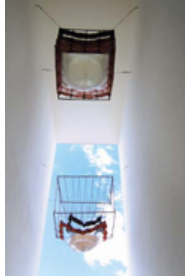


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Solo Show
María Fernanda Cardoso

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 Museos de Arte y Numismática del Banco de la República

María Clara Bernal

Few artists have a chance to see their own retrospective, and fewer yet have that chance in mid career. María Fernanda Cardoso is one of them. Curated by Carolina Ponce de León, the show *¿María Fernanda Cardoso: Inventario?* was inaugurated on August 4 in the new exhibition spaces at the Banco de la República art museum in Bogotá. The exhibition gathered works of the past 20 years, the last 10 of which this Colombian artist has spent in Australia.

The exhibition begins with *Cementerio/Jardín vertical* (Cemetery/Vertical garden,1992), an installation of white plastic flowers on the large wall that opens to the galleries. It harks back to the aesthetic of funerary rituals in Colombia, and more specifically, at the *Cementerio Central de Bogotá*, introducing at the same time the same tension between fragility and sturdiness that was to characterize her work as a whole. Next comes *Agua tejida*, a penetrable made of nets of starfishes, the piece with which Cardoso represented Colombia at the most recent Venice Biennale. In the gallery, the show retains the retrospective format, traveling from the earliest works, created using stuffed amphibians, through *Circo de Pulgas Cardoso* (Cardoso Flea Circus), to a series of painting-objects using kitchen scrubbers.

Next to Doris Salcedo, María Fernanda Cardoso is one of Colombia's female artists with the most international projection. In her work, the use of local symbolic elements, and the allusion to pre-Columbian cultures and to the violence in Colombia, is counterweighed not only by the introduction of the formal languages of international modernism, such as minimalism and *arte povera*, but also by recurring preoccupations such as the tension between life and death, the insistence in rituals, or the interest in finding a personal order in nature, themes all of them that can be readily understood in other cultural contexts.

Being an artists in permanent transit *¿between Colombia, San Francisco, and Australia?* has given her work several levels of meaning. One way to approach Cardoso's work is through the opposition of culture and nature. Appropriating the impersonal, non-contextual language of minimalism, Cardoso introduces the idea of repeating a module proposed by Sol LeWitt, but instead of the cube as a *¿base shape?* fore the repetition, the Colombian artist proposes an element taken from nature. Through the geometrization of nature, the artist introduces a rhythmic element with stuffed animals and plastic flowers. In her *Ranas danzantes* (Dancing Frogs,1990), a group of stuffed frogs with their limbs posed at right angles are arranged in the shape of a crown, giving the impression of dancing in a circle one after the next. To the visual impact of a work of art that uses non-conventional materials, and to the beauty of the piece as object, we need to add its symbolic implications. The use of an animal that for pre-Columbian cultures represented fertility and was used to invoke rain, and their placement in a circle, gives the object a ritualistic character. In the same line of thought we find *Corona para una princesa Chibcha* (Crown for a Chibcha Princess, 1990), a

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piece where a crown of lizards hangs from an arch, as if levitating over the head of an absent character, and it also alludes to ritual, but not only pre-Columbian ritual but also the symbiosis of indigenous rites with the Catholic rituals imposed by the Spaniards after the Conquest. Here the crown of thorns has been replaced by a crown of animals, and the martyr is no longer Jesus Christ but the very culture that disappeared under Spanish domination.

The topic of colonialism comes up again in Cardoso's work, with undertones that are more contemporary, two years later, with *Pirañas* (1992.) Here, a menacing school of stuffed piranhas seems to swim toward the viewer from the back of the gallery. Appropriating the formal language and using the technique of Lard Art in its relationship with the territory, Cardoso uses the piranha, an element that is charged with cultural implications. This animal, sold in this stuffed form for souvenir paperweights and key chains at airports and tourist centers, represents the 'savage' and 'exotic' element of our culture in the eyes of the rest of the world.

Those relationships that men establish with nature, the imposition of an order and a meaning that are alien to it, are what her best-known works explore: *Circo de Pulgas* Cardoso, the only one of her works in which the artist appears as a protagonist, one where, as in *Ranas danzantes*, animals acquire an anthropomorphic character. For this piece, Cardoso researched exhaustively flea circuses and the ability of fleas to juggle and perform, and later started giving lectures under the name Profesor Cardoso. In the circus, the artist acts as the trainer of a group of fleas that are shot out cannons or walk the tightrope in reference to the relationship between circus and art, and entertainment and science. Unfortunately, due to the fact that the project ended, in this retrospective we only saw the circus tent and a video of the performance, and the sense of spectacle, so essential to the piece, was somewhat missing.

The problem with a mid-career retrospective is the event's format and the implication of it being something definitive. In principle, a retrospective celebrates an artist's creative life in its entirety; this kind of exhibition has an order, and they generally start with the earliest works, show the artist's stylistic and ideological evolution, and end with the artist's 'masterpieces.' In the case of María Fernanda Cardoso, it is impossible to tell today which one is her 'masterpiece.' Perhaps *Circo de Pulgas*, which made her an international star, or her vertical gardens, which today are possess such worldwide relevance. What we can definitely see in this inventory of her artistic production is her symbolic commitment to a recurring set of topics and her affirmation of a very personal language, with which she has made an essential contribution to Colombia's art. It is not as much a matter of her use of unconventional materials, which so attracts viewers, or of the beauty of her structures, as it is a matter of her ability to reach a veritable point-counterpoint conversation between international languages and local contents, without falling into trendiness or folklore. Now we can only wait and see how this exercise in reflection will impact her future work.



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