

material witness

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laylah ali

maria fernanda cardoso

johnny coleman

douglas gordon

jun nguyen-hatsushiba

santiago sierra

Curated by Margo A. Crutchfield

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART **CLEVELAND**
CLEVELAND, OHIO

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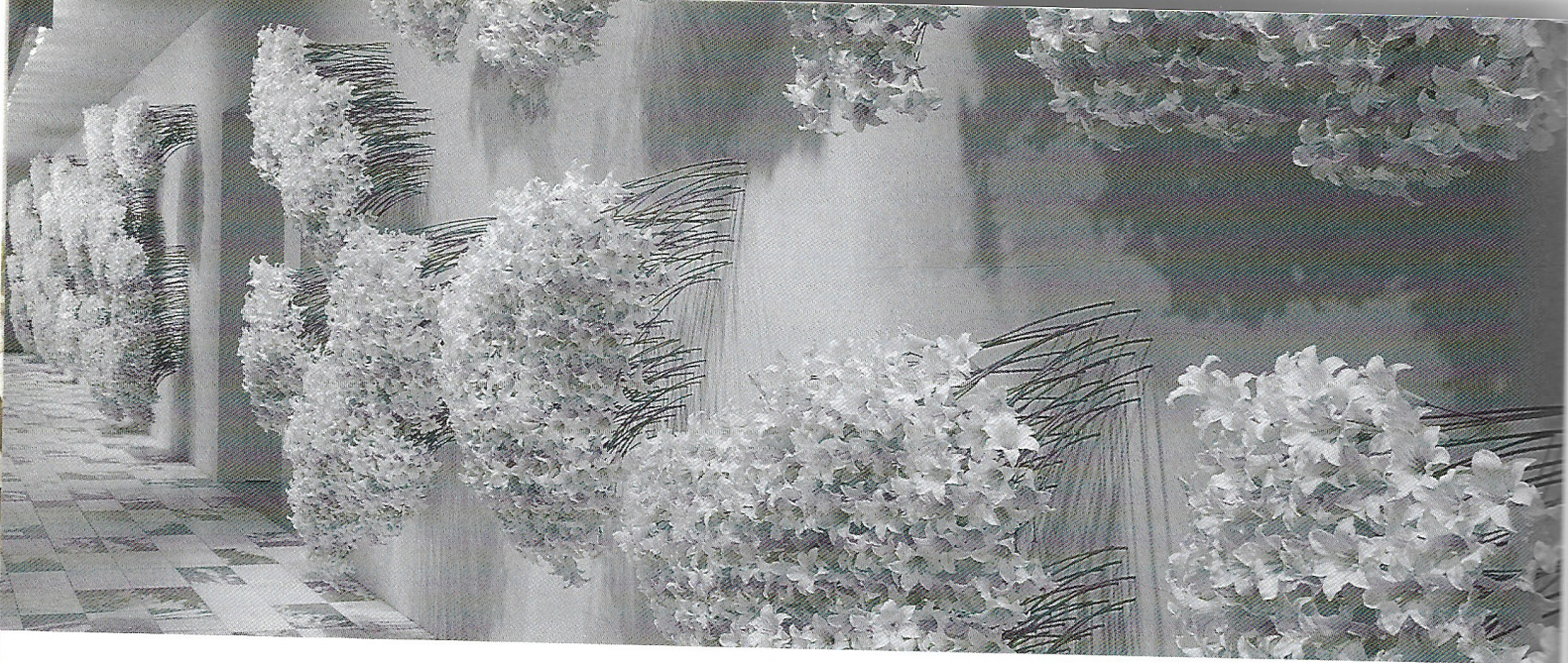


maria fernanda cardoso

Colombian-born Maria Fernanda Cardoso combines unconventional materials with a minimalist aesthetic in installations and sculptures that explore a number of themes, including her long-standing fascination with the natural world and our complex relationship to it. A consistent aspect of her work is the use of unaltered organic materials taken directly from nature, such as guava (a South American fruit), gourds, corncoobs, or cattle bones. Most of her work is made with animals—preserved insects, frogs, lizards, snakes, starfish, even dried Amazonian piranhas, all of which have personal and cultural associations with her Colombian childhood and heritage. Snakes, lizards, and frogs were plentiful in Bogotá, where she lived as a child, and her use of these preserved animals aligned in identical stylized positions recalls the repetitive rhythms and ornamentation found in pre-Colombian painting and metalwork.¹

