

Mira Schendel

Tate Modern

London

Through January 19

Twenty-five years after her death, Mira Schendel's quietly compelling art has finally gotten its due. An émigré from war-scarred Europe to Brazil, she worked largely in ephemeral materials—including rice paper and cotton thread—and teased and twisted them into pieces of haunting beauty and rigor. This fascinating retrospective, curated by the Tate's Tanya Barson with Taisa Palhares, puts the understated power of Schendel's art on full display, stressing her protean talent rather than dwelling on parallels between her work and that of other key figures in Latin American modernism, including Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, and Jesús Rafael Soto.

Schendel was born in Zurich in 1919 and educated in Milan. Due to her Jewish heritage, she was stripped of her Italian nationality before World War II, and, after spending some years as a stateless refugee, she immigrated to Brazil in 1949. There she began painting, drawing from the artistic movements then taking shape in that country while maintaining a critical distance. Early oil paintings from the 1950s show the influences of such artists as Paul Klee and Giorgio Morandi, with an added abstract flair. The blocks of slate gray, cream, and charcoal in an untitled 1954 work from the "Refrigerators" series, for example, suggest a schematic deconstruction of Morandi's jar arrangements.

After that early burst of painting, Schendel worked mostly with paper,



Ondas paradas de probabilidade (Still Waves of Probability), 1969, nylon thread, dimensions variable, installation view, 2013.

transforming the simple material into shimmering objects in both two and three dimensions. Her ink drawings, often featuring blizzards of typography and abstract shapes that evoke Brazil's breakneck urbanization in those years, have a black-and-white austerity that looks out of step with the bold coloration of her Brazilian contemporaries.

Throughout her career, Schendel used traditional, artisanal techniques to startlingly original effect. In her series of

"Droguinhas" sculptures, or "Little Nothings," she knotted rice paper into densely braided objects that evoke some ancient craft, combining delicacy with a thick, tactile quality. Rice paper was her preferred medium for challenging the very idea of materiality—and for *Trenzinho (Little Train)*, originally staged ca. 1965, she hung 114 sheets of rice paper on a thread strung across a room. The Tate Modern's installation of this work rustles softly as viewers enter the room.

The show's highlight, *Ondas paradas de probabilidade (Still Waves of Probability)*, 1969, is a forest of clear nylon threads hanging from the ceiling that all but defies visual apprehension. When the threads reach the floor, they curve gently upward, suggesting waves or rain hitting the pavement. This breathtaking, slightly confounding piece includes a wall panel with a quote about faith and knowledge from the Old Testament, which suggests that Schendel saw abstract art not just as an esthetic gambit but as a route to higher truths.

This fine show ends with a series of muscular, sculptural pieces from the '80s that look, at first glance, like the work of a different artist. As with the 1987 series of "Sarrafos (Battens)," in which black wooden bars stretch and bend at sharp angles against a large white screen, these late works exude Minimalist cool and self-confidence, and prove that Schendel's spirit of restless experimentation remained bright even at her death in 1988. —Roger Atwood