

María Magdalena Campos-Pons Lets the Spirits Guide

The prolific Cuban-born artist's first survey in many years has opened at the Brooklyn Museum. "It's all about love," she says.

By Siddhartha Mitter

Reporting from Nashville

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One evening back in Cuba, when the artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons was about 8 years old, she was visited by an owl. She was in her bed, she recalls, and saw it perched on the sill of the half-open window. It was observing her, as owls do.

"You might say they don't come that close," Campos-Pons, now 64, said recently in her studio at Vanderbilt University in Nashville. "But this was in the countryside, in a finca, in La Vega, Manguito. And ever since then I have dreamed a lot about flying."

By any measure she has flown far. She grew up on a former sugar plantation in Matanzas province. Her great-grandfather arrived enslaved from present-day Nigeria. Her father left school in third grade to work the cane.

But her own journey would take her through the schools that the Cuban Revolution brought to the countryside, to the art institutes that it established in Havana; to Boston, where she taught for 25 years at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts; and to Nashville since 2017, where she has brought her whirlwind energy to the local art scene.

Campos-Pons is a nonstop artist for whom no medium — painting, assemblage, photography, video, ritual-like performance, even Murano glass — seems beyond reach. Her work has been featured in biennials on five continents. She has founded art spaces in the cities where she teaches. Fiercely loyal colleagues and ex-students participate in her performances and field her predawn phone calls sharing urgent ideas.

"I barely rest," she said. The work, she added, is "absolutely a spiritual thing."



"Red Composition," from the "Los Caminos (The Path)" series, 1997. Beginning in the 1990s, Campos-Pons made ultra-large Polaroid prints. She often staged herself in the images, less as self-portraits than as a vessel for symbolic information or reflection about migration, Blackness and womanhood. via María



“When I Am Not Here / Estoy Allá, Tríptico I,” 1996. via María Magdalena Campos-Pons

Last week the Brooklyn Museum opened “Behold,” her first career-spanning survey in 16 years. It touches on her early work in Cuba, concerned with sexual politics and bodily autonomy. And it features some of her most influential works, including landmark multimedia installations and the ultra-large Polaroid triptychs she made using the company’s famed 20-by-24-inch cameras in the 1990s and 2000s.

But the exhibition carries through to the present, with some of her newest works made in Nashville, in which she finds ways to express the beauty she feels in the American South alongside the weight of its violent racial history. Magnolia trees and other local symbols appear in her compositions on paper that mix watercolors and photomontage. Some works honor victims of police violence, including Breonna Taylor.

Through her career Campos-Pons has modeled a “combination of humility and confidence,” said Carmen Hermo, the associate curator at the Brooklyn Museum who initiated the exhibition. (She curated the show with Mazie Harris, an assistant curator at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, where it will conclude in 2025 after stops at the Nasher Museum of Art in Durham, N.C., and the Frist Art Museum in Nashville.)

And the recurring symbols in Campos-Pons’s work — eyes, footprints, butterflies, hair, beads, pomegranates — offer points of emotional connection for any audience. “She creates this beautiful loop between looking, feeling, doing, thinking and being,” Hermo said, “that feels rare and special.”

With her long dresses and regal bearing, Campos-Pons — Magda to her friends — sometimes gets mistaken for a healer. When she planted a hyacinth garden on the Vanderbilt campus, she said, “someone came from the hospital to ask me to touch them.” Once, in Venice, people tried to touch her feet — awkward, she said, as she was wearing fancy designer sandals.



“A Mother’s Rivers of Tears,” performed on Sept. 16 at the Brooklyn Museum, honored the victims of police and vigilante violence and their mothers. Campos-Pons (in yellow) was joined by an ensemble of musicians and performers including LaTasha N. Nevada Diggs (right), Peyton Brown (left) and Dell Hamilton (left, slightly obscured). Naeem Douglas

Her grandmother was a Lucumí (or Santería) priestess. Her father, the sugar worker, was also an herbalist. She grew up, therefore, in a culture full of ritual, in which orishas and spirits make sense of the world. She was not herself initiated as a priestess, however; as she interprets it, her calling instead was “to serve in the arts.”

But her Afro-Cuban roots provide the intimate lens through which exploring personal and family stories widens to themes with broad resonance — migration, the multiplicity of Black experiences, women’s lives. And knowing, for instance, her guardian orishas — Yemaya and Oshun — she has centered spiritual information in her work since long before the contemporary art milieu had the range to understand it.

To the art historian Cheryl Finley, who has known her since the early 1990s, it is precisely Campos-Pons’s rootedness that makes her work global. She pointed to “The Seven Powers Come by the Sea,” an installation that debuted in 1992 at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. It involved carved-wood panels evoking slave ships, tall painted silhouettes, a field of framed family photographs and a performance in which Campos-Pons, in a white dress, silently held space at her own show’s opening. That work connected so much — the Middle Passage, farm and women’s labor, lineage and memory — under the aegis of the seven major orishas, the spirits who, Finley said, “would have come through the trans-Atlantic slave trade fully alive and ready to support, replenish and enhance the survival of Black-descended people.”



