

# MARÍA MAGDALENA CAMPOS-PONS

# BEHOLD

Including photography, installation, painting, video, and performance, *Behold* is a four-decade survey of Nashville-based artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons's work. The exhibition reflects the artist's role as a witness and recorder of the world, with all its pain and beauty, tragedy and love.

Campos-Pons was born in Matanzas, Cuba, in 1959, the year when Fidel Castro came to power. When she was an art student in Havana, artists were encouraged to experiment with new media and contemporary concepts, but after the Cuban government began to restrict free expression, she came to the United States in 1991. Since then, Campos-Pons has lived in Boston, Italy, and now Nashville, where she serves as the Cornelius Vanderbilt Endowed Professor of Fine Arts at Vanderbilt University.

In addition to reflecting the many places she's called home, Campos-Pons's imagery draws upon the histories of her Yoruba and Chinese ancestors, who came to Cuba as enslaved and indentured workers. Many of her artworks invoke Santería, a Cuban religion that combines Yoruba beliefs and Catholicism (the artist's grandmother was a Santería priestess). Works like *De Las Dos Aguas* allude to the religion's deities,

called orishas. In this grid of Polaroids, Campos-Pons assumes the identities of the orishas Yemayá and Oshun, protectors of migrants (cover).

Similarly inspired by Santería, the altar-like installation *Spoken Softly with Mama* honors a long history of extraordinary women in her family. Their images are projected onto ironing boards to draw a parallel between their lives as domestic laborers and the shapes of ships carrying kidnapped Africans on their transatlantic journey.

The exhibition's theme of beholding is evident in *Secrets of the Magnolia Tree* (fig. 1) a monumental triptych featuring a self-portrait. The artist stares out at us, her eyes large and owl-like to indicate that she misses nothing. She is flanked by gigantic blossoms of magnolias, beautiful trees that are often associated with the South. For Campos-Pons, the notion of witnessing history is double—the owl is all-seeing, as is the long-lived magnolia, silent observer of centuries of racism, injustice, and oppression, particularly in the context of this region's fraught history.

Such stories of family, spirituality, and history point to the capacity of art to overcome hurt through the healing power of love. In the lush floral work that concludes the exhibition (fig. 2), we behold an artist for whom the grief often associated with the giving of flowers is subsumed by an almost otherworldly beauty; it is a powerful antidote to despair.

Mark Scala  
Chief Curator



Fig. 1 María Magdalena Campos-Pons. *Secrets of the Magnolia Tree*, 2021. Watercolor, ink, gouache, and digital printing on paper on panels; 3 parts: 132 x 90 in. overall. Museum of Modern Art, New York, Latin American and Caribbean Fund and gift of Ronnie Heyman, 2022. © María Magdalena Campos-Pons. Image courtesy of the artist



Fig. 2 María Magdalena Campos-Pons. *Untitled (Flowers)*, from the series *The Rise of the Butterfly*, 2021. Gouache on inkjet paper; 10 parts: 92 4/8 x 163 3/8 in. overall. Fredriksen Family Art Collection. © María Magdalena Campos-Pons. Image courtesy of Galerie Barbara Thumm

La exhibición *Behold*, que incluye fotografía, instalaciones, pinturas, videos y *performance*, es una valoración de cuatro décadas de la obra de la artista María Magdalena Campos-Pons, radicada en Nashville. La exhibición refleja el papel de la artista como testigo y recopiladora del mundo, con todo su dolor y belleza, su tragedia y amor.

Campos-Pons nació en Matanzas, Cuba, en 1959, año en que arribó al poder Fidel Castro. Durante la época en que ella estudiaba arte en La Habana, los artistas fueron motivados a experimentar con medios nuevos y conceptos contemporáneos. Pero cuando el gobierno cubano empezó a restringir la libre expresión, emigró a EE. UU. Desde entonces, Campos-Pons ha vivido en Boston, en Italia, y actualmente en Nashville, donde trabaja en la Universidad de Vanderbilt bajo la cátedra patrocinada Cornelius Vanderbilt Endowed Professor of Fine Arts.

El imaginario de Campos-Pons, además de reflexionar sobre los múltiples lugares que han sido su hogar, recurre a las historias de sus antepasados yoruba y chinos quienes llegaron a Cuba como esclavos contratados. Muchas de sus obras evocan a la Santería, una religión cubana que combina las creencias yorubas y el catolicismo (la abuela de la artista era una sacerdotisa de la Santería). Obras como *De las dos aguas* aluden a las deidades de la religión, las y los orishas. En este diseño reticular de fotografías en Polaroid, Campos-Pons adopta las identidades de las orishas Yemayá y Oshun, protectoras de los migrantes (portada).

La instalación tipo altar, *Hablé con mamá en voz baja*, es inspirada de forma similar por la Santería y honra la larga historia de mujeres extraordinarias en

su familia. Sus imágenes aparecen proyectadas en tablas de planchar para establecer un paralelismo entre sus vidas como trabajadoras domésticas y las formas de las naves que cargaban a los africanos secuestrados en su travesía transatlántica.

El tema de la exhibición es observar, y se vuelve evidente en *Secretos del magnolio* (fig. 1), un tríptico monumental que muestra un autorretrato. Allí aparece la artista mirándonos fijamente con ojos grandes tipo búho para indicar que no se le escapa nada. Tiene a un lado unas flores gigantes de los hermosos árboles de magnolia tan representativos del sur de EE. UU. Para Campos-Pons, la idea de presenciar la historia es doble —tanto por el búho que todo lo ve, como para la longeva magnolia, ambos observadores de siglos de racismo, injusticia y opresión, sobre todo en el contexto de la difícil historia de esta región.

Estas historias de familias, espiritualidad e historia apuntan a la capacidad del arte para vencer el dolor por medio del poder sanador del amor. En la exuberante obra floral con la que concluye la exhibición (fig. 2), observamos a la artista para quien las penas, a veces asociadas con obsequiar flores, están subsumidas en una belleza casi sobrenatural; eso representa un poderoso antídoto para la desesperanza.

Mark Scala  
Chief Curator



September 27, 2024–January 5, 2025


This exhibition is organized by the Brooklyn Museum and the J. Paul Getty Museum. The exhibition is curated by Carmen Hermo, former Associate Curator, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum and Mazie Harris, Associate Curator, Department of Photographs, J. Paul Getty Museum with Jenée-Daria Strand, former Curatorial Associate, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum.

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