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Sailing into the 21st century: one of only two Portuguese institutions devoted exclusively to contemporary art, the Ellipse Foundation recently opened a permanent venue near the capital.(REPORT FROM LISBON)

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*Art in America* Portugal's time as a mighty seafaring nation may be long past, but the country's indelible maritime legacy was recently evoked by a monumental sculpture of a lighthouse featured last fall in the inaugural display of the Ellipse Foundation Contemporary Art Collection in Cascais, a seaside resort about 20 miles west of Lisbon. A 23-foot-high structure made of reinforced sand, Heroes of the Sea (2004) is the work of Joao Pedro Vale, a Lisbon artist known for sculptures and installations that frequently incorporate nautical themes as well as those of national identity. Nearly touching the ceiling of a large gallery, the piece has a pronounced tilt that recalls the Leaning Tower of Pisa and looks like it could topple over at any moment. At once a droll, phallic totem, symbolic of strength, and a somber lament for souls lost at sea, the work conveys by means of its ephemeral materials and precarious stance the fragility of human endeavor and the fleeting nature of political power. Brilliant, audacious and problematic, the work could be seen as an emblem of the Ellipse Collection as a whole.

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Vale is one of just nine Portuguese artists among the 126 artists represented in the Ellipse holdings, which include some 300 pieces. A number of works are by emerging artists from around the world, but the majority are by international art stars familiar to most U.S. and western European contemporary art audiences, though less known in Portugal. Dominating the presentation were significant examples by Matthew Barney, Douglas Gordon, Thomas Hirschhorn, Pierre Huyghe, Olafur Eliasson, Robert Gober, Mona Hatoum, Cristina Iglesias, Glenn Ligon, Sarah Lucas, Gabriel Orozco, Paul Pfeiffer, Jorge Pardo, Richard Prince, Thomas Scheibitz, Cindy Sherman, Kara Walker and Jeff Wall, among others.

Founded by Joao Oliveira-Rendeiro, chairman of the Banco Privado Portugues, the collection was initiated four years ago primarily as an investment scheme. Over the past 20 years, Rendeiro has established an international reputation for organizing lucrative financial projects between Portuguese and foreign firms, with a special focus on Brazil. He also heads a work group within the Clinton Global Initiative, an organization founded by the former U.S. president that meets in New York once a year to coordinate low-interest loans to developing nations.

Observing the dramatic rise in prices for international contemporary art in recent years, Rendeiro saw an opportunity for a local cultural initiative as well as long-term financial gain in purchasing such works. At first, he sought a group of 40 backers from Portugal, Brazil and Spain, who would invest a total of \$25 million in contemporary pieces, and, after a four-year period, would share in resale profits. But when that approach proved unwieldy, he scaled back the project, inviting only a few investors to participate and providing much of the funding himself.

Initially, the project stirred considerable controversy among some members of the local press, who viewed with skepticism plans for a private museum where works on public display could be sold at any time. But Rendeiro also envisioned the project as a means to fill a serious gap in the cultural landscape of southern Portugal by displaying the collection publicly. While this nation of barely 11 million was one of the early success stories of the European Union, enjoying an economic boost following its 1986 entry into the organization, it lagged well behind its EU colleagues in initiating cultural projects. The Ellipse Collection and the Fundacao de Serralves, a museum that opened in 1999 outside Porto in northern Portugal, of which Rendeiro was an early backer, are the nation's only two institutions devoted to contemporary art.

Following a number of other private contemporary art museums in other nations that allow public access, such as the Saatchi Collection in London, the Jumex Collection in Mexico City and the Schaulager

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in Basel, Rendeiro envisioned the Ellipse Collection as a combination of commercial enterprise and educational institution. The Ellipse offers public exposure to a broad range of international art and also provides support for emerging Portuguese artists. In addition, the project includes a study center and an artist-in-residence program to attract prominent contemporary artists to Portugal. Among future plans for the Ellipse are joint ventures with other private contemporary art institutions, such as the Pinault Foundation in Venice and the Herbert Collection in Ghent, Belgium.

