

# LEHMAN COLLEGE ART GALLERY



*A Town Portrait, 1994, installation view Lehman College Art Gallery*

## MARIA MAGDALENA CAMPOS-PONS

### A TOWN PORTRAIT

HISTORY OF A PEOPLE WHO WERE NOT HEROES, PART I

CURATED BY JULIA P. HERZBERG

FEBRUARY 4 - MAY 16, 1998

LEHMAN COLLEGE ART GALLERY

### SPOKEN SOFTLY WITH MAMA

HISTORY OF A PEOPLE WHO WERE NOT HEROES, PART II

CURATED BY SALLY BERGER

MARCH 5 - MAY 26, 1998

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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"A TOWN PORTRAIT:  
MEMORY STREAMS"

Emigration creates an existential state in which the artist as creator often produces, out of inner necessity, the most innovative modes of artistic expression. María Magdalena Campos-Pons has made an exilic journey and as a result is confronted with the ongoing process of reconsidering her roots and formation from the pivotal position of the past and present. Exile motivates her reexamination of the problematic of belonging, assimilation, and transculturation between diverse cultures.

*A Town Portrait* presents personal and collective histories through its component elements. In preparing for the installation, the artist corresponded with close members of her immediate family—mother, sister, and cousin—who live in Cuba. They shared with each other their individual memories of special places in the town, family events and celebrations, and reminiscences of their family history. Each of the components in the installation attempts to recreate a town portrait by conveying visual glimpses and written narratives based on those recollections.

La Vega is the artist's hometown; it was also the name of a large sugar plantation that formed part of a large network of sugar mills in the province of Matanzas. Campos-Pons' great-grandfather was sent from Nigeria to Cuba in the mid-19th century to labor on the La Vega sugar plantation. When slavery ended, the artist's family stayed in the town and continued working in the sugar industry until very recent times.

In the installation, the artist constructed four architectural elements—a doorway, wall, fountain, and distillery tower—that represent key places in La Vega which most specifically define her family's collective notion of place and rootedness. The installation begins with the Door, symbol of passage. Constructed of vertical panels of glass, the Door contains photographic images of the actual door from Campos-Pons' first home, members of her family, and historical and contemporary scenes of the town. The

Door links the past to the present through archival and contemporary views, each of which contributes to the sense of a town portrait. One of the photographs is of the artist's former home, which was in a building in the former slave quarters. At some point in the family's history, a statue of Elegguá, the Yoruba protector deity, who guards the portal and opens the paths, was placed at the base of the door to protect and bless those who entered. Reference to his functions are encapsulated in the title of the photographic series, *Abridor de caminos*, the one who opens the paths. The Door also functions as the physical and metaphorical element through which the artist moves between private and public spaces both within the actual installation and her discursive narrative. The Door acts as a point of passage, a liminal threshold between there and here, then and now.

The Tower is one of several former distillery towers remaining in the now defunct sugar mill. Campos-Pons remembers playing childhood games with other friends in the tower. When the artist left La Vega to study in a nearby town, the tower was the first building she saw at a distance when returning home. Over time the building assumed the importance of a landmark. Indeed, it remains the most notable historical remnant of the slave-run sugar mill, which contributed to producing quantities of sugar unrivaled in the Americas. As the children grew up in the town, they learned the history of the tower through their parents' stories.

In constructing the Tower, the artist used rough clay bricks to impart a sense of age to the structure. She related some of her thoughts together with those of her family in texts inscribed in the bricks. One reads: "The tower was the place that let me know that home was near. How long had it been there, what was hidden between its red bricks? The lost ones and those who defied all, even time."



*A Town Portrait*, 1994, installation view

The Fountain, another element in the installation, has the following words inscribed on the outside: "We made garlands of wildflowers." When the artist was young, the girls in the town gathered at the fountain, picked the flowers around it, and made garlands to adorn themselves. An aspect of that activity is the subject of the video *Flowers*.

The fourth element, the Wall, functions somewhat like the Greek chorus in terms of its collective narrative role. The artist compiled several passages from her family's written recollections and included them as texts in the Wall: "In La Vega we used to celebrate the African religious ceremony at Nengo's house. The ceremony included animal sacrifices. These were later cooked for the participants' dinner. Many of the celebrants were the godsons and daughters of the saint (Nengo). The people of La Vega loved the Water Tank. It was in the center of the town, and we used it as a reference point to divide the town into neighborhoods. They were called Triconia, La Quinta, and Palmarito. The majority of the townspeople used to work in the sugar cane harvest. The beginning and the end of the harvest were signaled by the sound of a long loud siren that was a symbol of celebration. In La Vega I (the artist's mother) knew a woman called Maria Perdomo, an ex-slave. She used to tell stories of the hardships of her life under slavery."

