

Why Sculpture, Why Here

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Participating artists: Subodh Gupta, Abel Barroso, Dilomprizulike (The Junkman from Africa), Huang Yong Ping, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons and Mamiko Otsubo, with a conclusion by Sarat Maharaj

Introduction for Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons

It's my pleasure to introduce Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons. Born in Cuba of Nigerian ancestry in 1959, Maria Magdalena received her initial training at the Higher Institute of Art in Havana and continued her studies at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston in 1988. She now lives and works in Boston. Her experience as an Afro-Cuban expatriate woman living in the United States plays a major part in her work, which uses installations to bring together performance, photography, film and sculpture. Campos-Pons has exhibited widely and internationally. In 2001, she took part in the 49th Venice Biennale and most recently, in 2007, the Indianapolis Museum of Art staged a mid-career survey of her work. This exhibition has now toured to the Bass Museum of Art in Miami.

Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons

Good afternoon to all. I am most pleased to be here and I want to thank the Iniva, the Henry Moore Institute and the Tate and everybody else involved who made this symposium possible. I am also delighted with the company of the artists who have presented today and I am going to try to answer the best I can the question of 'Why Sculpture, Why Here'.

It seems that we humans painted early, then we sculpted to establish a worship bible, then we sculpted because it embodied the way in which we exist, the way we occupy a space physically in every possible direction. What is a sculpture for me, how is my search for expression? I grew up on a farm, and the memory of wet clay in a water puddle can constitute every possible capacity of a bodily felt experience. By the time that I started to consider work outside the realm of three-dimensionality, the categorisation or reduction of my practice to one field seemed obsolete. I was and am still curious about placing the convention of what is a sculpture in question. What if the model for my sculpture is not a physical entity, but a recollection of it from the

testimony of those who remember a place? What if the understanding of the multi-dimensionality of time is translated metaphorically and physically? What does it mean to sculpt in the ephemeral, transient quality of the 21st century; there's a special sensational relationship with time, motion and fleeting image. How to capture and inscribe the materiality of memory? How does memory enter the territory of sculpture?

What interests me most is the hybrid condition of the practice, the uncharted territories, the uncertainty of the definition. I install all my questions. I construct a hybrid relationship between materials and ideas open to transformation. To give some kind of answer regarding the fermentation informing my experience and reality, I'm going to show you a few images of the work I have done in the last maybe ten years. As Celina said earlier, my practice involves photography, painting and performance.

This piece is from an installation entitled 'Threads of Memory'. I started it in 1994 for the Biennale in Senegal, and it's constructed by five video projections. It's a story of around ten minutes of narrative, and in front of the projections there are these sculptural – I want to call it that – elements which are really referring to window components of architectural elements from Cuba, or elsewhere – I have found the same image in other parts of the world. What I was interested in here was to construct a place in which you, the viewers, are located outside the video, but also in front of this window. And the window created this kind of in-between space and relation between what is fleeting, what is passing, what is motion, and the stillness of the constructed audience. I think of the fleeting image as sculpture in the meaning of memory, as in the material that constantly translates somewhere somehow the area of time that has passed. And when I think of memory being a very important concept in my work, memory is sort of a glass wall, and this glass wall could be somehow diffused by time, could be fragile, could be broken, but you always could look through, I am showing the work behind, from the back.

This is another image of the same installation 'Threads of Memory', and I was experimenting in this particular work with light and colour, using colour primarily as a painter, but in a different way. I was interested in the meaning of water, how to translate the water in this piece, the reflective quality of water. What I did was construct this kind of a pool of reflection in the space and allow the video itself to construct a different moment of life through colour. So as the piece goes on, there is this moment of monochromatic investigation.

