

# Enigmas: The Works of Regina Silveira

By Sarah Meister Posted on June 9, 2015



Regina Silveira. *Enigma 1*. 1981. Gelatin silver print. 11 9/16 x 15 1/2 inches (29.4 x 39.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy of Latin American and Caribbean Fund © 2014 the artist.



Regina Silveira. *Enigma 2*. 1981. Gelatin silver print. 11 5/8 x 15 9/16 inches (29.5 x 39.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy of Latin American and Caribbean Fund © 2014 the artist.



Regina Silveira. *Enigma 3*. 1981. Gelatin silver print. 11 5/8 x 15 5/8 inches (29.6 x 39.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy of Latin American and Caribbean Fund © 2014 the artist.



Regina Silveira. *Enigma 4*. 1981. Gelatin silver print. 11 5/8 x 15 1/2 inches (29.6 x 39.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy of Latin American and Caribbean Fund © 2014 the artist.

In the shadow of the Brazilian military dictatorship, Regina Silveira pursued an elusive art, by necessity and by design. Absence and isolation, illusion and distortion were not only promising artistic strategies, but also richly meaningful metaphors in an era of severe political repression. Trained as a painter and printmaker in her native Porto Alegre, Silveira studied with the expressionist painter Iberê Camargo. By the early 1970s she was experimenting with photographic imagery (mostly found), and became an active participant in the mail-art circuits then proliferating throughout Latin America.

A small group of us had the opportunity to interview Silveira during a C-MAP trip to Brazil in November 2012, and I was keen to learn more about her early engagement with photography. We spoke about four unique photograms she called *Enigmas* from 1981, and discovered that at that moment they were actually in New York (making an acquisition significantly easier!). These works aligned with several of our department's strategic priorities, they were a perfect complement to the earlier printed material in the Library's holdings, and I was determined to bring them into the Collection. We plan to feature them in an exhibition Quentin Bajac

and I are organizing titled *American Photography: Recent Acquisitions from The Museum of Modern Art* that will open in conjunction with Paris Photo at the Grand Palais in November. Silveira's photographs will appear with a group of conceptually-based works from the same era (including Sarah Charlesworth, Liliana Porter and Marcia Resnick), underscoring the potential for using the Collection to trace connections between related practices in both North and South America.

Silveira made these *Enigmas* by photographing an object and carefully drawing an opaque mask over it during the exposure process. In the resulting images, the masks produce the illusion of shadows, absent of visible volumes from which they were cast, that loom large over each object. Around this time, shadow (and its corollaries absence, trace, and afterimage) became an essential subject for Silveira, and she sought new alternatives to the rigid authority of a singular perspective. The incongruous pairings of mundane household objects with shapes that are more difficult to classify (and that are alternately menacing and harmless) hint at Silveira's fascination with Marcel Duchamp's Readymades. This exploration became public in 1983 with her heralded installation *In Absentia M.D.* at the São Paulo Biennial, where she filled the space with painted shadows of absent, imaginary representations of Duchamp's iconic *Bottle Rack* and *Bicycle Wheel*, shadows apparently cast from pedestals that were patently empty. This representation of traces left by imagined events is a hallmark of Silveira's more recent monumentally scaled installations. Silveira's *Enigmas* deftly synthesize her fascination with the ancient art of skiagraphia (shadow painting) and anamorphosis (the distortion of a singular perspective captured from oblique angles) that would become central to her practice.