The personal and collective portrait of the town is expressed through a stream of memory fragments, some of which are featured in the videos. *Rocking Chair* focuses on an empty rocking chair covered with mosquito netting. Images of family members are projected on the seat of the chair as if they were apparitions. An old family adage holds that it is bad luck to let a chair rock without its sitter, because a moving chair will disturb the spirits of the people sitting in it. The video *Flowers* features the artist stringing a garland of tropical flowers into a necklace. The activity recalls the childhood games in which the artist

and her friends whiled away the hours making garlands to adorn themselves. In the third video, *Water Images*, the artist sifts water through her hands from an aluminum casserole. Images of tropical trees appear in her palms as she evokes the ephemeral nature of re-collecting. The performances are accompanied by Campos-Pons' childhood lullaby, sung softly, slowly, and rhythmically, adding another layer to the personal narrative of *A Town Portrait*.

The artist's excavations of childhood memories result from her living in the United States, away from Cuba. Negotiating her place between the here and now, and the there and then is an ongoing process, expressed and performed in diverse artistic forms in this installation.

In addition to *A Town Portrait*, the exhibition also includes two series of photographs—*Abridor de caminos* and *When I Am Not Here/Estoy alla*. Each addresses the artist's ongoing explorations of personal and collective history, identity, gender, and religion. The photographs, produced in the mind and performed by the body, are linked to the videos in *A Town Portrait*. Part of a larger corpus of photography executed during the previous year, they expand the media for which the artist has become known, namely sculptural objects, installations, video, and performance.

In *When I Am Not Here/Estoy alla*, Campos-Pons is covered in brown and white makeup. Two of the three photographs feature the artist with English and Spanish texts written across her chest. The work problematizes the complex issues confronting the artist who has moved from one country to another at a time when travel between them is restricted. From the artists' vantage point, "here" and "there (alla)" are transmutable. In her performance, the artist (re)identifies her existential state as she (re)negotiates

her notion of place. The phrases on the artist's chest, "IDENTITY COULD BE A TRAGEDY" and "PATRIA UNA TRAMPA" (Homeland [is] an Entrapment), may be interpreted in light of the charged views espoused by either US or Cuban cold war politics, or in light of the artist's personal politics: the need to go beyond the restrictions imposed by nations, whether or not at political odds.

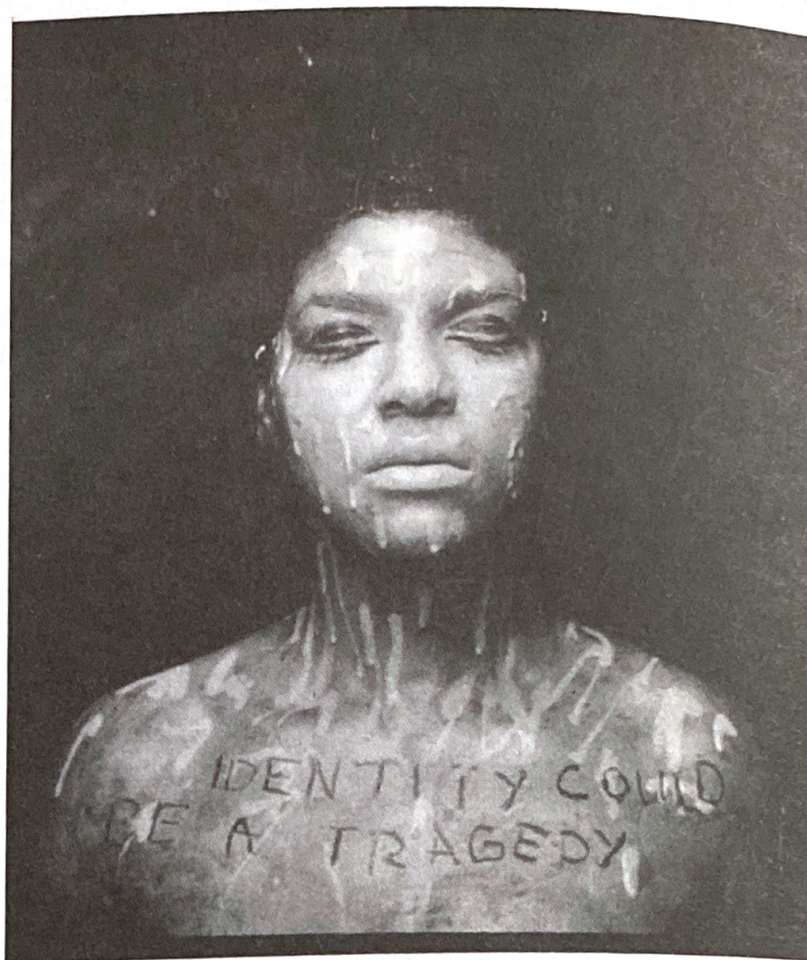
*Abridor de caminos* features ten different shots, many of which are of the artist as subject and object of the performance. Aspects of her Yoruba-derived, Santería background are drawn from images, colors, and meaning. Red and black are the colors of Elegguá, the deity that opens one's path, *abridor de caminos*. References to African sculpture are implicit in, for example, the shot of the artist's legs, lined with red, referring to scarification; her hair is elaborately coifed with beads—evoking the intricate hairstyles that convey status and gender in traditional African art. The body—viewed close up and in fragments—performs minimal gestures, an accumulation of which imparts the monumental presence of tradition, survival, continuity, innovation, and creativity.

