

De lo que soy / Of what I am

an exhibition of self-portraits and autobiographical work
by women with roots in Latin America and the Caribbean

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February 11 - May 12, 2003

organized by susan hoeltzel and patricia stevens

Lehman College Art Gallery
Bronx, New York



Monika Bravo
September 10, 2001,
Uno Nunca Muere La Vispera, 2001

To make an autobiographical work is to posit some part of the persona as an identity. It is an assertion of the self, reflecting interests, aspirations, and desires. This exhibition focuses on work in which the artist's life provides a primary source. In some of the work the artist is literally depicted, in others she is represented symbolically or metaphorically. Some of the artists work as diarists, others not. The topics are diverse, ranging from universal rites of passage—childhood, coming of age, romance, maternity, motherhood—to those issues often associated with Latin American art—a concern with social and political content and an interest in surrealism and fantasy. For some of the artists it is the intersection of life with historical events that provides the defining moment.

The notion of identity shaped by association with the mythic abounds and the attrib-

utes of the gods provide further insights into the persona. Works include references to Wonder Woman, the Egyptian goddess Mut; the orishas, Shango, Yamaya, Obbataca, and Oshosi; the Hindu goddess Kali; the Aztec goddesses Tonatzin and Coatlicue; and the Christian Virgin of Guadalupe and the Virgin Mary. Others in the exhibition work in an attempt to counter the mythic presence of Frieda Kahlo whose work has come to define contemporary Latin American self-portraiture.

Transcultural dislocation is a theme in much of the work—most of the artists have lived in more than one country and culture. The notion of a “hybrid identity,” in which cultures merge, provides a subtext in many of the artists’ work. There is common agreement that home is not a fixed locale but carried within.



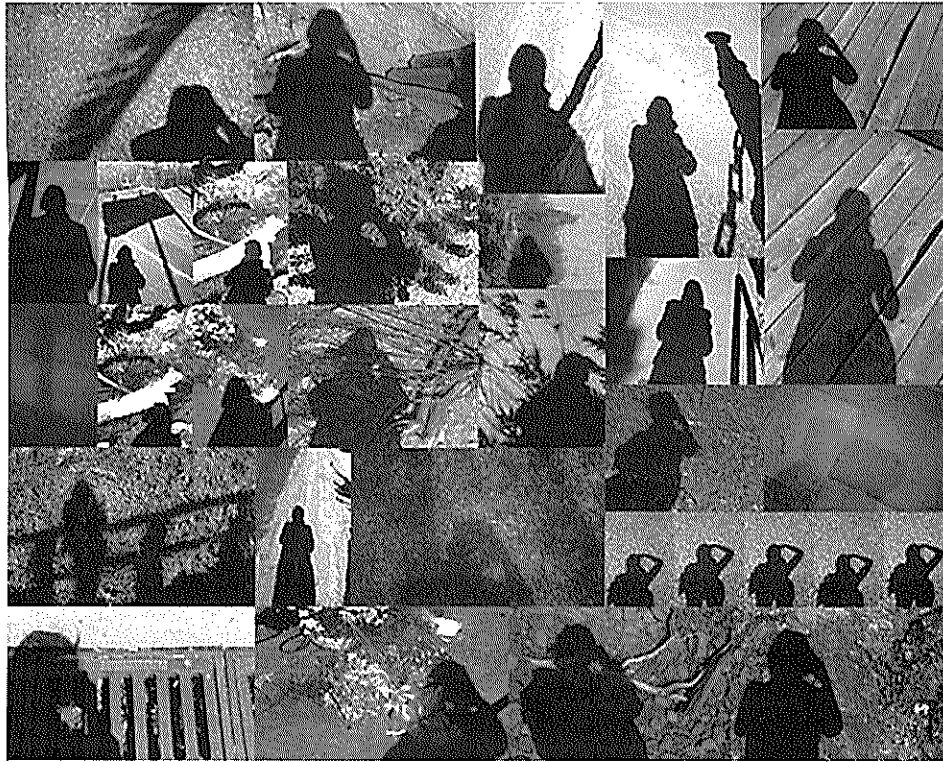
Patricia Villalobos Echeverría
Epicentro I - IV, Terremoto - Earthquake series
 1997

Monika Bravo's poetic images of a dramatic storm moving through New York harbor, of boat traffic traversing the rivers, and of rain on her studio windows, are some of the last footage to capture the views from the World Trade Center. Bravo was a participant in the World Views program sponsored by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. Seven hours of video, condensed to five minutes and forty seconds in time lapse, record the extraordinary evening before the towers were attacked. Panoramic vistas and streaks of lightning are set to music and capture the beauty of the city at night. Shot from the 92nd floor of the north tower, *September 10, 2001 Uno Nunca Muere la Vespera* is dedicated to the memory of Michael Richards, a fellow artist who spent the night in his studio and did not escape the next morning.

The New York City skyline, harbor and bridges feature prominently in other works by Bravo. This footage was intended to be a part of an installation entitled *A_Maze*. The *2001 Uno Nunca Muere la Vespera* refers to a saying in her native Colombia which means you die on the

day you are intended to die. This work was produced, in part, with a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts to Lehman College Art Gallery.

Historic events also provide the content in four mixed media photographs from the *Terremoto / Earthquake series* by Patricia Villalobos Echeverría. This series grows out of her experience of the massive 1972 earthquake in Managua, Nicaragua. Ten thousand people were killed in this city which lies on the San Andreas Fault. The body is central to her work and it provides a locus from which to examine the political, social, historical and mythological content. The four prints are richly layered in meaning and offer multiple interpretations. They reference both the seismic events as well as their political consequences. In this series Villalobos is identified with Coatlicue, a form of the Aztec mother goddess Tonatzin whose identity is also merged with the Virgin of Guadalupe. Their composite identities are a metaphor for her own—born in Tennessee to Salvadorian parents, Villalobos, grew up in Nicaragua and the United States.



Matilde Marín
Itinerary, 2003

In the photographs Villalobos lays across a field of stars which suggests the night sky as well as the American flag. Superimposed on the photographic image are serigraphs of seismologist's graphs of the quakes, which also function as targets. Her body is bound with wire and her open eyes appear lifeless. The gelatin silver prints are streaked with washes—printer's ink diluted with solvents—which provide a painterly surface and a sense of eroded earth.

Argentinean Matilde Marín's large-scale photographic installation is composed of 31 shadow portraits. Trained as a sculptor, Marín has worked for many years as a printmaker. More recently she has incorporated photography, video, and digital imagery into her work. In a sense the collage of photographs in this exhibition, *Itinerary*, is a travelogue, recording the light and textures. Created over a period of years, Marín has photographed her cast image in many countries. Shadow lengths suggest the hour of day and, in the broader sense, the passage of time. This formalist composition is Marín's ephemeral mark on the landscape.

