
Art Remains

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You might remember Maria Fernanda Cardoso from her amazing "Flea Circus" at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston some years back. The Colombian-born artist had a circus tent, death-defying video of flea performers and tiny props littered with dead performers. Carcasses turn out to be the constant between that campy circus and her current, much more serious show, "**Maria Fernanda Cardoso**," at Sicardi Gallery.

While there is still some humor present in the Sicardi show, Cardoso seems much more focused on the formal qualities of dead animals -- and dead animal parts. Butterflies, cattle bones, sheepskins, starfish, dried frogs and sea horses all become visual elements in Cardoso's sculpture and collages.

The artist looks for geometry in the natural world. There is a strong minimalist feeling to the work. But instead of Carl Andre's slabs of copper or some young contemporary artist's stacked plastic cups and take-out trays, the building blocks of Cardoso's work are animals.

Dancing Frogs (2002) is sprinkled with Cardoso's black humor. For the piece, she uses dried frogs that look like an unsquashed version of the "toad jerky" found on Houston streets in the summer. The frogs are impaled on a circle of wire running through their frog butts and out their bellies. Their heads face the viewer. The wire circle is hung away from the

wall, but the frogs' feet touch it, so they seem to be "standing" on the wall like a circle of web-footed Rockettes. Casting animated-looking shadows against the Sheetrock, they really do seem to be dancing in a circle with their little frog arms raised. In spite of the desiccated-frog ick factor, it's really sort of a jolly piece. At last, a use for dead amphibians!

The works in which Cardoso weaves feathers into rectangles of mesh are just too much like a '70s fiber-arts class project. They feel too static. The dyed sheepskins sheared into grids

aren't that interesting either. Things don't seem to go as well when Cardoso tries to impose geometry on something rather than working from what she finds within the piece.

Cardoso also created kaleidoscopic designs from butterfly wings glued to paper. They're nice but not nearly as powerful as the starfish pieces. Arranged against a white background, the wing designs are set behind Plexiglas that's frosted to create clear circular windows to showcase each arrangement. They're lovely and decorative but come across as a little dry.

While most of us non-Colombians will focus on the formal qualities of Cardoso's works, there are some culturally specific undercurrents in early works on view, such as her 1992 piece *American Marble*. In it, a diagonal grid of sawed-off cow bones are stood on end. The bones were traditionally set into the floors of homes to create decorative patterns. They were called American marble because Spanish colonists in Colombia, unlike those in more prosperous colonies such as Mexico, were too poor to have actual marble. Instead they embedded cow bones in the floor like tiles. It's an interesting backstory as well as design, but the scale is a little wimpy. Extending the pattern over a much larger expanse could be spectacular.

While there are other artists out there with an aesthetic that relies on natural materials, Cardoso's take is unique. When she works with the geometry of the natural world, the results are amazing.

A loose, sagging tangle of snakes, *Mating Ball* (2003) is a departure from the rest of the show in that it uses fake animals. I guess tangling a mass of dead snakes and hanging it from the ceiling might be too much of a challenge even for Cardoso. The snakes seem luminous with their pale purple and green translucence -- in fact, if you read the works list, the rubber snakes are identified as "glow in the dark." It's supposed to explore the mating habits of snakes, but something about the piece conjures the same dark but silly quality she had in her flea circus.

Other works have a much more elegant focus and are equally successful. Starfish are the components in Cardoso's most beautiful pieces. In a small floor piece, she links chunky orange tiger starfish together into a sphere like the sections of a geodesic dome. But the two hanging works that use a type of slender-legged starfish are especially stunning. Their loose radial symmetry makes them perfect for Cardoso's ethereal constructions. Suspended from the gallery ceiling, they feel like delicate fragments falling from some larger entity.