This piece from 1991, I believe, was shown in the 4th Havana Biennale. I was already living in Canada, but I was invited to participate in the Biennale, and its theme was something in celebration of Columbus. At that moment I felt very determined about how I was going to celebrate the arrival of Columbus and the discovery of the New World and what that means to the population of where my ancestors came from. So I had in my mind this particular shape of the slave ship and I used the image to construct this piece. Now this piece is not necessarily what could be placed in the context of sculpture, but I was using material such as marble and wood and carving, and I considered it more in the tradition of a bas-relief. I was interested, of course, in introducing the faces and the narrative and the stories of this population; it is a story that has not much presence in the context of contemporary visual language in the Western world.

I'm now jumping back to 1992, to a piece made of black pine – white pine is an endangered species – and I have always been fascinated by the tradition of carving from West Africa where my ancestors come from. I wanted to do a piece that has in some way an African meaning, but I tried to do that in a metaphorical way. So this piece is talking about inter-racial marriage, and in Cuba, in America, everywhere, it is kind of an endangered species, it is still a kind of minority, but it happens today. To the left we see a lot of shapes and forms that refer to a more masculine element and to the right we see black forms referring of course to the female. And then you could walk through the piece, you could be inside like in a little forest. I did a piece in 1989, which I showed at a place which maybe doesn't exist anymore in London, Riverside Studio. It was called 'Erotic Garden or Some Annotations about Hypocrisy' and it was an entire room with many of this kind of forests growing out of the floor of the space.

I am showing you to the very left a little fragment of the piece that is coming next which is called 'The Seven Powers, Come by the Sea', and then this is from 1993, I was invited to do an exhibition at the ICA in Boston, the theme of which was displacement. And this image about the British abolitionist map, about the slave ship, came back to my mind, and I went to the archive and found it. I was kind of divided between the beauty of the image and its harsh implication, but the kind of mathematical precision in the construction, the economy, the efficiency that was in play really caught my eye and I decided I want to inscribe this image in a permanent material, back into the archive in a different form. I spent seven months carving this

piece, and every one of those in the bottle had the name of one of the so-called Euro-Pantheon as we understood it in America.

I was more than anything terrified by the image, but at the same time enchanted, so I ended up doing this piece, 'The Seven Powers, Come by the Sea'. (I'm not telling you where they are, they are all in museums around the world. Sometimes I remember, but sometimes I don't remember where they are, so I avoid that.) This is a version of 'Seven Powers, Come by the Sea' and again back to the question of 'What is Sculpture', again the idea of the single piece resting on the floor, having some sort of location on the site, but I cannot define that in a way. It is a small, little photograph of many members of my community and family located in the floor of the gallery, and I thought I'd install my questions, because I really cannot assert just one simple definition of it. I cannot just locate my projects in one discipline, one territory or another, so for that reason I always say 'hybridity' – maybe there is another word, 'bricolage', maybe there are other possible ways of calling these pieces. The photographs on the bottom have text, behind them is a picture of my great great grandfather, who was brought to Cuba during the slave trade.

From that I jump to a piece consisting of a series of three components which I started in 1993. It's called 'History of People Who Were Not Heroes'. This is the first instalment, called 'A Town Portrait'. I constructed this piece literally by talking with my family in Cuba. We had telephone conversations, a letter, all kinds of communication with my family, and then I built the object or the element upon what they told me it was about. So I reflect on the question, when is the sculpture itself, the model, not in front of you, when does the model really become the memory, recollecting it all not only by your own memory but the memories that come in from others talking back to you. So what is that space, how is it located, and how could it be defined in the history and context of the sculptural work? I spent a lot of hours literally thinking about that and since I don't have a sense of humour, I just pose this question to myself and try to understand and to answer it in my work.