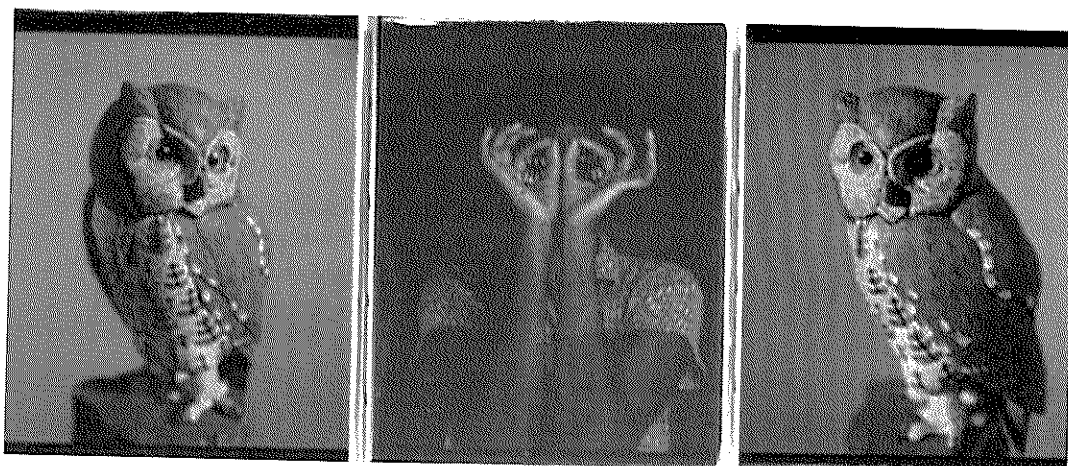
María Magdalena Campos-Pons has worked in many media and continues to explore performance-based photography as a means of examining identity. Campos-Pons emigrated from Cuba in 1988 and much of her work over the past fifteen years has dealt with memory of another time and place. She has frequently referenced the spirituality of Santería, a syncretic practice with roots in Catholicism and Yoruba religions, in the objects and colors she uses. Her body too functions as a signifier. In the *Nesting* series cultural dislocation continues as an element but this time the objects also include wooden representations of North American birds, a gift from her mother-in-law. Birds are traditionally a symbol of freedom.



María Magdalena Campos-Pons
Nesting I, 2000

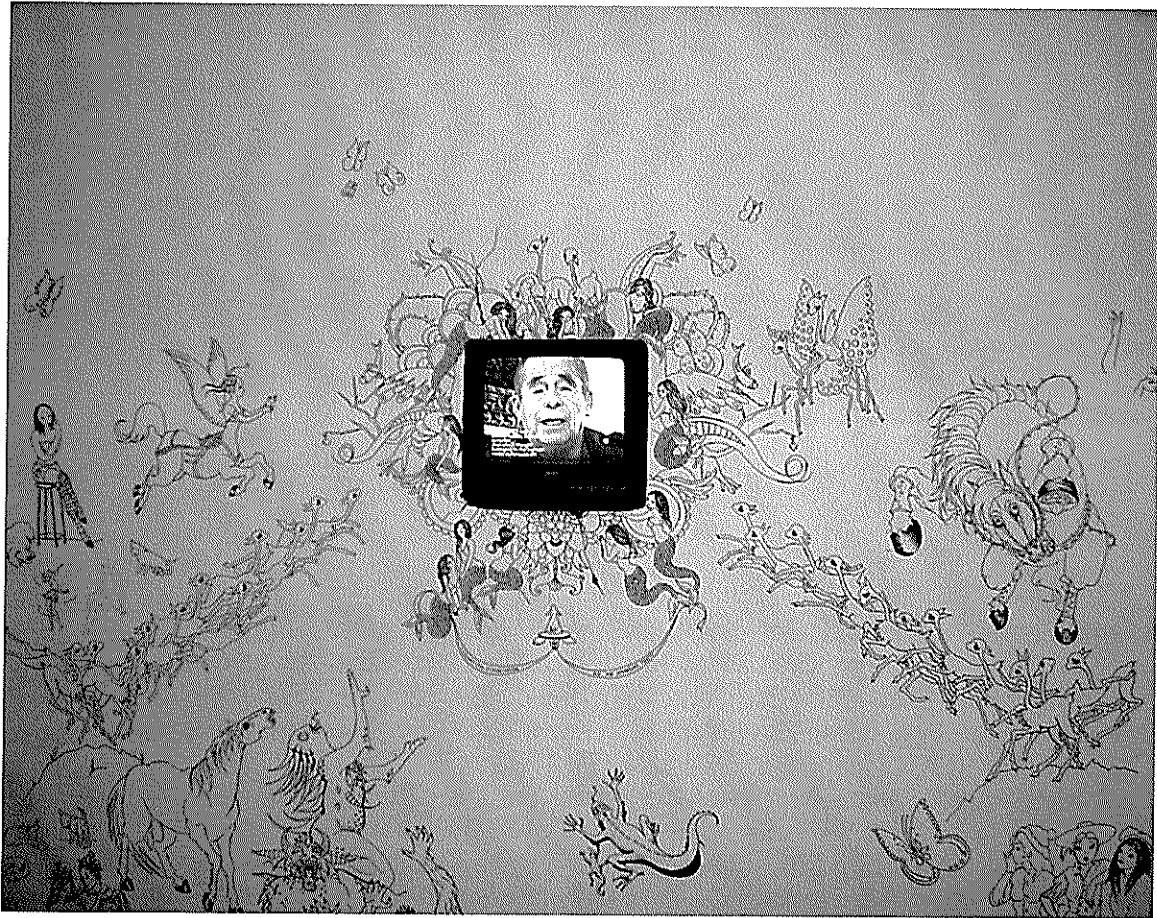
These birds are also migratory and live in multiple environments, as Campos-Pons does. Perhaps, as the title of the series implies, it is a settling in.

Campos-Pons works with a large format Polaroid camera, which produces singular and instantaneous results. She stands before the camera as if in a trance. Her pose is both frontal and formal. In *Nesting I* she is the nest. Her hair, looped into fine braids mixed with beads, surrounds and camouflages her head. Yellow facial paint along with the intricate coiffeur reference African traditions. Birds flank her sides and top her head in the photograph. In *Nesting II* she poses in imitation of the owls that are part of this composi-



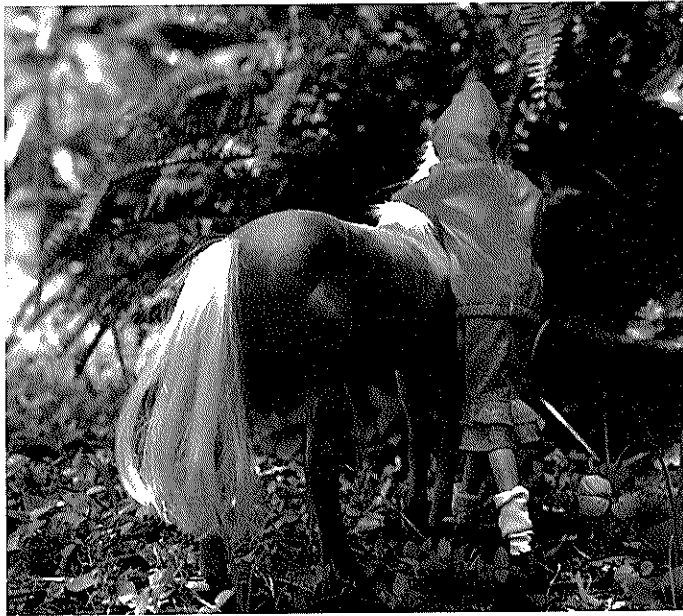
María Magdalena Campos-Pons
Nesting II, 2000

tion. Her eye coloring suggests African body paint as well as the markings of the owl. In the *Nesting* series the amber color of the background and the beads are a reference to Ochosi, the hunter orisha. In a poem she wrote about nesting, Campos-Pons enumerates those things, which characterize a nest. It is both a utopia and an entrapment.



