

Gala Porras-Kim (b. 1984, Bogotá, Colombia; lives and works in Los Angeles) received an MFA from the California Institute of the Arts and an MA in Latin American Studies from the University of California, Los Angeles. Her solo exhibitions include *Gasworks*, London (2022); Radcliffe Institute of Advanced Studies at Harvard (2022); the Amant Foundation, New York (2021); the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2019); and Headlands Center for the Arts, Sausalito, CA (2018). Selected group exhibitions include 34th Bienal de São Paulo, Brazil (2021); Gwangju Biennale, South Korea (2020–21); Ural Industrial Biennial, Ekaterinburg, Russia (2019); Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2019, 2017); and Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2016). Porras-Kim is the recipient of the Art Matters Grant (2019), Creative Capital (2015), and Radcliffe Fellowship for Advanced Study at Harvard University (2019), among others, and is the artist in residence at the Getty Research Institute (2021–22). Porras-Kim's work is in the collections of Brooklyn Museum, New York; FRAC Pays de la Loire, Carquefou, France; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Perez Art Museum, Miami; Seoul Museum of Art, South Korea; and Whitney Museum of American Art.

Gala Porras-Kim: Correspondences towards the living object is organized for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis by Wassan Al-Khudhairi, Chief Curator, with Misa Jeffereis, Assistant Curator.

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Related Programs

Artist Talk: Gala Porras-Kim
Saturday, March 26, 1:00 pm

RE: Artist as Medium (Workshop)
Saturday, June 25, noon

RE: Artist as Medium (Roundtable)
Thursday, July 21, 6:00 pm

Gallery Guide
Contemporary Art
Museum St. Louis

March 25–
July 24, 2022



Gala Porras-Kim Correspondences towards the living object



Gala Porras-Kim, *228 Offerings for the Rain at the Harvard Peabody Museum (detail)*, 2021. Colored pencil and Flashe on paper. 72 × 72 inches. Courtesy the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles. Photo: Paul Salveson.

Have you ever visited a museum and wondered how an object got there? Gala Porras-Kim questions how objects live and move through the world, how knowledge is derived from objects, and what stories are being told about them and from whose perspective.

The majority of archaeological objects kept in museums today were put there after being removed from their location of origin. Ritual objects, which previously served as offerings to spirits for their journeys in the afterlife—vessels, sculptures, coins,

jewels—are locked in a display case, implying a disconnection from their existential purpose. When museums place items such as these on display, they



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do so within a specific methodology and framework—the objects serve as a visual representation of an(other) culture, telling a story about their place and time. Objects are often defined as “tools,” for example, to conform to an institutional narrative while disregarding the objects’ original, sometimes sacred, meaning.

Correspondences towards the living object includes five projects, each a mediation, or conversation, between an object or collection of objects and the institutions in which they are kept. The discussions often take shape as letters—authored by the artist and sent to various institutions—presented alongside works of art in the form of drawings, sculptures, and other materials that expand on these mediations.

The work in this exhibition prioritizes a person or a people’s wishes for their objects to live in perpetuity, rendering the goals of the institution as secondary. This reorientation exposes many of the tensions within museum administrative processes, conservation practices, and legal policies, posing the question: can the multiple functions of these objects—from both the past and present—be made to somehow coexist?

Precipitation for an Arid Landscape

Precipitation for an Arid Landscape is part of a larger body of work that considers objects kept in collections that were never meant to be historicized. At the beginning of the 20th century, 30,000 artifacts and remains were removed from the Chichén Itzá cenote, a sacred, rain-filled Mayan sinkhole located in one of the most important archaeological sites of Mexico’s Yucatán Peninsula. The objects were placed in the cenote as sacrificial offerings to Chaac, the Mayan god of rain and thunder, imploring the deity to produce rain for the region’s agricultural livelihood. Upon their removal, the objects were entered into the collection of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University.

Comprised of multiple works including drawings, sculpture, and documents exploring the historical and legal context of the excavation, *Precipitation for an Arid Landscape* considers the following question: how do we rejoin the rain and the objects, and if that is not possible, how do we restore them to their original purpose? In the eponymous sculpture, copal—a tree resin traditionally used by Mayans for incense or ritual offerings—is mixed with dust collected from the area of the museum where the objects currently reside. The sculpture requires the institution to apply rainwater to it, and by using rainwater, the materials may be reunited with Chaac. In a letter to the director of the Peabody, Porras-Kim prompts the museum to consider its role in the physical conservation and ritual preservation of these objects.