"The Seven Powers Come by the Sea" premiered at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston in 1992. One of Campos-Pons's landmark installations, it evoked the Middle Passage, family history and Afro-Cuban religion, with the artist holding space in silence at the exhibition's opening. via Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields; Melissa Shook



Campos-Pons soon added video and audio to her installations, notably “Spoken Softly With Mama,” an influential work from 1998 that visitors to “Behold” encounter as they enter the exhibition. Paula Abreu Pita

Another major installation, “Spoken Softly With Mama” (1998), is the first work that visitors encounter as they enter “Behold” in the museum’s Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art. Here, upright ironing boards form the surfaces for family photos transferred onto stretched fabric, and video projections of the artist’s legs or feet walking. A flotilla of glass sculpted irons and trivets dispersed in front of the screens conveys allusions both maritime and domestic.

“A work like ‘Spoken Softly With Mama’ is art-historical canon, period,” Hermo said. “But conversations about feminist art are remiss if they don’t include artists like Magda, who has been thinking about what it means to take genealogical lineage, what the body does, what the spirit does, and move it into a space of permanence” through art pieces.

In the studio, Campos-Pons unrolled paper sheets to reveal her latest method: Starting with watercolor, she prints photographs onto the painted paper, then adds marks to the resulting surface. The combination collapses drawing and photography, so you might not be sure how much a patch of skin, flower or leaf owes to each technique. Last year MoMA acquired a triptych made this way, “Secrets of the Magnolia Tree,” which appears in “Behold.” Its central figure is Campos-Pons as a human-owl hybrid.

She produced a Moleskine sketchbook that she is filling with her family tree, each relative depicted as an owl in a magnolia. The project connects her Cuban roots and memories with her present. She collects leaves on campus and lacquers them into her works, mixed with the painted ones. It is a nod to what torment and violence the trees of the South have seen, she said, but also the beauty in her surroundings.



“Secrets of the Magnolia Tree” (2021), which blends watercolors and photomontage, shows the artist as a half-owl figure amid the flora of Tennessee, where she has lived since 2017. via Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons

Campos-Pons has gotten involved in Nashville with trademark gusto, in particular building ties between Vanderbilt’s programs and Fisk University, the historically Black institution with a hallowed art history. She has founded the Engine for Art, Democracy and Justice, with the aim to connect local and visiting artists and activists; it runs a project space off-campus, in a former clothing store in Nashville’s West End.

“Magda is a force,” said Jamaal Sheats, the director of the Fisk University Galleries, who was one of her students at the Museum School. The “Magdalenian school of thought,” as he put it, “fully explores what art has the capacity to do” for its community.

Perhaps in that spirit, Campos-Pons has never closed her channels to Cuba. She has taken part in several Havana Biennials, including the 2019 edition, which was preceded by a crackdown on dissenting artists, and which the artist Tania Bruguera (who was Campos-Pons’s student in Havana in the 1980s) refused to attend.

Campos-Pons’s approach that year was to stage exhibitions and events in Matanzas, whose Afro-Cuban artists, she said, were hitherto rarely if ever invited. Now separate from the biennial, her program, “Ríos Intermitentes” (“Intermittent Rivers”), is scheduled to return to Matanzas next year. “We should have real elections in Cuba,” she said. “We should have real democracy. But I want to build in Matanzas a republic of its own.”

She did not sign the letter last month by 24 Cuban and Cuban American artists, including Bruguera and Coco Fusco, calling for the boycott of government-funded Cuban arts events, but considers its initiators as friends. “Every artist needs to use their agency in a way that honestly serves what they believe is just,” she said.



Campos-Pons in the studio in Nashville. “It’s all about love,” she said. Gabriel McCurdy for The New York Times

Last Saturday, the Brooklyn Museum held a symposium on Campos-Pons’s work. Afterward, she premiered her new performance, “A Mother’s River of Tears,” in the Beaux-Arts Court. It was dedicated to the victims of police and vigilante violence and their mothers — a natural continuation of her photo-painting work in tribute to Breonna Taylor that appeared in the Louisville exhibition honoring Taylor’s life.

The procession featured 10 women in white, including friends and former students who have taken part in Campos-Pons’s previous performances; two passed back and forth a rich blue fabric. Kamaal Malak, the onetime bassist in Arrested Development (and Campos-Pons’s new boyfriend), led an ensemble. The poet Major Jackson recited. Campos-Pons, in yellow — the color of Oshun — and with her face painted white, moved among the audience distributing fruits and flowers.

In Nashville, Campos-Pons had described the piece as exploring “tender territory, tender space.” It emphasized, she said, the “central role of women in holding well-being, clarity and love in society.” One inspiration was “All About Love,” by bell hooks — one of seven books that she recommends to accompany the entire exhibition.

“It’s all about love,” she said. “And the power of love to sustain.”

María Magdalena Campos-Pons

Through Jan. 14, 2024, at the Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn; 718-638-5000, brooklynmuseum.org.

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