Kukuli Velarde
The Apple of His Eye, 2003

Kukuli Velarde's video installation *The Apple of His Eye*, is a very personal examination of parental expectations and their consequences. It focuses on adolescence and the painful process of separation and the transition to adulthood. Velarde, raised in Peru, was a gifted child artist and the daughter of a man who once aspired to be a painter. The tale is a classic one of a father who chose a career for a child—publishing books of her work as a teenager—and a child who took flight from her family, from painting and from Peru. The video is structured as a father/daughter dialogue with Velarde's father speaking on camera and the artist responding in text replies. Both are speaking with the perspective of time and distance. The video is surrounded by line drawings done directly on the walls. Large-eyed princesses, monsters, flocks of vicuna, mermaids, puppies, and adolescent girls frolic on an 8 foot by 24 foot surface and recreate her earlier style.

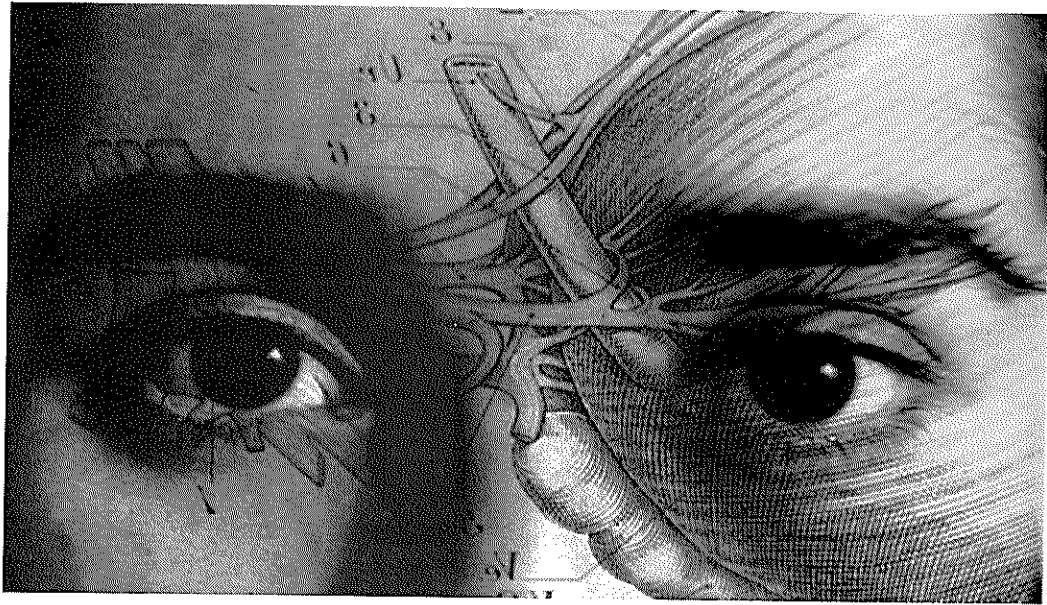


Eugenia Vargas
My Horse and I #5, 2001

In Eugenia Vargas' photographic series *My Horse and I*, toy store surrogates, evolved from her earlier performance-based self-portraits, enact a sequence which reads like fiction. Vargas grew up in southern Chile and like many children developed an important, early relationship with her horse. Its presence in her work is both literal and metaphorical. In this series childhood experiences are transformed through memory and the imagination. Intense color saturation of the reds and greens in these prints creates an eerie dream-like sense of narrative. While it suggests both the idyllic play of childhood and a sense of nostalgia, it also hints at a darker interpretation. *My Horse and I* offers a visual narrative in which one cannot help but see images of power and control, metaphors for sexuality, and a sense of loss.

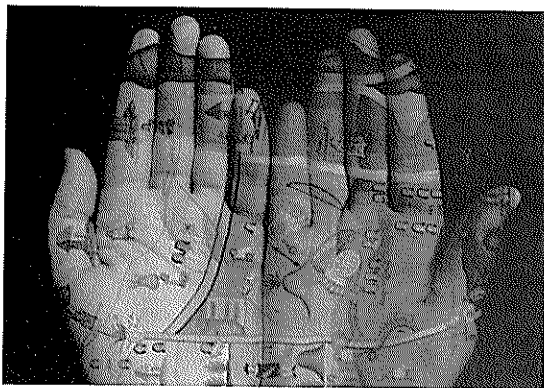


Eugenia Vargas
My Horse and I #11, 2001

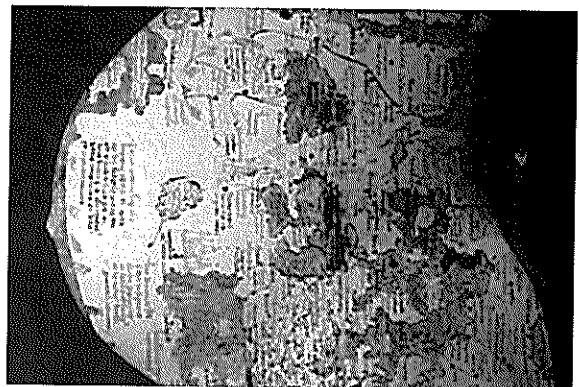


Tatiana Parceró
Ojos #23, Cartografía series, 1996

In the work of Mexican-born Tatiana Parceró, her body is the primary subject. Ignoring the whole, Parceró isolates parts—her eyes, her hand, and her stomach in the three works in this exhibition. Using transparency overlays she adds additional imagery and meaning. In *Nuevo Mundo #10*, an early map of the New World is an obvious metaphor for new life. The map is superimposed on a dramatic profile of her pregnant belly—its landmasses, harbors and newly charted seas seem to radiate out from her navel. In *Palmas #31*, a photograph of her hands are paired with a Meso American codex. If fortunes are to be told by reading the hands, Mexican history and the legacy of the Spanish conquest mark Parceró's lifeline and predictions of the future will be predicated on the past.



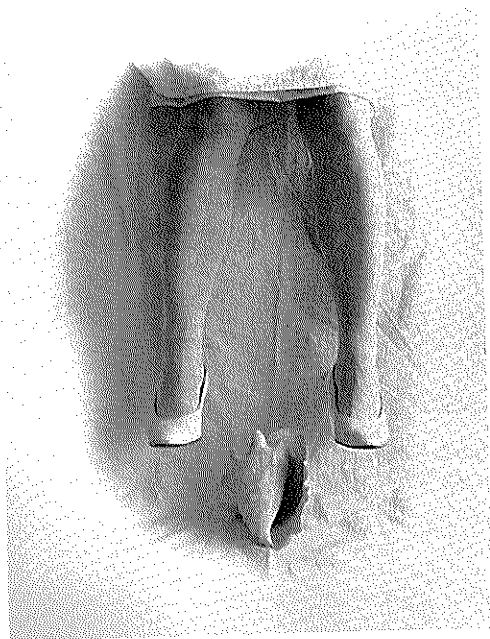
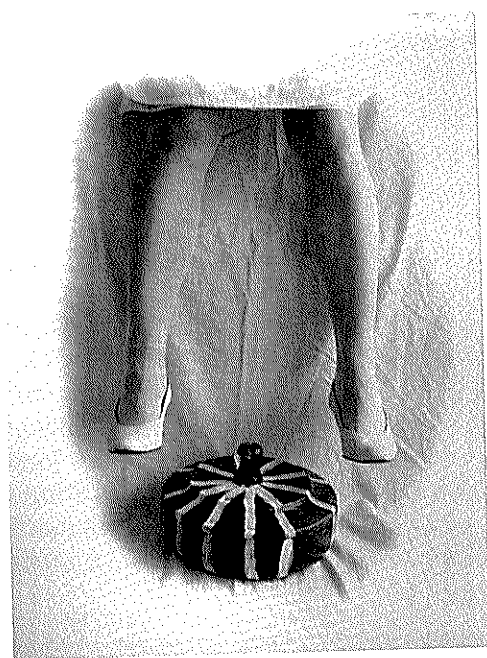
Tatiana Parceró
Palmas #31, Cartografía series, 2002