In my experience as an artist I always argue with all the artists I admire, I envy them in a good way, I enjoy their work tremendously, and since I was very young in Cuba, I was fascinated – and this is a strange combination – by Marcel Duchamp, and when I came to study in America, the first city I visited outside Boston was Philadelphia, because I know that Philadelphia hosts the largest collection of his work. I wanted to see the big door, I needed to. So I always say that this little door of

mine is an installation based on my memory of the Large Glass, my interpretation of it, and of course this door in there refers to a door that is inserted in the image; it's the door of the slave barrack in which my great great grandfather was living. I was thinking again here about this question of glass, fragility, vulnerability, resilience as some kind of metaphor of memory, and then glass has an element that in a sculpture enters architectonic space, habitat, domesticity, public space, many many different dimensions.

The entire piece is constructed from the material that was dictated to me by how my family remembered seeing, so this door represents the recollection of the entire town – that's why it's called 'A Town Portrait' – and it was for me a very big image, and my memory, I decided, needed to be in glass. And when you see it in the very back of the wall, I want to come back to when every member of my family told me something about life in the town and I used a recorder. The entire sugar cane plantation which was this town about, La Vega, which is in the door vignette of every part of the town, was built with steel, terracotta and clay. That tower was the tower for the sugar plantation and my mother, my sister, my other sister and my aunt told me something about the tower, so every side of the tower is constructed by the text of how they describe to me how this tower was, which I did not remember. The other component, which we call the fountain – my younger sister told me that we used to go there and play a game similar to Ring Around the Roses. So you need to work your way around the fountain to read the entire information. Inside, there is the description of a dream of how we're thinking about our future etc. and on the wall they had three flat panels with three vignettes that really kind of bring on the idea about how the pieces go into the wall. So this is 'A Town Portrait', it's a collaboration of my mother, my sister, my aunt, my cousin, the entire town, another view of it.

This is a piece I did in between. It's called 'The Herbalist's Tools' and it's a piece that I did in homage to my father who was a herbalist and to people of African heritage in Cuba. In Santoria they have a tradition for herbalism, for healing, for cleansing used for good energy, and my father was a herbalist and I used to go to the forest with him to collect plants. I remember this tree which is called Royal Palm and which happens to be the national tree of Cuba, the Ceiba, which happens to be a sacred tree in Cuba, and the Amasigo (?) which happened to be used in my back yard. Those three trees have a very different personality. The ceiba is very big, very large, the palm is elegant and tall, majestic, and the amasigo is thin and small but the surface

is almost like copper. In the landscape on a sunny day in Cuba, if you see an amasigo tree, it seems like metal, and what I did was reverse the relation of this element, so the inside of the column has the texture, so they could have the kind of information of the outside of the tree and around the columns they have little holes and as you get closer to the holes you could read text inside. All of the texts talk about the different capacities and properties of this particular plant. On top of the little branch there are fresh plants. This is kind of a complex environment; when you enter the room there's sound, they smell, a really really powerful smell because they are always freshly planted and always change; marjoram, basil, thyme, whatever you could find to put in there from Cuba, but around the base of the tree there's cornmeal. The history behind that is that when my father used to go to the forest to take a branch of a tree, he would never take it without asking the tree for permission and give an offering, and I saw that as gentle, as a respect for and a way to relate with nature. Yes, we need it, we use it, but we don't use it without asking for permission and giving something to say thank you for allowing us to do that, and I believe in that so profoundly and I am so pleased that my father taught me and I witnessed that.

I painted the walls with images of Cuban plants, and in the botanical kind of frames they are actual plants from Cuba that my mother smuggled into America. So as you enter the room there's this entire transparent wall and images of many many many possible plants from Cuba. You see a lemongrass on top of the lemongrass image and of course, if lemongrass is there you would smell it. And there are the herbalist's tools, specific tools which my father would carry. One is a kind of hook used to collect the plant before it's cut with a machete, and the machete is there, with the inscription 'with permission', because you need to ask permission to cut the plant. The whole piece is now in the exhibition in the Bass Museum.