78 west Mexico ceramics from the LACMA collection: Nayarit Index

In 1986, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) acquired 235 objects that had been excavated from a burial chamber located in Nayarit, on the Pacific coast of Mexico. The person who sold the objects, Proctor Stafford, stipulated that wherever these pieces were put on display, the institution was required to list his name alongside the object details on the wall. Over time, the objects became known as the Proctor Stafford Collection at LACMA. Porras-Kim’s project questions why the collector’s name has become the identifier for this varied group of indigenous artifacts.

Through her drawings, the artist emphasizes the individuality of these artifacts by drawing them to scale and categorizing them by shape and size. In addition, Porras-Kim writes to the curatorial department at LACMA to request that the objects be renamed to represent the region they come from rather than the name of the collector. As part of a larger project, *78 west Mexico ceramics from LACMA collection: Nayarit Index* questions how these objects were taken from Mexico, and brings into focus the policies of public institutions when it comes to private collectors—particularly how agency is given to the collectors rather than the objects and their original owners.



Gala Porras-Kim, *342 Offerings for the Rain at the Harvard Peabody Museum*, 2021. Colored pencil and Flashe on paper. 72 x 72 inches. Courtesy the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles. Photo: Paul Salvesson.



Gala Porras-Kim, *Proposal for the Reconstituting of Ritual Elements of the Sun Pyramid at Teotihuacan*, 2019. Polyurethane, acrylic, document. Courtesy the artist.

Proposal for the Reconstituting of Ritual Elements for the Sun Pyramid at Teotihuacán

Proposal for the Reconstituting of Ritual Elements for the Sun Pyramid at Teotihuacán highlights the ethical significance of archaeological extractions and attempts to return and restore ritual objects and elements to their original site and purpose. In 2018, the artist came across two monolithic rock forms, or stelae, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. They had been extracted from their original location at the top of the Sun Pyramid at Teotihuacán, one of the most important Mesoamerican archaeological sites, located near present-day Mexico City. The Sun Pyramid is a ritual site for the afterlife and the stelae were possibly made as offerings to the Sun God. Porras-Kim wondered what happened to the ritual functions of these elements once they were displaced.

In response, the artist created two official replicas of the stelae and attempted to donate them to the National Institute of Archaeology and History (INAH) in Mexico, the institutional stewards of the Sun Pyramid. In a letter sent to the INAH proposing the donation,



Gala Porras-Kim, *A terminal escape from the place that binds us*, 2020. Paper marbling on paper; human bones from Shinchang-Dong, Gwangju, 1 BC; letter. Dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist. Commissioned by the 13th Gwangju Biennale in collaboration with the Gwangju National Museum.

Porras-Kim suggested placing the replicas where the original stelae stood as an act of mediation to symbolically restore, or reconstitute, the ritual elements of the Sun Pyramid. Alongside the replicas, Porras-Kim reconstructs the context in which the stelae were found through a large graphite drawing and ambient sound that captures the interior views and sounds of the pyramid, a drawing of what the sun looks like with one’s eyes closed, and a brass sculpture activated by the rays of the sun.

A terminal escape from the place that binds us

Leaving the Institution Through Cremation is Easier than as a Result of a Deaccession Policy

These two bodies of work pose questions surrounding human remains in the collections of the Gwangju National Museum and the National Museum of Brazil: when does the agency over our own bodies cease to exist? How can we retain agency over our bodies in life and death?

These works suggest the potential for knowing the wishes of the ancient dead. For *A terminal escape from the place that binds us*, Porras-Kim suspended pigments over the surface of water on paper—a process known as paper marbling—and allowed patterns to form without her guidance, ceding control to chance. Historically, this process has been used as a divination technique known as encromancy, with the resulting images interpreted as the response of spirits to a specific query. Here, the patterns potentially map an ideal setting for the remains of those in the Gwangju National Museum’s Collection.

Leaving the Institution Through Cremation is Easier than as a Result of a Deaccession Policy is centered on the remains of a skeleton named Luzia in the National Museum of Brazil. In 2018, a fire tore through the museum and only fractured fragments of the original remains were discovered in the wreckage. This project includes a napkin marked with ashes collected after the fire—the napkin acting as a vessel to hold Luzia’s ashes until she is fully freed. The title is a reference to the irony of Luzia’s partial liberation from the museum through an accidental cremation rather than an institutional policy decision to deaccession, formally removing the object from the museum collection.

Each body of work is paired with letters to the respective institutions suggesting the unlikelihood for the deceased to have agreed to become objects in museum collections. They prompt museum officials to honor the personhood of these remains by acknowledging the agency of the people who once inhabited those bodies.