Tatiana Parceró
Nuevo Mundo #10, 1998-2000



The photography of Marta María Pérez Bravo hovers between documentation of performance and deconstruction of ritual practice. Predicated on the syncretic beliefs of Afro-Cuban religions—particularly Santería and Palo Monte—Pérez Bravo concretizes symbols and beliefs using her body. In the three photographs in the exhibition the forms are minimal. Her body is fragmented. Between her legs are objects, attributes of the orishas. The images float on a light ground conveying a sense of mystery.

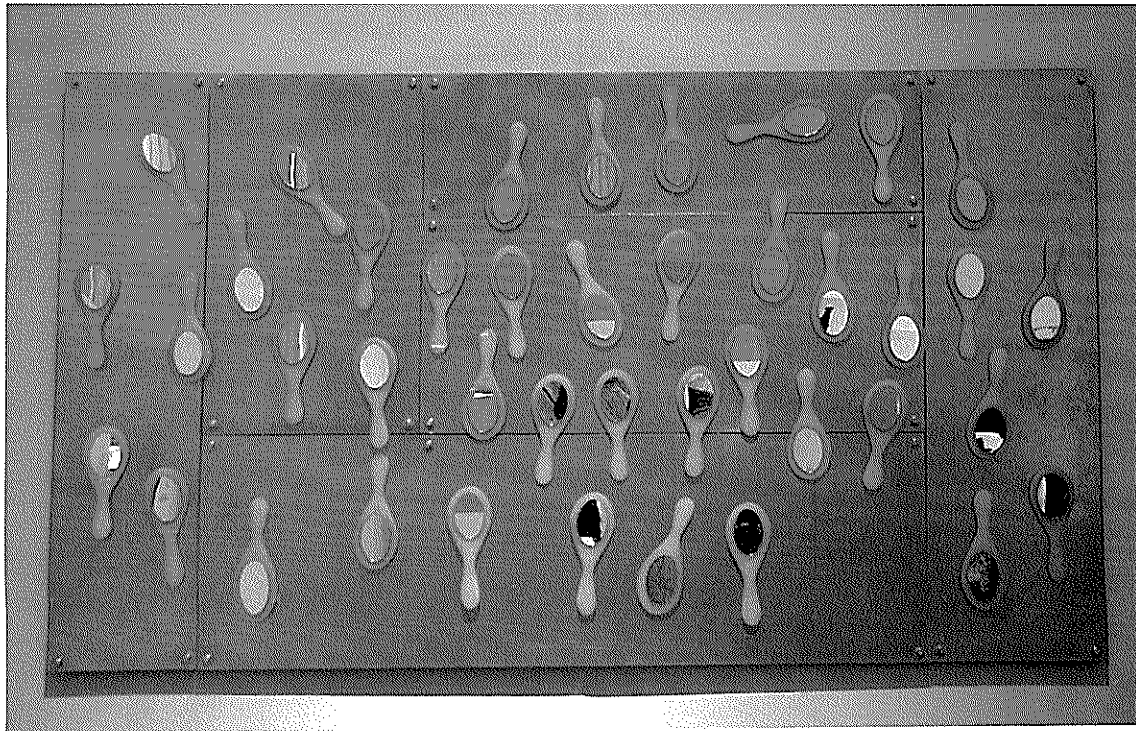


Marta María Pérez Bravo
Omo-obbaíaca, Omo-Shango, and Omo-Yemaya, 1998



Mari Mater O'Neill
Untitled, 2000

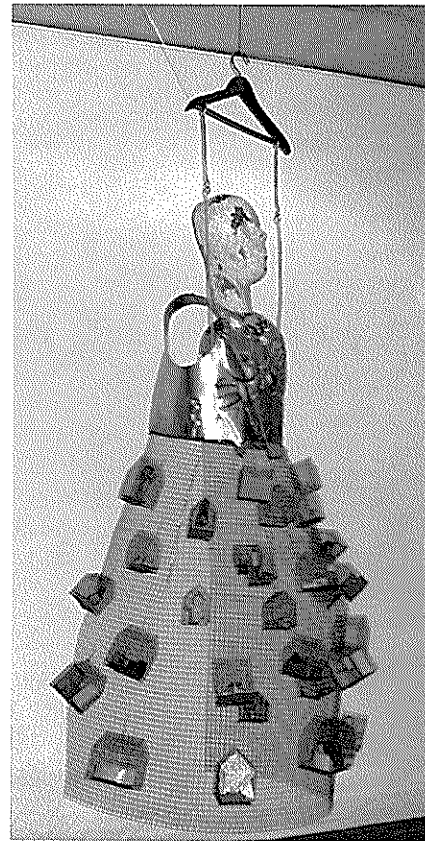
In an untitled large-scale print by Mari Mater O'Neill two comic style heroines do battle with some undefined force of evil. Frame by frame they wield shovels and hoes. A trowel dangles from the belt of one of the figures. Flowers and hearts adorn the background. The final sequence culminates with the two in a romantic kiss. Prominently displayed in the center panel is the stamp of the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, the chief arts agency on the island, lending its imprimatur. The style of this work marks a change in the more lyrical style of O'Neill's earlier work.



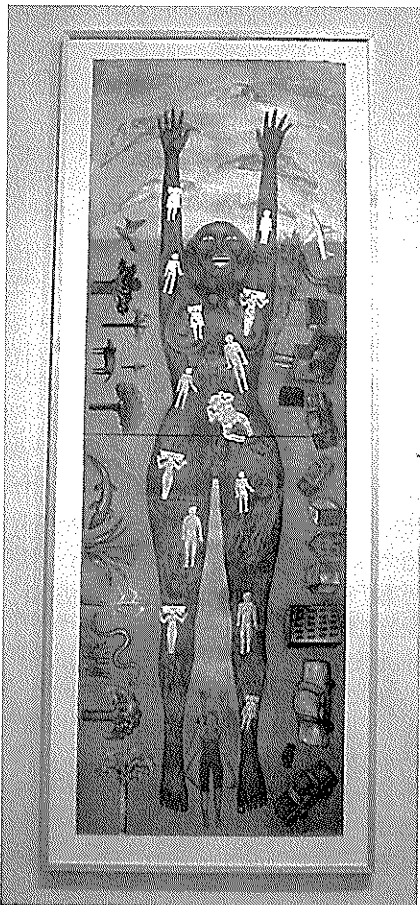
Anaida Hernández
Multiples, 2003

Anaida Hernández deals with the external self, the visage. Her installation *Multiples* is interactive. Fifty small mirrors, attached by magnets, cover a galvanized steel wall. Initially reflecting the artist's image, it now includes the viewer as a composite portrait made up of many small facets. The mirrors are intended to be used by the viewer, taken from the wall and examined. Each mirror handle has a simple symbol stenciled on the back, such as a heart or dice, possibly suggesting an attribute or an arbitrary fortune or fate. Watching the interaction for just a few minutes, one becomes aware that this work is about appearance and maybe even vanity. The audience tries not to be seduced by their own image but usually fails. Hernández's earlier installations have focused on social issues such as domestic violence, immigration, and human rights. This work seems related to her more recent installations which deal with the notion of games—"games of chance" as a metaphor for the arbitrary nature of fate and the "games people play" as a reference to interpersonal relationships. Anaida Hernández moved to New York from Puerto Rico in the mid-1990s and has recently settled in the Bronx.

