

Art Reviews

Celia Álvarez Muñoz Adds Color to Conceptualism

With an eye for unearthing cultural hypocrisy and advocating for exploited people, Álvarez Muñoz responds to social injustice in her colorful art.



Jennifer Remenchik April 16, 2023



Celia Álvarez Muñoz, "Petrocuatyl" (1988, performance c. 1981), cibachrome print, 20 x 16 inches framed, in *Breaking the Binding* at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego (all images courtesy the artist and the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego)

LA JOLLA, Calif. — *Celia Álvarez Muñoz: Breaking the Binding* suggests an artist who grew up speaking two different visual languages: the pared-down intellectualism of conceptual art's sparse text-and-image combos and a brazen vernacular of the Tex-Mex border's bright colors and Indigenous roots. Indeed, Álvarez Muñoz's exhibition at the La Jolla location of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, her first museum retrospective, reflects her delight in merging binaries — the personal and political, the Spanish and English languages, conceptual art and storytelling — presenting them as messily and inseparably conjoined.

With an eye for unearthing cultural hypocrisy and advocating for exploited people, Álvarez Muñoz responds to social injustice, using both direct condemnation and emotional restraint. One such lesson in the latter comes from the installation “El Limite” (1991). She couples large black and white photomurals depicting toy trains made from sardine cans with a text about her father's life. A traveling train-hopper in his youth, he also spent time on trains in Europe while fighting during World War II, which the artist ties to the Mexican Revolution and the Bracero Program of the 1940s by including smaller documentary photographs from that time.

The Bracero program, which ran from 1942 to 1964, granted work permits to laborers from Mexico to fill in US labor gaps resulting from the war. While protection from discrimination was “guaranteed,” many braceros faced a variety of hardships, from non-payment of wages to racism and retaliatory lynchings. Many American agricultural workers felt threatened by the Mexican workers' low-wage presence, but in the end both were largely replaced by machines. Álvarez Muñoz curates a combination of images and text that allows the viewer to do the work of interpreting these abuses of power.

In “Fibra y Furia” (1997), Álvarez Muñoz addresses labor abuses yet again, this time with a focus on gender discrimination. Large swathes of fabric hanging dramatically from the high museum ceilings are paired with stereotypical housewife dresses. This visually compelling piece comments on the fashion industry's exploitation of female labor to make garments that ironically hold women captive in their gendered identities. “Fresas” (1997) likewise exposes the sexualization of women in society. Denim “booty” shorts are cut into a thong in which the crotch is tellingly replaced with red sequined fabric, connecting objectification to the way female labor in the garment industry is undervalued.

One of the artist's best-known pieces, “Petrocuatl” (1981), is both an installation and a performative lecture the artist gave as a response to a graduate art history professor's assignment at North Texas State University. Instead of giving a generic presentation, Álvarez Muñoz came dressed as the teacher and told the class that her “husband” would curate an exhibition around a recently discovered pre-conquest site in Mexico City. (The actual professor's husband was a curator at the Kimball Art Museum.) Álvarez Muñoz went on to present her own sculpture as an “actual artifact” from the site — a mask she constructed from a vintage WWII respirator adorned with beads and feathers, which belonged, she said in character, to Petrocuatl, a (fictional) recently discovered Aztec god. In this cheekily humorous response to a simple art history assignment, Álvarez Muñoz

both calls into question the authenticity of art history and archeology and inserts herself, a Chicana artist, into its White, male-dominated narrative.

Woefully under-represented in the current canon of art history, Álvarez Muñoz has been making such dynamic interventions into contemporary conceptual art for more than four decades. Awash in both art historical references and cultural specificity, the artworks on display are also imbued with the artist's wit. Across the exhibition, she refuses to fit neatly into either box of Chicana or conceptual artist, rather walking the line of both. The nuanced work requires patient viewing and a willingness to unpack the multitude of personal and political histories that permeate its essence.



Celia Álvarez Muñoz, "El Límite" (1991), vinyl and mural, dimensions variable, in *Breaking the Binding* at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego



Celia Álvarez Muñoz, "Fresas" (1997), shorts and sequins, dimension variable, in *Breaking the Binding* at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego



Celia Álvarez Muñoz, "Fibra y Furia" (1997), 20 bolts of fabric and 3 dresses, dimension variable, in *Breaking the Binding* at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego

Celia Álvarez Muñoz: Breaking the Binding continues at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego (700 Prospect Street, La Jolla, California) through August 13. The exhibition was curated by Dr. Kate Green, curator of modern and contemporary art at Philbrook Museum of Art, and Isabel Casso.