

Maria Fernanda Cardoso *December 1, 2007*

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by T. Billick

Maria Fernanda Cardoso's work is currently in the USF [Contemporary Art Museum](#) exhibition, "Homing Devices." Cardoso's "Garden Of Insects" was constructed of stick bugs, grasshoppers, and butterflies. Maria's Garden is very convincing but unexpected as being constructed from insects that look like sticks and leaves. Maria purchased the butterfly and the grasshoppers, but she bred the stick bugs. As a minimalist Maria's techniques are clean and flawless.

Maria Fernanda Cardoso comes from a Colombian culture. Maria's work is influenced by her environment of mass graves that are full of dismembered bodies. The soil is very rich from the swampland and is known for growing potatoes. Maria uses a panty hose filled with dirt linked together representing a combination of potatoes and dismembered body parts. Within the panty hose, Maria would plant grass seeds and document the growth. In other work Cardoso uses flowers to represent death because walls surrounding the graves were full of fresh flowers. She also uses reptiles from her childhood that relate to the crown of thorns and the terrorism she was exposed to day to day. I find it interesting that Maria grew up surrounded by death and continues to use dead insect corpses in her work today.

Maria's Colombian roots are very pronounced in her work and she uses a variety of exotic materials from these roots. Golden gourds are found in tombs and are still in use today as bowls. Cardoso uses the gourds as sculptural elements. She also creates sculptures with brown soap that is traditionally made from fat and ashes. Maria said the smell is bad when using the soap but it is good for the skin. When Maria moved to Australia she used sheep skin and emu skin. Cardoso says there is a market for everything and you can buy anything. Maria felt unconnected with the animals she chose to use in her work so she worked with a butcher to skin the animal herself. It's expected for someone to kill animals for food but Cardoso is a vegetarian. I am uncertain of the use of the animals' bodies but Maria expresses her interest in the texture and surface qualities of the emu's skin that is representational of landscape. Maria encouraged others to touch her work to feel the dry grass qualities of the emu.

The Flea Circus is Maria Fernanda Cardoso's first work outside of her cultural influence. Maria lets on that she trained each flea and refers to them as her little artist. Maria talks of feeding her fleas by purchasing cats, but she said the fleas were too hard to retrieve. She said she wasn't allergic to fleas so she would let them feed off of her arm three times a day. At one point Maria Cardoso's Flea Circus was up to a population of 1,500. Fleas had a three to four month life span and they were constantly reproducing. I asked Maria what happened to all the fleas after the circus had stopped touring and she said, "Well, me and my assistant didn't know what to do with all of them, so my assistant put them in the sewer." Maria's work is full of sick humor that I very much enjoy!