Marina Gutiérrez's two works in this exhibition are richly layered in meaning with references that range from the art historical and literary to the personal. Her sculptural installation *Dis-illusionment Gown - Body Mask* series alludes to the loss of love. The figure hangs from a coathanger, like a garment on the rack, and might possibly read in an earlier era as an allusion to abortion. Its war-tattered face is covered with writing—Pablo Neruda's poem of love lost "los versos mas triste." The bodice of her dress is clad in armor and she wears a Purple Heart with a labyrinth within. The neckline is embossed with the phases of the moon. A cage-like skirt is adorned with small mesh boxes



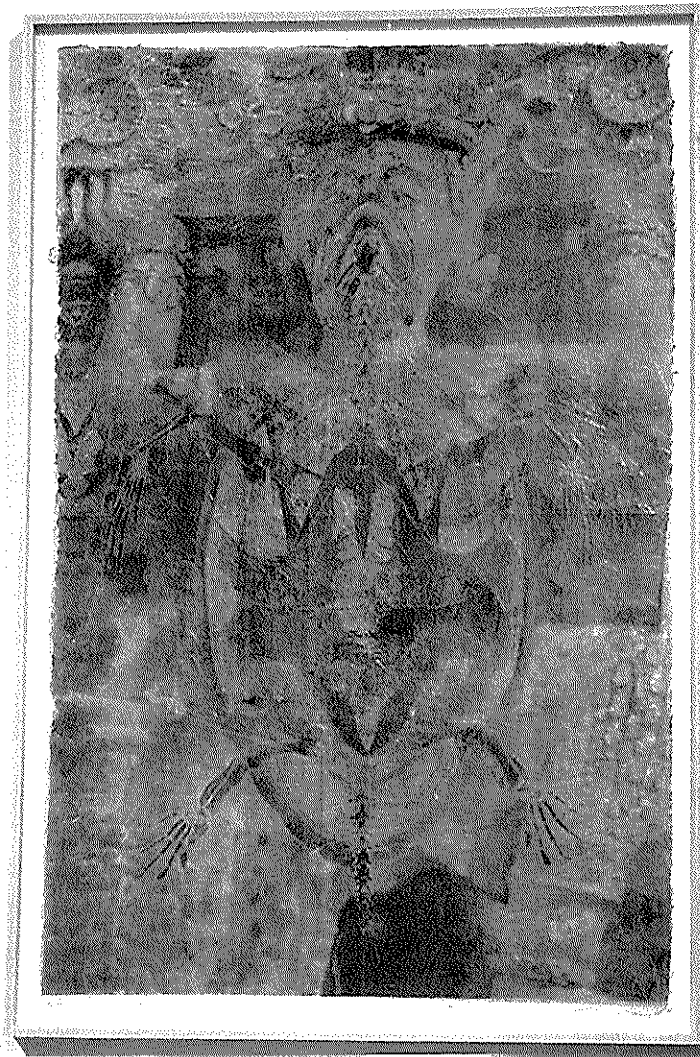
Marina Gutierrez
Dis-illusionment Gown - Body Mask
series, 1997



Marina Gutierrez
Reaching Mut, 1994

that compartmentalize objects representing aspects of an idealized domestic life—doll furniture, fingernails with red polish, penises, and babies.

Two mythic females, whose domain is the sky, are found in the imagery of a second work by Gutiérrez. Mut, consort of Amon, arches across the two panels of a large-scale print and a smaller figure of Wonder Woman stands at the bottom. The surface of the larger figure, with milagros attached, provides a ground for images of fertility and childhood—babies, a couple, a hopscotch court. The figures are surrounded by the parts of a bifurcated identity—on one side with the tropical scenes of Puerto Rico and on the other with the urban views of New York City.



Josely Carvalho
book of roofs// #0001.tracajá.40, 2002

Josely Carvalho's *book of roofs//#0001.tracajá.40* is a part of an ongoing project, a visual diary that ranges from an interactive Website to mixed-media installations. The series, inspired by the clay roof tiles that have been used for centuries in Brazil, began in the late 1990s. The series title provides a broad metaphor for shelter, both for the body and the soul. The early production of the tiles, said to be shaped by draping clay across the leg of a worker, infers a connection of labor, production, and the body. The prints in this series of forty works combine traditional woodcut with digital images. Delicate strata of hand-made paper joined with Roplex, create a translucent, multi-layered image. In *book of roofs//#0001.tracajá.40* the Hindu goddess Kali, creator and destroyer, slayer of time and death, is overlaid with an image of the bone structure of a sea turtle. The latter functions as a metaphor for the self and a personal icon for Carvalho. It appears throughout Carvalho's work. The sea turtle is an animal that travels great distances and navigates both sea and land. Its home is always with it. In a sense it is a metaphor for living and working in two cultures, Brazil and New York, as Carvalho does.



Esperanza Cortés
Untitled, 1998-2002

Colombian-born Esperanza Cortés links the flourishing of her own artistic career with the birth of her daughter in an autobiographical, mixed-media work. The work includes a pregnant nude in low relief that floats on a blue/green encaustic ground, perhaps a reminder of the primordial sea from which we all evolved. Veins radiate out from her pubis, running down the figure to root her to the earth and upward to become the branches of a "tree of life" in full foliage. Beneath the figure is a vessel, like those intended to hold holy water, conferring a blessing and offering purification. Decorative tin leaves and glass beads embellish this altar-like composition. Defined in symbols of blood and water, this earth mother image is depicted as a powerful force of nature.



Lydia M. Negrón
Reflections, 2000

In *Reflections* Lydia Negrón is represented as a serene, contemplative figure surrounded by objects. Each is embedded with allusions to the multiple cultures in which she lives, connecting to her Puerto Rican heritage and to her life in the United States. Catholic traditions, a bible, rosary beads, and a painting of the Virgin Mary, are in one corner. A mirror with Taíno iconography is in another. Designs on the frame of another mirror reference African art. There is a chandelier with an American eagle. Negrón exists somewhere in the middle—in a room filled with sources of light and mirrored reflections, Negrón's environment is an autobiographical reference.