Throughout his career, Rendeiro has been an avid collector of Portuguese modernism, and together with his wife, Maria, he has assembled a group of top-notch works, ranging from Cubist paintings by Amadeo de Souza-Cardoso (1887-1918) to postwar gestural abstractions by Maria Helena Vieira da Silva (1908-92), some of which was displayed in the couple's spacious home outside Lisbon when I visited last year. Feeling inadequate to collect knowledgeably in the contemporary art field, Rendeiro hired a team of advisors and curators to shepherd the undertaking, including Manuel Gonzalez, former director of the J.P. Morgan Chase Collection; Pedro Lapa, director of Lisbon's Museu do Chiado, a former monastery transformed into a museum of Portuguese modern art; and Alexandre Melo, a critic and curator at the Banco Privado collection. The works unveiled at the Ellipse were acquired by the curators at galleries and art fairs around the world in a relatively short period of time. The focus of the Ellipse is now to develop a cohesive, permanent collection, and there are no immediate plans to sell any of the pieces.

The Ellipse Collection debuted with great fanfare on Oct. 15, 2006, attended by an international art crowd as well as Portugal's recently elected right-of-center president, Anibal Cavaco Silva, who replaced the Socialist incumbent Jorge Sampaio. Located in a sprawling, rather nondescript warehouse space across from a BMW dealership on the industrial outskirts of Cascais, the Ellipse sports a dark brown painted facade bearing the large white lettering of the institution's striking logo, designed by the trendy French design firm M/M Paris. Renovated by Portuguese architect Pedro Gadanho, the structure encompasses about 25,000 square feet of exhibition space, plus offices and education facilities.

The inaugural exhibition, "Open House," selected by the Ellipse's curators in tandem with its director, Filipa Sanchez, featured more than a third of the institution's holdings and filled two venues, including the Centro Cultural de Cascais, a smaller exhibition space in the town center. The first work visitors encountered in the darkened lobby of the main building was *The Garden of Mistrust* (2004-05) by Cuban artist Alexandre Arrechea, a stylized surveillance mechanism consisting of a tall white-painted metal tree

whose branches are tipped with video cameras. Projected on screens hung high on the lobby walls were images of visitors entering the space.

The entrance corridor opens onto the largest gallery, a vast room filled with several monumental works and a set of six white ceiling fans, *Ventilators* (1997) by Gabriel Orozco, spinning high overhead. Long ribbons of toilet paper dangling from each fan blade fluttered through the air in graceful spirals. This playful piece as well as the artist's absurdist and interactive sculpture placed below, *Ping Pond Table* (1998), featuring a shallow lily pond in the middle of two intersecting Ping-Pong tables, lent the space a carnivalesque atmosphere for a moment. But this mood was quickly altered by the sobering brutality of some newspaper, magazine and TV images covering the surface of Thomas Hirschhorn's cavernous assemblage, *Concrete Shock* (2005), which filled one side of the gallery. Many of the harrowing pictures haphazardly arranged over this anarchic and timely piece are recent shots of torture victims in Iraq and elsewhere.

Jorge Pardo's grandiose, though more formal and tidy untitled architectonic sculpture of 2004, installed across the room, looks like a giant birdhouse made of birch plywood with round portholes and irregular faceted windows of colored Plexiglas. Hanging on a nearby wall were large paintings by Carroll Dunham and Juliao Sarmiento. The latter's triptych, *Sofrimento Desespero e Ascese* (Suffering, Despair and Ascent), a spare image of three female figures in white, gray and black, was painted for the Venice Biennale of 1997, when Sarmiento represented Portugal. On the floor in front of this painting was Mona Hatoum's large kinetic sculpture *+ and -* (1994-2004), a round metal sandbox with a continuously revolving blade in the center that alternately combs and smooths the surface.