Julia P. Herzberg, Guest Curator©

1. For an excellent history of sugar production in the province of Matanzas, see Laird W. Bergard, *Cuban Rural Society in the Nineteenth Century: The Social and Economic History of Monoculture in Matanzas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.)

2. The artist's texts are in Spanish in the installation, but her English translations were reproduced in the exhibition brochure, "María Magdalena Campos-Pons," in *Transcending the Borders of Memory*, essay by Olga M. Viso, curator (West Palm Beach: Norton Gallery of Art, 1994), n.p.

3. For a discussion of blood sacrifices (ebo eje) as part of the offering of an animal to deity, see Miguel Ramos, "Afro-Cuban Orisha Worship," in *Santería Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art*, ed. Arturo Lindsay (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), p. 32.



*When I Am Not Here/ Estoy alla*, 1996, one of three photographs

## CHECKLIST

*A Town Portrait*, 1994

Installation, four sculptures (clay, steel, blown and fused glass, copper) and three video projections with sound: *Rocking Chair, Flowers, Water Images*  
Dimensions variable according to space  
Collection of the artist

*When I Am Not Here/ Estoy alla*, 1996

Three Polaroid prints, each 29 x 22 inches  
Collection of Martha Schneider, Chicago

*Abridor de caminos*, 1997

Ten Polaroid prints, each 29 x 22 inches  
Courtesy of Mario Diacono Gallery, Boston

*The artist's use of the Polaroid 20 x 24 camera was funded by Polaroid Artist Support.*

This exhibition is sponsored in part by The Reed Foundation and the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs through the Office of the Bronx Borough President, Fernando Ferrer and the Bronx City Council Delegation, The Joe and Emily Lowe Foundation, J.P. Morgan & Co., Incorporated, The Andy Warhol Foundation for The Visual Arts, Inc., and the Friends of Lehman College Art Gallery.

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THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

With the title of this mixed media installation, *Spoken Softly with Mama*, María Magdalena Campos-Pons evokes the image of an intimate scene between a young girl and her mother in whispered conversation. This work is an homage to the female figures in the artist's Afro-Cuban family, descendants of survivors of the Spanish colonial slave trade between Nigeria and Cuba. The artist, who now lives in Boston, exchanges stories, songs, old photographs, embroidery and dress patterns, and other materials with her mother, sisters, and aunts from afar. *Spoken Softly with Mama* integrates their personal and collective memories about life in Cuba into fragmented video narratives performed by the artist and projected onto wood and embroidered-fabric sculptures.

This newly completed installation is the second part of an evolving series entitled *History of People Who Were Not Heroes*. The artist's relocation to the United States in 1990 brought into sharp focus ideas about her Afro-Cuban roots that inspired this comprehensive series. The first installment, *A Town Portrait* (1994), revolves around the eighteenth-century sugar cane plantation village and former slave barracks where the artist grew up in the rural province of Matanzas. She recalls the village by recreating its architectural remains using bricks made of clay from the area and inscribed with key phrases from the oral recollections of her family. The artist records childhood songs and games in black-and-white videotape and projects the scenes within the installation space.