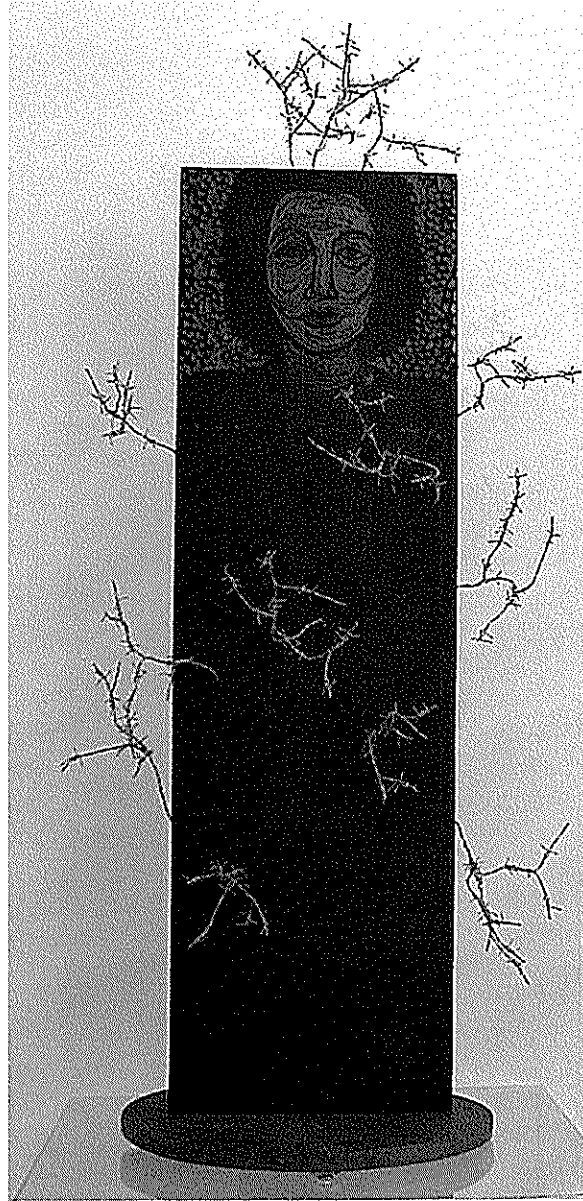
Elba Damast's *This is the way I feel* presents a multi-headed self-portrait that displays a distinctly irreverent personality. She clowns with bared teeth, dangles a cigarette from her mouth, and sticks her tongue out. Each head is a heart, the seat of one's emotional life and an icon Damast has used throughout her more recent work. The patterned floral background is an extension of her interest in eastern philosophy and Indian miniature paintings. Surrounded by a small fence, the figure is corralled, suggesting restraints and limits. It is hard not to see this dominant central figure with its millefleur pattern in the background without thinking of the well-known medieval tapestry *Unicorn in Captivity*. In a second work, a Janus-headed bust, her head is again a heart. She looks in two directions. A large bronze heart, engraved with words of love, is exposed on her chest.



Elba Damast
This is the way I feel, 2002



Elba Damast
This is the way I feel, 2002-03



Belkis Ramírez
*Se ha secado mi jardín/my garden has
dried up, 1988*

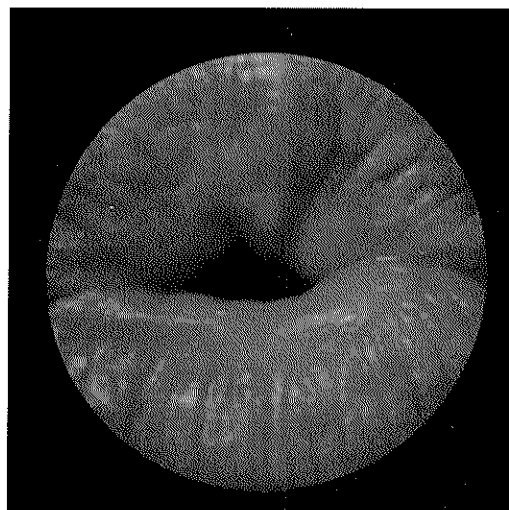
Although trained as an architect, Belkis Ramírez works as a printmaker, using the print and, sometimes, the block from which it is printed as a medium for large-scale installations as well as smaller works. Her figurative work also addresses larger issues, from the marginalization of women and freedom of speech to the ecological problems in Latin American countries. *Se ha secado mi jardín/my garden has dried up* shows the artist's self-portrait carved from a plank of mahogany, like a wood-cut block. Surrounded with barbed wire, she is both protected from the outside world by this barrier and caged in by it. The title refers to plants that died when a friend failed to water them for her.



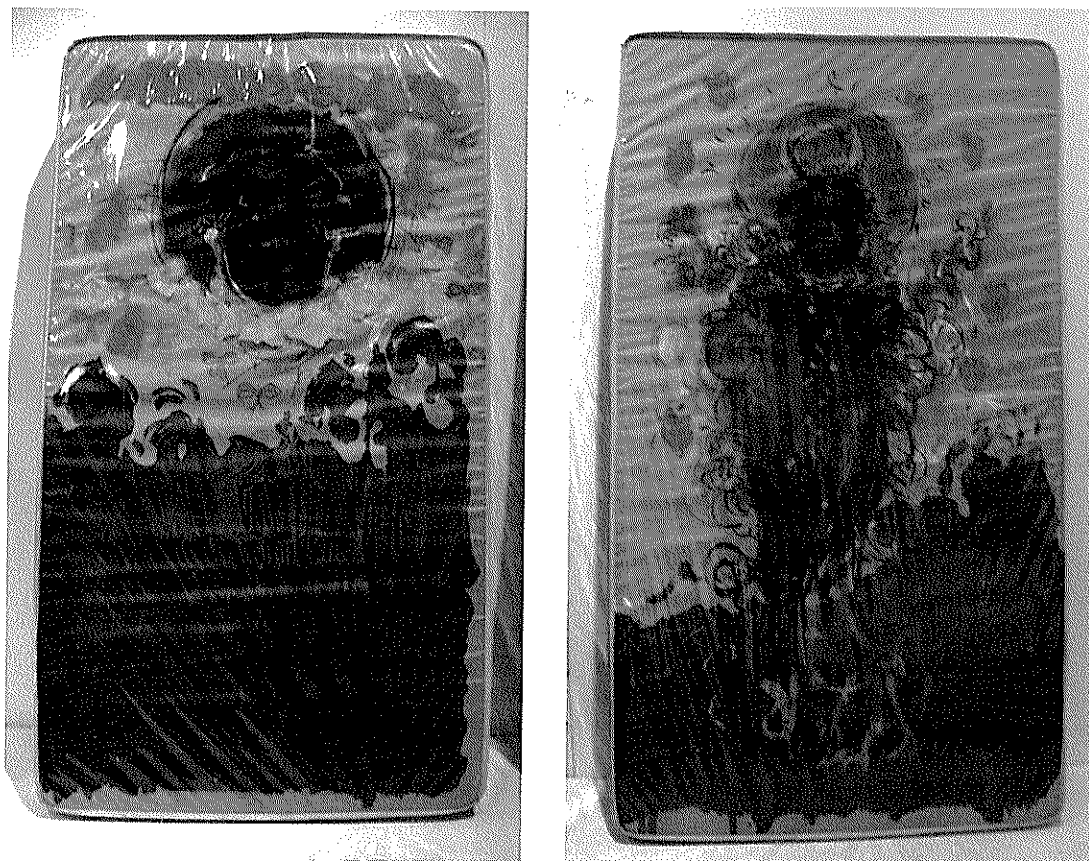
Beatriz Mejia-Krumbein
Still I am an Artist, 1998

Beatriz Mejia-Krumbein uses a quilt made in her native Colombia as the ground for her self-portrait. The quilt is accompanied by a statement that the artist asked be posted with the work—"My artist inside can be ignored but nobody has the power to make it mute to myself." Mejia-Krumbein paints herself onto the reverse side of the quilt without concealing its raw seams and stitching. In this work she is surrounded by smaller ghostly portraits, with wide open eyes. Her mouth sewn closed and her arms tied or encircled with shackles. Through the work Mejia-Krumbein also address a larger issues of political repression and fear in a violent society, of bearing witness yet being voiceless. She thinks of the quilt as a symbol of fragmentation as well as a symbol of unity. With its individual pieces stitched together and bonded, it provides shelter and comfort.