Beyond this gallery was a room filled mostly with photos and inkjet paintings by Richard Prince and photos by Cindy Sherman, including works from her familiar 1977 "Untitled Film Stills" series. Most interesting here were Prince's books of drawings displayed in a vitrine. These intimate, erotically charged works feature men's magazine shots of naked women, each altered and in some cases defaced by fierce but deft de Kooningesque markings.

In another gallery, photographs by Louise Lawler and paintings by Thomas Scheibitz were hung along with sculptures by Thomas Schutte and Rita McBride as well as Scheibitz. The most attention-grabbing piece, Tom Sachs's sculptural grouping *Barcelona Pavilion* (2002) recreates classic modernist furniture by Mies van der Rohe with pieced-together foamcore. A similar tongue-in-cheek humor pervades Sarah Lucas's sculpture *She likes it cosy* (2005), elsewhere in the show, in which she suggests a sexy domestic scene

by means of unlikely abject materials such as nylon pantyhose stretched over an empty metal bucket to suggest a female figure, and clunky cinderblocks referring to a masculine presence. The jarring textural contrasts in the work correspond nicely with one of Ernesto Neto's large stretched Lycra pieces, *Nav Lia Mir Clar* (2004), installed nearby. A more somber but no less evocative grouping contained works by Guillermo Kuitca and Jimmie Durham and a large multipanel woven mat piece suspended from the ceiling, *Passage III* (2003) by Cristina Iglesias, which cast hazy shadows of stylized letters on the walls and floor.

On the second level, outstanding among works by David Hammons, Wolfgang Tillmans, Mike Kelley, Kara Walker and Ilya & Emilia Kabakov was a large installation by Elmgreen & Dragset showing a tall wooden picket fence spanning the width of the room, partly painted white, with a long-handle paint roller leaning against one segment of the fence. Draped over the fence are two pairs of jeans, lending a bit of playful innuendo to this quietly theatrical piece. Hanging in the same gallery, a large 2004 untitled painting by the team Muntean/ Rosenblum, of dramatically posed youthful models with skateboards, suggested an oblique allegory. Also of note was a group of cutouts and watercolors by Arturo Herrera. The most striking piece in this area, however, was *Fio (Thread)*, 1990-95, a sculpture by Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles, consisting of 48 bales of hay arranged in a neat cube. Intertwined with the hay is a gold thread nearly 300 feet long, and, ostensibly, a solid gold needle buried somewhere inside the haystack.

On view in the Ellipse exhibition at the Centro Cultural de Cascais, besides Joao Pedro Vale's *Heroes of the Sea*, were major pieces by Franz Ackermann, Tony Cragg, Gillian Wearing, Damian Ortega, Andreas Slominski and Jack Pierson. Among the less expected offerings was a wall filled with dozens of autobiographical figurative paintings and works on paper by Billy Sullivan, and several humorous works by Swiss artist Olaf Breuning. Placed on the floor, Breuning's fanciful *Turtle* (2005), made of a found ceramic teapot and green cups and saucers, all carefully arranged in the shape of a stylized turtle, seemed about to crawl across the room; and his photo work *Lady G* (2002) showed a voluptuous nude on horseback, with small stickers of asteroids stuck to her buttocks, as if in an effort to update the *Lady Godiva* story by adding a cosmic dimension of sorts. Another eye-catching piece, *Lifeguard* (2005), a large mixed-medium work made of woven strips of carpet covered in photographic paper by Brazilian artist Jarbas Lopes, was hung in a small alcove. One of the wackiest installations on view, *Rio Fundo (Deep River)*, 2004, by another Brazilian, Marepe, looks like it was conjured after a night of hard drinking. The work features five end tables of varying heights, up to 7 feet tall, whose legs are stuck in the middle of rubber car-tire

inner tubes. Atop the tables are empty glasses and full bottles of potent cachaca.