This is the second part of the 'History of the People Who Were No Heroes', called 'Spoken Softly with Mama'. As you enter this space, a space divided into two chambers, the first chamber is only these three little benches made out of ebony. I wanted to use ebony, because the meaning of the word 'ebony' comes from 'as wood'. On top of the bench there are three linen sheets tidily folded and they are inscribed, embroidered, in this case in French because the piece is at the National Gallery of Canada: 'For Beauty', 'For Necessity', and 'For Survival'. 'Spoken Softly with Mama' is a homage to the women in my family who did a job for other women, and what I learned from them was that it was hard work, but they did it with joy and

they were beyond it. In a funny way, I always say I learned feminism from my mother, from my aunt, from my grandmother, and I learned a very joyful way of feminism with a lot of information about the femininity side of being a women, and no complaints, you decide what you want and you do it.

This is the second chamber. As you enter, there are all these ironing boards which I have enlarged out of proportion. They cannot be used anymore, because they have been located in a position where they are kind of talking about the sculpture, but cannot be used to iron. I literally dressed them up with the fabrics that my mother and my aunt were ironing at that time for the women they worked for, so they are silk, organdie, linen, and on top of them are embroideries of different details. In the bottom there is this kind of art-like celebration of irons, and one of them is my grandmother's iron. What I have done really is translate the material in this non-utilitarian form, so all the irons I cast with glass and I spent around three years working on this piece just casting irons and tree bits.

We are talking 95/96/97, the piece was premiered in 1998 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. People would tell me, why do you want to use glass, there is polymers there, but I have my theory about using glass, because glass is fragile, because glass could break. And I was thinking in my reflection of memory, memory too is fragile and memory too could be broken, but memory too is resilient. Believe me I have a lot of cuts in my fingers from stitching that piece, but I wanted to use the material that really embodies in a way that is consistent with the area that I wanted to convey.

When you are in the room, behind you are these three piles of fabric and on the border of each one of them is embroidery – for whom the woman did the work, for her father, her son, her brother, her friend, I don't know, a stranger, so there's endless inscribing of that, and on the very top there are three projections which are three narratives of women doing different labours. Each of the boards have a narrative that lasts around 50 minutes, and each of them interacts with the other ones.

One of them is 'Pomegranate' in homage of one of the ladies who used to cook, and in Cuba and in the Mediterranean we use pomegranate all the time. Now it's very fashionable in America, but I've grown up with pomegranate. Pomegranate is a jewel, it's a beautiful fruit when you open it, so I play with that and I did this pomegranate story, but I juxtapose the pomegranate with the sound of pears rolling, projecting back in the little piles of fabric. In the board in the centre, I have taken the

motif in the shawl that my granddad had at his wedding, I inserted it back in the line of embroidery in the ironing board, so I am really interested in the juxtaposition of the material layering of information.

Here we have a photograph of silkscreen fabric, another line of embroidery which is superimposed over the photograph and a third layer of video that is projected in it. I am thinking actually like a painter, when you're using glazing in painting, you use it to reveal information layer for layer, but in this case I'm using the materials of embroidery, organdie, and the fleeting video image. But it is the same kind of idea. In the bottom of the board the names of the ladies are inscribed and then there are different moments, different images of different installation. Maybe this piece was in the Venice Biennale.

This piece is called 'Not Just Another Date'. The entire installation consists of six windows and each of them has this pile, this bundle of bags; you don't know what's inside, but in there are written the names of every single place that I could imagine or remember where there wasn't a conflict at that time and it seems at the moment that the entire planet was in conflict one way or another, so I did this, and I call it 'Not Just Another Date' (somebody told me that is wrong English).