Photographer Sandra Bermudez uses eroticism and desire throughout her work as the means to an end. In two works in this exhibition *I Miss You* and *I Need You*, she creates playful, seductive works that seem to reference pornography as much as contemporary body art. Large-scale tondos offer close-ups of Bermudez's lips, teeth and tongue as she mouths words of love. In these works, which are part of a larger series, Bermudez's mouth is painted with bright red lipstick. The intense color is reinforced by the rich saturated C-print tones. Her native country of Colombia is known for its exportation of red roses and professional beauty pageants, which market women and romance for international consumption. These photographs parody the glossy images of *Penthouse* and *Playboy*.



Sandra Bermudez
I Want You and I Miss You, 2001



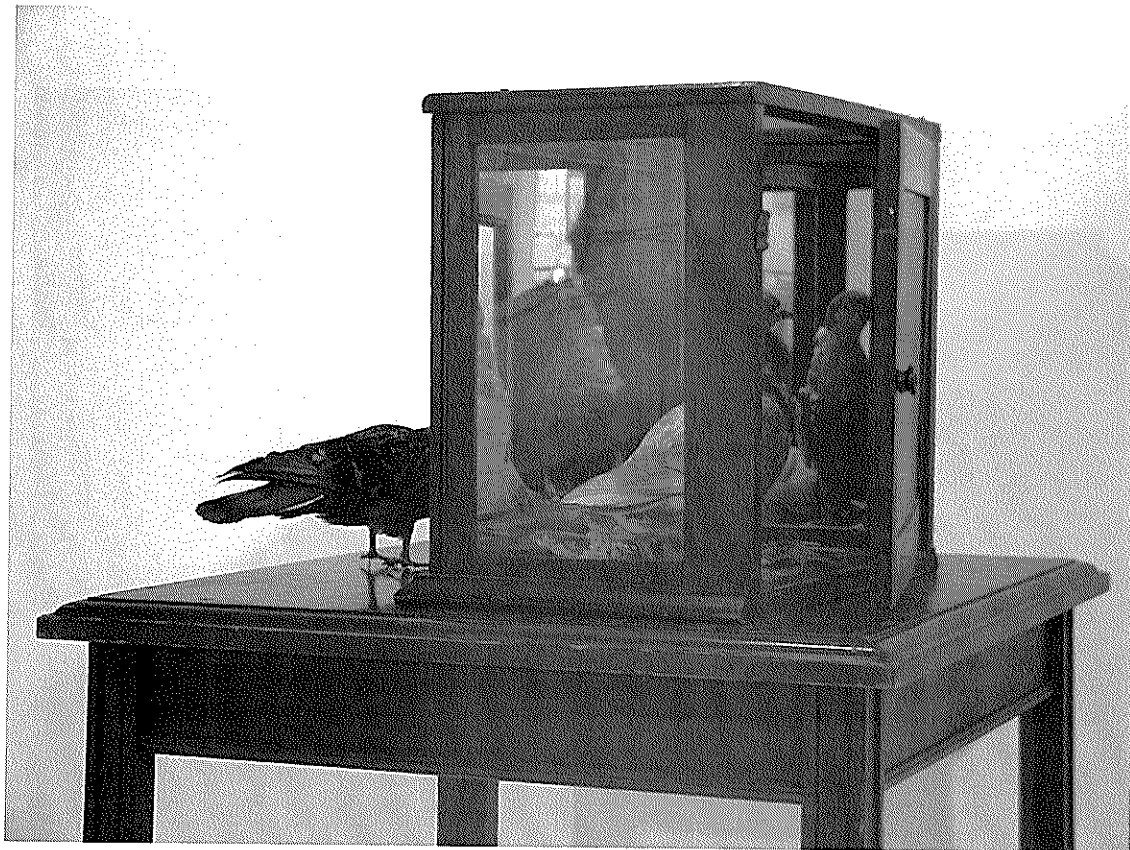
Scherezade García
Sleep my little child #1 and #2, (detail of an installation) Paradise Series, 2001

Dominican-born, New York artist Scherezade García is represented by two works, details from the *Paradise Series*, *Sleep my little child #1* and *Sleep my little child #2*. Sea and sky surround cherubic infants on bright pink, baby crib mattresses. Painted on the underside of a plastic covering, these babies with halos and plump cheeks are accompanied by the earliest desires of worldly goods—toys and candy. These images juxtapose the sacred and the profane—the pure spiritual being of a sleeping child and the potential for corruption by the culture.