*Spoken Softly with Mama* is a family portrait revealed through the household objects used by generations of women in her family to make a living. Working in other people's homes, these women washed and ironed laundry, and rinsed expensive stemware that they could not afford for themselves. Campos-Pons exchanges the ordinary materials of the ironing boards, irons, and

sheets that they labored over, for fine wood, glass, and translucent fabric to signify the transcendence of their endeavors and the innate fragility of human relationships. She recreates adolescent games and fantasies, alludes to mythological personae, and incorporates family photographs into scenes of three video narratives that symbolically illustrate her own passage into womanhood. These scenes are then projected onto the objects in the space so that they become embodiments of her family and its history. The elements of the installation cohere into a magnificent altar in visual and poetic praise of the women's fortitude that nourished family and friends following the end of slavery.

Campos-Pons instinctively and provocatively uses a wide range of media—any substance is potentially part of her artistic palette. The content and form of her work is infused with the practices of Santería, a syncretism of the Yoruba religious tradition brought to Cuba from Nigeria and Catholicism. Compelled by the altars she was exposed to at an early age, long before she had ever seen a painting, she presents with ease multiple elements in the three-dimensional space of an installation. The particular initiation rituals of Santería inspire her as she conducts her performances with an intensity equal to that of a shamanistic trance, creating powerful narratives that take place in the moment of a still frame or over time in the moving image. Materials are metaphorically transformed and fragments of personal, individual, and collective stories are symbolically blended to express the spiritual aspect of ordinary lives and the covalent bonds of time, memory, and history. Her multimedia work reflects a natural, but edgy synthesis of traditional and contemporary artistic, cultural, and religious practices. *Spoken Softly with Mama* is an articulation of the beauty that Campos-Pons finds in strength, expressed through the passage from what *was* then to what *is* now.

## INSTALLATION WALK THROUGH

The sculptural objects, embroidered fabric, photographs, projected video performance, still images, and sound of *Spoken Softly with Mama* combine fragments of memories, iconographic symbols, and spiritual precepts, integrating the artist's lived experience within a larger Afro-Cuban historical context. The elements of the installation converse creating a harmonic balance of story, the purely visual, and an intuitive visceral perception. Once the installation is considered as an altar derived from West and Central African ceremonial traditions that were ecumenically combined with Catholicism, its multi-layered connotations unfold. The altar appears as an art form throughout history, but its contemporary manifestations are most apparent in the work of artists referencing their roots in Latino and Caribbean cultures that are fusions of Spanish, African, and indigenous elements. The influences of Campos-Pons's Afro-Cuban background find a personal expression in the particular altarlike form of this site-specific installation.

The entranceway to the gallery serves as an antechamber that beckons the viewer into another space-in-time. Three stacks of meticulously folded sheets, with words sewn in script along their edges, rest on ebony stands. Video images flicker like the light of votive candles across their diaphanous surfaces. The first video is an image of the partial phrase "*para que su*" ["so that"] as it is being slowly embroidered in a 30-minute approximation of the real sewing time. A second projection shows the artist, wearing a simple white cotton top and skirt, unfurling a sheet onto which family photographs are superimposed. As the photograph fades, she folds the sheet and momentarily rests with it clasped against her stomach. Shown on the third stack of sheets is a video of pearls as they roll over a wood floor, are scooped together, and again let loose. The actions repeat over and over in endless cycles of creativity, observance, and reverie. These mini-narratives introduce the themes of the videos in the inner installation space.

Once inside, the viewer stands in a gently illuminated room. Three larger, and two smaller, resplendently hewn, padded, and shrouded wooden boards—elegant replicas of ironing boards—stand in upright positions. Projected video images of a figure (the artist) fill the three large surfaces. She alternately paces back and forth silently, twirls around, kneels on the floor folding sheets, peels a pomegranate, and sits in contemplation at a table. The smaller standing boards harbor turn-of-the-century photographic portraits of two women—an aunt and grandmother in the artist's family. A layer of glimmery, sheer white organza embroidered with flowers and designs replicated from the women's clothes covers these photo-

graphs. Each of the boards bears the name of a female family member—Fautima, Telefora, Nica, Amparo, and Oneila.

