Oiticica's shift into three-dimensional structures.

This variation in his work culminated in the creation of the *Spatial Reliefs*, suspended structures conceived as "paintings in space" that activate volume, color, and the viewer's movement. Made from cut and painted wooden planes, these works extend the logic of painting into three dimensions, creating new spatial-temporal relationships between artwork and observer.

By the early 1960s, Oiticica was redefining the very purpose of art. His immersion in the everyday life of Rio's Mangueira favela led him to develop "environmental art"—works that embraced participation, embodiment, and social experience. Whether in the Grupo Frente gouaches, the *Metaesquemas* or the intricate volumetric structures of the *Spatial Reliefs*, his work of the 1950s and '60s harbors a generative tension – that of constituent elements poised between coherence and dispersal: between autonomous art object and inchoate world. In this regard, the works precede the radical deconstructive impulse of his multi-sensory architectural environments of the 1970s.

While this exhibition marks Oiticica's first solo presentation in Los Angeles, his art has received significant institutional recognition in the region. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) holds in its collection two *Metaesquemas* from the late 1950s, as well as a *Penetrable* from 1979. In 2010, Oiticica's iconic blue-lit swimming pool installation from 1973, a collaboration with Neville D'Almeida, was featured in *Suprasensorial* at the Museum of Contemporary

Art. His influence continues to expand: this December, Dia Beacon will restage Oiticica's monumental installation *Grande Núcleo (Grand Nucleus)*, *NC3*, *NC4*, *NC6* (1960–63), alongside a selection of other major works.

About the artist

Hélio Oiticica (1937 – 1980) is widely regarded as one of Brazil's leading artists of the twentieth century and a touchstone for much contemporary art made since the 1960s, primarily through his freewheeling, participatory works of art, performative environments, avant-garde films and abstract paintings. Even before the age of 20, Oiticica was a key member of the historic Rio de Janeiro-based Grupo Frente (1954–56), his radical play with geometric form and vibrant colors transcending the minimal lines of European constructivism and imbuing his work with an exuberant rhythm that resonated with the avant-garde music and poetry of his native Brazil. In the late 1950s, Oiticica would go on to become a leading figure of Brazilian Neo-Concretism (1959–61) that included other ground breaking artists such as Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape and the poet Ferreira Gullar, ultimately giving rise to the artistic movement known as Tropicalismo, named for a work of Oiticica's from 1967.

Increasingly, Oiticica became a countercultural figure and underground hero, foregrounding bodily interaction with spatial and environmental concerns over pure aesthetics. "Ambient art," he wrote, "is the overthrow of the traditional concept of paintingframe and sculpture – that belongs to the past. It gives way to the creation of 'ambiences': from there arises what I call 'antiart,'" which he later defined as "the era of the popular participation in the creative field." This generous and generative practice would become highly influential for subsequent generations of artists, especially his Parangolés or 'habitable paintings' and all-encompassing series of installations, known variously as Núcleos (ceiling-hung geometric panels forming gradual chromatic experiences) and Propositions or Penetrables (labyrinth-like architectural environments made of sand and semi-permeable cabins). This supra-sensorial approach continued until his untimely death in 1980 at the age of 42.

Oiticica's work has been the subject of many major museum exhibitions, including the critically acclaimed retrospectives Hélio Oiticica: *Dance in my Experience* at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo and the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro in 2020–2021, and Hélio Oiticica: *To Organize Delirium*, which debuted at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Philadelphia in 2016 and traveled to the Art Institute of Chicago and the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2017. Dia: Beacon will open a solo presentation of his work in November 2025. Hélio Oiticica: *The Body of Color* was exhibited at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston in 2006–2007 and in London at the Tate Modern in 2007. His work is included in the collections of numerous international institutions including Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA, USA; Inhotim Centro de Arte Contemporânea, Belo Horizonte, Brazil; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA, USA; Museo de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, Spain; Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX, USA; Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, USA; Tate Modern, London, UK; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN, USA; the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates; and the Pérez Art Museum Miami, FL, USA, among others. The Projeto Hélio Oiticica was established in Rio de Janeiro in 1980 to manage the artist's estate.

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