A number of museums and cultural institutions throughout the Lisbon area held special exhibitions and events to coincide with the Ellipse opening. The Fundacao Arpad Szenes--Vieira da Silva, which is the permanent home of an excellent group of works by da Silva from throughout her long career, hosted a panel discussion in English the night before the opening. The panelists, including the Ellipse's Rendeiro and Gonzalez, artists Ligon and Sarmiento, and New Museum curator Richard Flood, held forth on the evening's Ellipse-related theme, "the global significance of private museums." While the discussion was inconclusive at best, the principal message was that private institutions now provide a public service by filling the cultural lacunae caused in many countries by ever-decreasing government support for the arts.

The Museu do Chiado, located in a particularly handsome area of Lisbon's historic district, presented a survey of Sharon Lockhart's videos and photos that is on an extended international tour. The Chiado, which features a fine permanent collection of mostly 20th-century Portuguese art, hosts a small but energetic program of traveling contemporary art exhibitions directed by Pedro Lapa, who is also an Ellipse curator and a former curator at the Centro Cultural de Belem (CCB). Inaugurated in 1992, the sprawling Belem complex encompasses several interconnecting modernist buildings close to the ancient port from which Portuguese sailors launched their global explorations. The CCB includes theaters, a library, restaurants, bookstores, music shops and two enormous, publicly funded multilevel art galleries for temporary exhibitions of contemporary art as well as historical shows.

On view at the CCB were two extensive exhibitions. One space held a retrospective of paintings and drawings by Portuguese artist Jorge Martins, spanning his 50-year career. Martins was a key proponent of Pop art in Portugal in the 1960s and later of Conceptualism, but some of his most enthralling works are large abstract paintings he produced in the late 1970s using brilliant contrasting colors and spare architectural forms that have a vaguely Op art feel. The other show was an engaging exhibition of mostly cutting-edge works from the collection of Helga de Alvear, a Madrid dealer. Some of the top-notch pieces on view were examples by Joseph Beuys, Marina Abramovic, Franz West, Luc Tuymans, Stan Douglas, Andreas Gursky, Candida Hofer, Isaac Julien, Matt Collishaw, Katharina Grosse and a particularly striking room-size installation by Angela Bulloch.

Perhaps the most spectacular show coinciding with the Ellipse opening was "Fundacao" (Foundation), a vast installation by

Portuguese artist Pedro Cabrita Reis, which occupied the main galleries of the Gulbenkian Foundation's Centro de Arte Moderna, located in a modernist structure adjacent to the Museu Calouste Gulbenkian. The project, which also marks the 50th anniversary of the institution, is, according to a statement by the artist, an exploration of memory and history. Curated by museum director Jorge Molder in collaboration with the museum's Cristina Sena da Fonseca, "Fundacao" consists primarily of objects and artworks that Cabrita Reis found in the archives and storage areas of the Gulbenkian. After passing through a gallery filled with the artist's recent series of enormous white monochrome paintings, one enters the museum's largest space, filled with a wide range of detritus, including bricks, wires, neon light fixtures, dusty and bent metal bookshelves and boulders from the museum's parklike surroundings, assembled by the artist and arranged over a period of several months. With some walls painted bright yellow or orange and illuminated by long stretches of neon tubing, the installation at times appears blinding and oppressive. But meandering through this seemingly randomly configured assemblage, one gains a sense of the project's purpose. Certain vantage points offer an impressive panoramic view, as if one were scanning an idealized metropolis. A human presence, albeit ghostly, is evoked by Cabrita Reis's tall abstracted form in white plaster placed high on a pedestal at one end of the room. Adding to the historical dimension of the project was a small Corot landscape hung on one skewed wall, and a Canova marble bust of a woman, lying on its side in a brightly lit vitrine. Cabrita Reis discovered these pieces languishing in the museum's storerooms and integrated them into his elaborate installation in rather poetic ways, lending a touch of humor and a gentle humanism to his massive and aggressive architectonic folly. Similar in attitude and conviction to the curators and proponents of the Ellipse Foundation Contemporary Art Collection, Cabrita Reis considers his own "Fundacao" to be a work in progress.

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