Numerous translucent molded *pâte de verre* irons sit poised on the dark surface of the floor at the foot of the boards, like foam floating on the sea, inanimate objects charged with life. Together, their configuration creates a facsimile of a "*collar de mazo*," an elaborate beaded necklace ritually used in Yoruba divination and the Atlantic altar traditions. The *collar de mazo* is usually a circle of multiple strands of beads gathered into a central "*moña*" or knot. In this installation, many intricately patterned trivets made out of the same cloudy white cast-glass as the irons represent the *moña*. The shape and placement of the irons and trivets and their relationship to the phallic shape of the boards serve as a symbolic uniting of the male and female. Though the content of the videos mainly refers to the females of her family, Campos-Pons has taken care to emphasize the male relationships through the specific shapes, forms, and embroidered texts of the installation.

A dialogue among the three simultaneously projected narratives merges family history, recollection, and myth. In the opening video sequence projected on the left board, a truncated view of a woman's bare legs and feet pace back and forth. At each turn the performer clicks her heels together three times in an allusion to Dorothy's lament in *The Wizard of Oz*, "There's no place like home, there's no place like home, there's no place like home." Like the young woman in that film, Campos-Pons wishes to be whisked back home. Her pacing becomes slower and slower as the viewer is transported with her through time to her childhood home in Cuba. African percussion instruments and the staccato of falling beads punctuate the activity, rhythmically slow down, and eventually fade. A whimsical familiar Spanish children's song, about a boy who dreams of marrying a well-to-do widow who knows how to sew, fills the space.

On the middle board, fingers peel away the skin of a pomegranate. The seeds are sensuously pulled from the core until there is a single ripe seed remaining. This one is gently massaged loose until it falls. The next image shows the luscious red seeds as they cascade downward in a river of red juice, metamorphosing into streaming red ribbons and cords. The pomegranate alludes to the story of Persephone, a well-known figure in Greek and Roman mythology who was stolen away to Hades by Pluto, the god of the underworld, when she wandered from her girlfriends, intrigued by the white-and-red petals of the narcissus flower. Her mother Demeter, goddess of the earth and fertility, mournfully let the earth wither until she was given the opportunity to meet her daughter once again on earth. But this chance came only after Pluto had enticed Persephone to partake of a pomegranate seed before she resurfaced. Unable to resist the temptation to taste the fruit, she thereafter spent part of each year with her mother, on earth, and part in the underworld with her husband, forever caught between two realms, the mortal and immortal worlds. Campos-Pons uses the varied connotations of the pomegranate to represent her multi-



*Spoken Softly with Mama, 1998*

cultural identity, and to invoke the ideas of adaptation and transition that have been integral to her life. This story is a symbolic expression of the delineation between fantasy and reality, the erotic desire that signals a young girl's passage to womanhood, as well as an expression of the literal separation between her parental family in Cuba and her own family in the United States.

The projection on the right board shows the artist balancing a stack of sheets on her head in the traditional manner of an African woman carrying her goods to market. Each sheet has words written on its folded edge in Spanish and English: "Para su hermano, her husband, her brother, su es poso, her son, para su hijo, padre, father." She bears the weight of her burden with determination, a firm expression on her face. While specifically referencing the women's arduous work that supported their families and the maintenance of a connection to their African roots, this image more subtly conveys the painful side of all memory and relationships.

Because of the symbolically rich and resilient Yoruba religious traditions that inform Campos-Pons's oeuvre, the materials of the installation are densely layered with meaning. Every object, color, material, sound, shape, and motion is charged with personal, sacred, and historical resonance. In accordance with Yoruba tradition, each believer is protected by certain personal Orisha, or gods. These Orisha are signified by specific colors and objects. The color red of the pomegranate fruit and the ribbons allude to Changó, the Yoruba thundergod, and god of passion and creativity. A woman wearing a full-length gold skirt and holding a string of pearls is the embodiment of two Orisha:

Oshún, symbolized by the gold, represents love and sexuality, and her sister Yemayá, represented by the pearls, is the goddess of the Atlantic and the giver of life.

The predominant white motif in *Spoken Softly with Mama* is commonly found in the African-based altar traditions of Cuba, because this color honors Obatala, head of the Orisha pantheon. White cotton sheeting and gauzy mosquito netting show how devotion is part of daily life. The carefully groomed white dresses worn by the women represent a personal, yet ritualized, observance. Opaque, shimmery, and translucent surfaces—from sheer organza, to satin sheets, to silk embroidery thread, to smooth pearls—reflect and transmit light, in the highest form of visual praise.