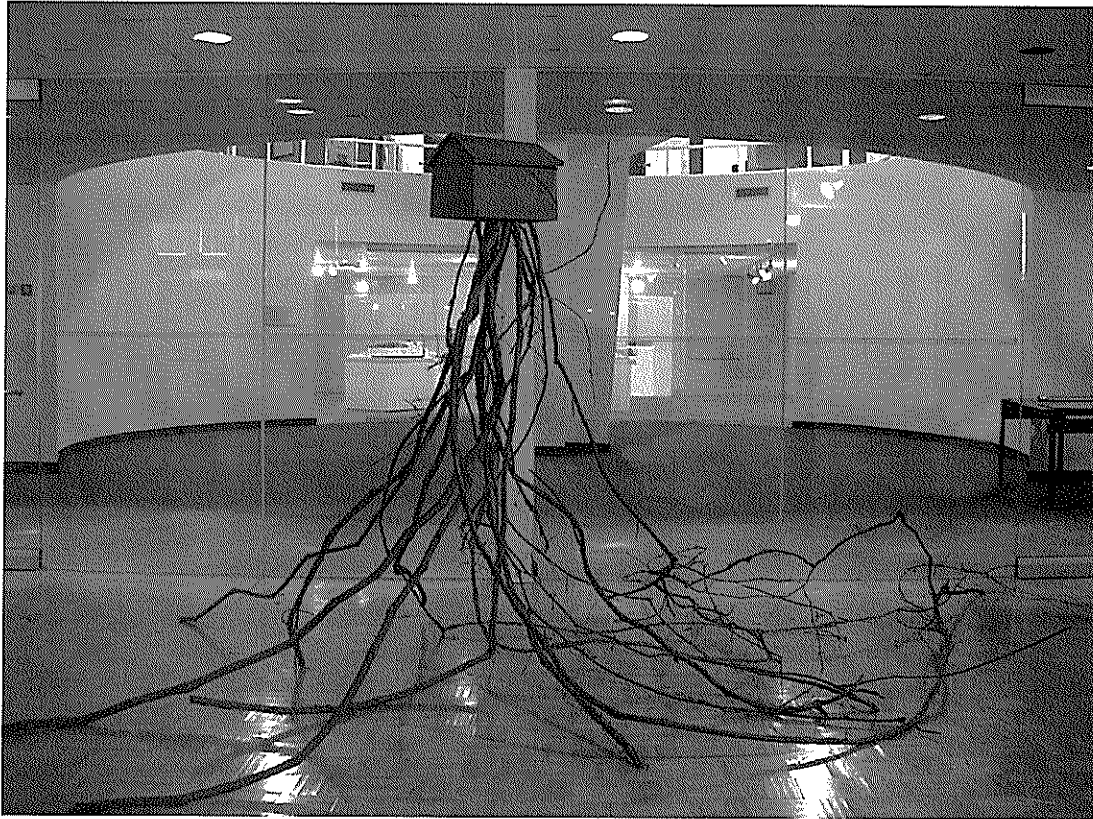
Mónica Castillo
Portrait, 2002

Mexican artist Mónica Castillo works against the tradition of female self-portraiture in her country that has been largely defined by the cult of Frida Kahlo with its intimate details of pain and despair. Castillo has concentrated on the making and re-making of her own image since 1993, always using her face in such a way that the works cannot be taken for personal revelations. She is represented in this exhibition with a fiberglass cast of her face and upper torso. Painted chocolate brown with oil and acrylic, the surface is covered with street debris—cigarette butts, pop tops, orange peels, discarded paper, and crumpled leaves. This artist wants us to look at her self-portraits and see that they are not about her at all.



Laura Anderson Barbata
Legal But Illegitimate II, 2001

Laura Anderson Barbata uses familiar objects to examine inequities, in the installation *Legal but Illegitimate*. Alluding to racial and economic disparities and to wishes and dreams, it is composed of two taxidermy pigeons on a simple table. The white bird wearing a gilded wishbone is enclosed within a small rectangular structure constructed of mirrors. The door is left ajar. The black pigeon is outside the structure, alone with his meatless bone, peering inside. The two fail to communicate and it is unclear which, if either, is free.



Annalee Davis
(up) rooted, 1997

Annalee Davis uses her work to examine cultural and historical issues of the Caribbean and her homeland of Barbados. In her installation *(up) rooted*, a small house floats in the air connected to the gallery floor with an expansive tangle of roots. The house is small but broadly anchored to the earth. Davis's own roots in the region go back for several hundred years. In this work she focuses on recent migrations since the 50s that have taken people away for employment, education, and for opportunity. No one stays in one place permanently and "home is a place carried within."

Exhibition Checklist

Laura Anderson Barbata

Legal But Illegitimate II, 2001
wood table mirrors, glass,
taxidermy birds, gold
wishbone, bone,
and dry flowers
38 1/4" x 26" x 26"
Courtesy of the artist

Sandra Bermudez

I Want You, 2001
C-Print on plexi
39" diameter
Courtesy of the artist

I Miss You, 2001

C-Print on plexi
39" diameter
Courtesy of the artist

Marta María Pérez Bravo

Omo-obbatata, 1998
gelatin silver print
9 1/4" x 15 1/2"
Courtesy of Galerie Ramis Barquet

Omo-Shango, 1998

gelatin silver print
19 1/4" x 15 1/2"
Courtesy of Galerie Ramis Barquet

Omo-Yemaya, 1998

gelatin silver print
19 1/4" x 15 1/2"
Courtesy of Galerie Ramis Barquet

Monika Bravo

September 10, 2001,
Uno Nunca Muere La Vispera, 2001
single channel digital DVD
5 minutes 40 seconds
©Monika Bravo
Courtesy of the artist

María Magdalena Campos-Pons

Nesting I, 2000
four Polaroids
33" x 77"
Courtesy of Howard Yezerski Gallery,
Boston

Nesting II, 2000

three Polaroids
33" x 103"
Courtesy of Howard Yezerski Gallery,
Boston

Mónica Castillo

Portrait, 2002
oil on acrylic on fiberglass cast
17.5" x 16.25" x 6"
©Mónica Castillo,
courtesy of Robert Miller Gallery

Josely Carvalho

book of roofs// #0001.tracajá.40, 2002
printmaking on handmade paper
6' x 4'
Courtesy of the artist

Esperanza Cortés

Untitled, 1998-2002
clay encaustic, metal and glass beads
67" x 33" x 3"
Courtesy of the artist

Elba Damast

This is the way I feel, 2002-03
polyester resin and bronze
36" x 28" x 20"
Courtesy of the artist

This is the way I feel, 2002

pigment on canvas
104" x 68"
Courtesy of the artist

Annalee Davis

(up) rooted, 1997
wooden house and vines
76" x 13" x 13"
Courtesy of the artist

Patricia Villalobos Echeverría

Epicentro I - IV, Terremoto - Earthquake series 1997
oil & serigraphs on silver gelatin prints
48" x 48" x 3"
Courtesy of the artist

Scherezade García

Sleep my little child #1, (detail of an
installation) *Paradise Series*, 2001
mixed media, mattress, acrylic, charcoal
56" x 31" x 6 1/2"
Courtesy of the artist

Sleep my little child #2, (detail of an
installation) *Paradise Series*, 2001
mixed media, mattress, acrylic, charcoal
56" x 31" x 6 1/2"
Courtesy of the artist

Marina Gutierrez

Dis-illusionment Gown - Body Mask series,
1997
mixed media
7' x 4' x 4'
Courtesy of the artist

Reaching Mut, 1994

lithograph collograph, collé and
pulp painting
two panels, 88" x 29.5"
Courtesy of Rutgers Center for Innovative
Print and Paper

Anaida Hernández

Multiples, 2003
mixed media installation, metal,
mirrors, screws
40" x 72" x 1/8"
Courtesy of the artist

Matilde Marín

Itinerary, 2003

photographs on foam board

94 1/2" x 118"

Courtesy of Casas Riegner Gallery, Miami

Beatriz Mejia-Krumbein

Still I am an Artist, 1998

acrylic and cheesecloth on fabric

52" x 36"

Courtesy of the artist

Lydia M. Negrón

Reflections, 2000

oil on canvas

56" x 36"

Courtesy of the artist

Mari Mater O'Neill

Untitled, 2000

lithograph relief and ink jet with collé

two panels 59" x 37"

Courtesy of Rutgers Center for Innovative
Print and Paper

Tatiana Parcero

Ojos #23, Cartografia Interior series, 1996

acetate and C-print

30" x 45"

Courtesy LatinCollector Art Center

*Palmas #31, Cartografia Interior series,
2002*

acetate and C-print

30" x 45"

Courtesy LatinCollector Art Center

Nuevo Mundo #10, 1998-2000

acetate and C-print

12" x 18.5"

Courtesy Grapa Studio of Art, Miami

Belkis Ramírez

*Se ha secado mi jardín/my garden has
dried up, 1988*

mahogany and barbed wire

63" x 21" x 21"

Private collection

Eugenia Vargas

My Horse and I #5, 2001

C-print

20" x 30"

Courtesy of Ambrosino Gallery, Miami

My Horse and I #11, 2001

C-print

20" x 30"

Courtesy of Ambrosino Gallery, Miami

Kukuli Velarde

The Apple of His Eye, 2003

video and marker drawing installation

8' x 8' x 8'

Courtesy of the artist

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