This is the third component of 'History of People Who Were No Heroes', called 'Meanwhile the Girls Were Playing'. I tried to do these three parts, 'A Town Portrait' where the town is constructed upon the memories from my family, and 'Spoken Softly with Mama' which is an intimate portrait of the women in the family through the labour they performed, and then a sort of self-portrait. And the self-portrait came through thinking about the sisters in the family, and what I decided to do was to focus on the dress that the sisters maybe wore on one occasion. So I remember that one had a green dress, the other one had a yellow dress, and the other one a blue dress. I forgot to mention that both in 'Spoken Softly with Mama' and in this piece, I use a very old tradition of casting glass. This one is with bulls' eyes glass which has an extensive palette of colour, so I'm kind of painting in three dimensions. It is a very colourful sculpture with a pool of light, luminosity. They have a video projection in the centre of what would be the waste line, and at the very back of the room is this large projection of a lady who is always spinning under the canopy. I was trying to juxtapose the air of innocence with dark, unknown things happening behind the scenes.

In the centre of the blue dress, you can see a little bit of the projection, which is about games. In Cuba, because you don't have Toys R Us or these other big chains of toy stores, children create their own toys, at least when I was a child. We used to play with the inner tube of a bicycle, and that was a big entertainment, so this particular little image is used for one moment. I use textile, glass, video in this piece, and I am interested in the relationship between these elements. As for the construction of the piece, the form itself, some of the little drawings on the floor are three-dimensional; they are embroidered and they are moving out into the glass and in scale too, so they expand from the inner core of the piece to the outside. There is glass, but in the centre they are still textile.

I am coming back to 'Threads of Memory', because I think that it's again connected in a way with the piece, and back to the war site where meanwhile there were planes and you see in the very side of the piece, it's just the same projection in the back in which the laser is spinning under the canopy of light. And there is a whole video projection in the centre of this green skirt that has to do with birds. They are metaphorical symbols that relate to each of the girls in the family, and in the back is the grandmother, the major larger than life figure looking after the girls while they were playing.

And then this is a piece I have done in Italy. It's on top of a mountain; there are no flowers in this particular area, so all the flowers, all the images here are flowers coming out of the projection.

This is a performance piece that I did at the opening of my exhibition in Indianapolis, and I think of the body of the artist, of myself as a sculpture too, so I am showing this tape, and as soon as it's finished I will be happy to answer any questions.

Question

Thanks for that, I enjoyed the images very much but as a theatre director, I look at your work as much more than just being installations. I see them more as wonderful potential stage sets. I'm wondering how you'd respond if I'd say, well, because I see them as potential stage sets, rather than just beautiful things to look at, what happens if we could play with them, experiment with the space, with soundscapes, making a movement-based, choreographed piece. I just wonder how you will respond, you might say no, not at all interested?

Maria Magdalena

No, thank you for your question. Actually, I have been approached at least three times by dancers and similar people who want to do collaborations, but I forgot to mention that every one of these particular pieces have very very large, important sound components made by a very dear to my heart composer who happens to be my husband.

I'll tell you this story from the Venice Biennale. A gentleman from Yemen came up to me and said, you should do a film, you should do a long film, and I said to him, I am waiting to mature, so in some way my answer to you is the same. In Indianapolis, a dancer wanted to do a project and I'm thinking, well, maybe now I have matured, so I should take this, so I am aware of the possibility.

Maybe it has to do with what I said before, it's very hard for me to describe and to decide about this kind of category of how to be in this particular time. The 21st century is such a fleeting time, and what does it mean to produce a constant image, what does it mean to make sculpture? For me that's a very important question, how to you capture time in this materiality.

Question

When you were showing your work, the use of glass in the irons, you were speaking about the fragility, one thing that you didn't mention but I think you use a lot is Polaroids. Could you tell us a bit more about that?

Maria Magdalena

Yes, you're right, but this symposium was about 'Why sculpture, Why Here', so I thought that this selection was more appropriate. But I've done a large investigation into Polaroid work, and I actually play with a number of similar problems in the construction of my Polaroid images, for instance, some of the pieces that I have done in the last four years are sculptural pieces before they are actually shot with a Polaroid. Maybe I need to come back for another symposium about photography.

Transcribed by Jackie Howson and edited by Marion Endt.