As the three video narratives reach closure, the projections end with the still image of a woman, each from a different time period. One, taken a century ago, is of the artist's maternal grandmother in a white dress leaning her head against her hand, her elbow resting on a table covered with a cloth and flowers. In another, Campos-Pons, elegantly dressed in radiant gold and yellow colors, leans against a table in the same position with a bowl of pomegranates beside her. In the third, the artist's aunt, wearing a 1950s-style dress, smiles out at the camera. At times, all five boards mirror images of women in the family. These narratives describe timeless passages of life—adolescence, womanhood, and maturity. Here, contemporary story and ancient Greek, Roman, and Yoruba mythologies have been interwoven with the lives of ordinary women in a conjoining of the sacred and the secular.

In *Spoken Softly with Mama*, Campos-Pons walks, embroiders, carries, plays, sings, dances, kneels, sits, and dreams in a poetically driven evocation of desire, passion, fulfillment, and longing. The artist integrates the past with the present;

conflates the sacred with the secular; intertwines indigenous, African, and western artistic and religious practices; and invokes ancient and modern myths in an intoxicating and courageous mix. Viewers stand before this work in contemplation and awe, completing the axis between altar and devotee.

Sally Berger©  
Assistant Curator  
Department of Film and Video

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Sound Design by Neil Leonard. Vivart, Boston: Video producer, Branka Bogdanov; camera and editor, Silvia Morrison. The artist would also like to acknowledge the following support: a grant from The Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation, and the assistance of Brooklyn Urban Glass, Brooklyn, N.Y., Ruth Short and Julie Nathanson; Galamander Press, New York, Randy Heminghaus; Women's Education and Industrial Union, Boston, Golda Keegan; and Amparo Campos in Matanzas, Cuba.

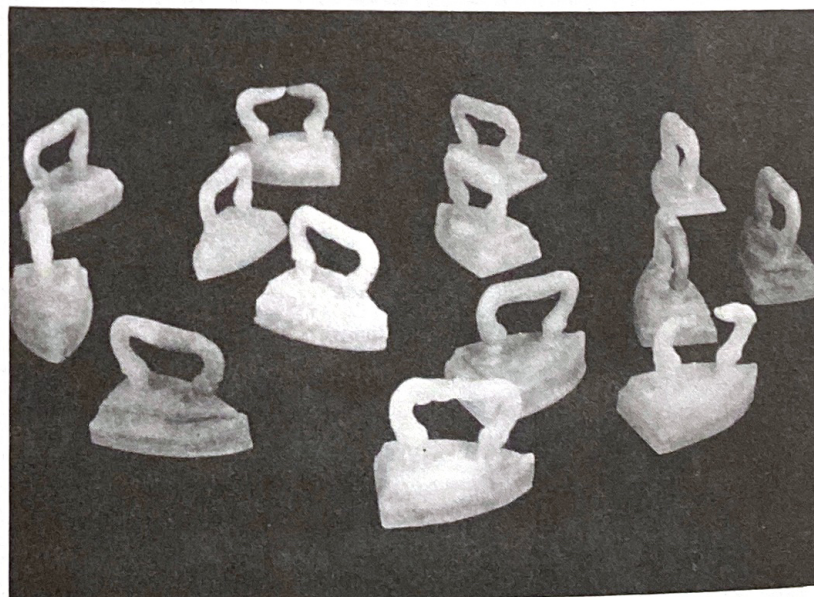
#### RELATED WORKS BY CAMPOS-PONS

Certain earlier works, such as *The Seven Powers That Came by the Sea* (1993) and *Umbilical Cord* (1991) bear a specific relationship to *Spoken Softly*. In *The Seven Powers That Came by the Sea*, seven boards bear the imprint of the slaves in the hulls of the ships that made the Middle Passage from Africa to the Americas and Europe from the 14th to the 18th centuries, and are inscribed with the names of the seven major Orisha who had watched over them during the voyage. Photo portraits of African descendants from Cuba and North America float on the floor of the installation space. *Umbilical Cord* is a mixed media installation that, like *Spoken Softly*, specifically pays homage to the women in the artist's family. It traces seven women in the matrilineal line, each represented by a photograph of her exposed belly and another of her left arm; the photographs are all then connected by a cord tied with red cloth. *Azucar* (Sugar), the third installment of *History of People Who Were Not Heroes*, has yet to be completed.

#### REFERENCES

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*Spoken Softly with Mama, 1998, detail*