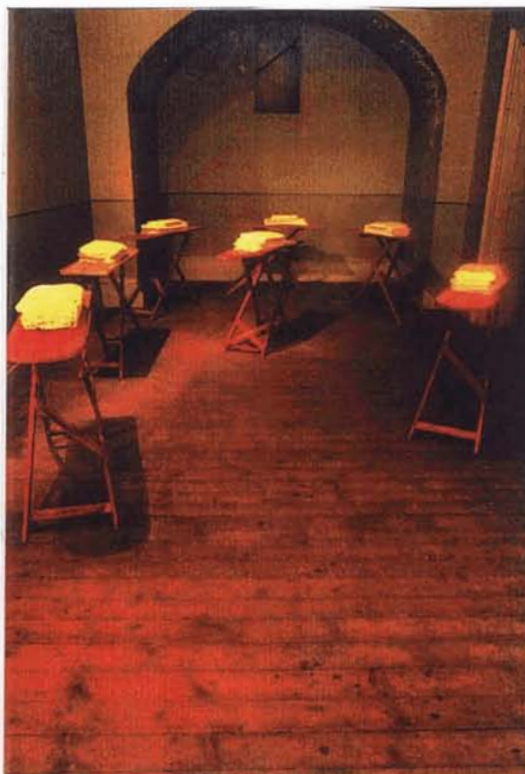


# Unfolding Desires



a Solo Exhibition by  
Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons

November 21, 1998 till January 16, 1999



## Dislocations and Recollections Julia P. Herzberg ©

Emigration creates an existential state in which the artist as creator produces, out of inner necessity, innovative modes of artistic expression. In recent years María Magdalena Campos-Pons made an exilic journey from Cuba to Canada to the United States. As a result of that shifting, she confronts the ongoing process of reconsidering her roots and formation from the pivotal position of the past and present. Exile motivates the artist's reexamination of the problematic of belonging, assimilation, and transculturation of diverse cultures.

In the three installations presented here, Campos-Pons weaves memories of family and self and constructs accounts—some remembered, others imagined. *Umbilical Cord* and *A Town Portrait* feature photographic images and texts to speak of and for the artist's African heritage; *Untolding Desires* utilizes everyday objects to evoke elements of a transatlantic passage.[1]

In *Umbilical Cord* (1991) Campos communicates personal and collective narratives through images of the female body. The mixed-media installation consists of thirteen photos, nine labels, and a wire cord. These elements are divided into three horizontal registers to suggest a genealogical tree. The seven subjects are women in the artist's family, among them her grandmother, mother, sisters, and nieces. Campos represents her grandmother, the matriarch, by a traditional photographic portrait. The other members of the family, however, appear as a series of images of their body parts. The artist has chosen to represent them by the abdomen, the locus of creation and birth, and the arm, one of the limbs whose main artery connects to the heart. In this genealogical configuration, the women are connected to one another by a wire cord that is attached to the main artery in each of their arms, thereby uniting their blood lines and life lines. A cross covering the navel—the locus of embryonic growth and survival—of each woman has many associations, including the wound and its healing, colonization, evangelization, and New World syncretism. The cross Campos painted on her own stomach, with cross bars in the form of little feet, suggests the four cardinal routes of Africa's slave trade. 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.

In preparing for *A Town Portrait* (1993) Campos-Pons continued her collaboration through correspondence with her immediate family in Cuba. They shared with each other their individual memories of special places in La Vega, their hometown, of family events and celebrations, and of reminiscences of family history. Their written recollections enabled the artist to vivify a history of her place, from both near (within) and far, while she dealt with issues of separation. Each of the four constituent sculptural elements in the installation is based on the collective accounts of Campos-Pons and her family. [2] The piece attempts to recreate a town portrait by conveying visual glimpses and written narratives based on those recollections.

La Vega was also the name of a large sugar plantation that formed part of an extensive 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.

The four architectural elements—a doorway, wall, fountain, and distillery tower—in the installation 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. 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.[3] 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."

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. 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 later cooked for the participants' dinner.[4] 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 María Perdomo, an ex-slave. She used to tell stories of the hardships of her life under slavery."

*Unfolding Desires* (1997) is a post-minimalist piece featuring seven ironing boards and small neat stacks of white folded sheets on top of each.[5] Placed in an elliptical arrangement, the discursive space is slowly energized through the implied movement of the repeated forms, both replicating the silent motion of boats as well as the visual imagery of manual labor performed in servitude. The body's absence in this work is as powerfully felt, thereby implicitly present, as it is in the two earlier pieces wherein the body was represented through photographs and written texts. In creating a fictive space, Campos-Pons calls on (re)membered histories and geological dislocations embodied in everyday objects charged with references specific to many peoples' lives and fortunes.

Campos-Pons evokes a wide range of personal, historical, and art-historical references to construct her aesthetic and conceptual ideas regarding the private and public spaces of the interior and exterior self. The artist's excavations of 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 modes in these works.

Dr. Herzberg, art historian and independent curator, has published and curated extensively on Latin American, Latino, and culturally diverse contemporary art.

[1] Contemporary artists, such as Faith Reingold and Willie Cole, come to mind, among many, whose work also embraces a rich iconography and range of symbolic and expressive meanings in terms of expressions of social history.

[2] In a written text for *A Town Portrait*, the artist acknowledges the collaboration with her mother, Estervina Pons and her sisters Amparo Campos, Marta Campos, as well as other relatives. See Olga M. Viso (curator and essayist), "María Magdalena Campos-Pons," in *Transcending the Borders of Memory*. (West Palm Beach: Norton Gallery of Art, 1994), n.p.

[3] 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.)

[4] For a discussion of blood sacrifices (ebo eje) as part of the offering of an animal to a 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.

[5] A version of this piece was exhibited in "Life Little Necessities" curated by Kelly Jones in the 2nd Johannesburg Biennial (1997).

María Magdalena Campos-Pons was born (1959) and raised in Cuba. The artist was trained in Havana at the National School of Art, the Superior Institute of Art (ISA), and Massachusetts College of Art. She has lived and worked in Boston since arriving in the United States in 1991 and has exhibited extensively in this country and Canada, Europe & South America. In 1993 she was a recipient of the Bunting Fellowship, Mary Ingraham Bunting Institute, Radcliffe Research and Study Center, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. During the fellowship year the artist completed *A Town Portrait*. In 1997 Campos-Pons was one of the artists selected for *Trade Routes*, the Johannesburg Biennial. In early 1998 had a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. That same year the artist received The Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Grant.

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