An early work, *Woven Water: Submarine Landscape / Agua Tejida: Pasaje Submarino* (1994/2003), is an environment Cardoso created by sewing 3,000 blue starfish together. More recently, she has created an installation with 500 preserved grasshoppers for the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid (2000), an installation with hundreds of sheep hides at the Art Museum of the Americas in Washington, D.C. (2002), and a new body of work based on dead butterflies (2003). In the 1990s she developed her best-known work, the *Cardoso Flea Circus*, for which she trained live fleas to perform a variety of incredible and humorous stunts.²

LEFT Maria Fernanda Cardoso
Cemetery-vertical garden / Cementerio-jardin vertical, 1992–2004
(Detail)
Artificial flowers and pencil on wall
Collection Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. Museum purchase with funds from Charles C. and Sue K. Edwards, 2000



The relationship of human beings to nature and particularly the relationship of human beings to other living species are among Cardoso's primary concerns. By using dead animals in her art she intends to make people more aware of or "more willing to acknowledge their participation in the death—the dying—in their midst. In death, animals often give us life, as food, or through medical research."³ Yet, as has been aptly observed, most of us do not want to be associated with the deaths of the animals we use.⁴ Capitalizing on the sensuality of the materials she uses and the visual poetry of her forms, Cardoso confronts us with this disconcerting issue.

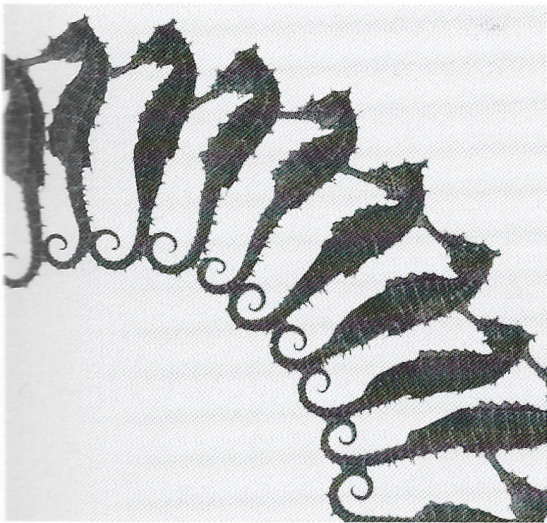
The installation featured in this exhibition, *Cemetery-vertical garden / Cementerio-jardin vertical* (1992–2004), unlike most of Cardoso's works, is not made of animal or organic materials. However, its title and subject—the garden—does refer to nature, and continues Cardoso's thematic exploration of life and death.

This monumental wall installation, 12 feet high and 43 feet long, references traditional Latin American cemeteries, where tombs are packed tightly together and niches with plastic flowers in vases line the walls. *Cemetery-vertical garden* is made with a profusion of artificial lilies, 6,000 in all, mounted on the gallery wall in dense clusters that gracefully repeat in a flowing pattern along the length of the installation. Jutting out from

ABOVE Maria Fernanda Cardoso
Cemetery-vertical garden / Cementerio-jardin vertical, 1992–2004
 Artificial flowers and pencil on wall
 Dimensions variable
 Collection Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego
 Museum purchase with funds from Charles C. and Sue K. Edwards, 2000
 Installation at the Museum of Modern Art, New York 1999–2000

the wall, the masses of white flowers are gently bowed, bending toward the ground as if burdened by their own weight. The sculpture's elegant formal simplicity recalls minimalist sculpture, but this work, contrary to

the minimalist aesthetic, is enriched by the density of its materials and the sensual effects conjured by such an abundance of flowers. Expansive and almost overwhelming, *Cemetery-vertical garden* is a beautiful and contemplative work of art.



The thousands of lilies configured in this work are visually engaging but also charged with symbolic power and cultural reference. Flower, garden, and cemetery are potent signifiers; fused together, as the sculpture's title implies, they become metaphors that simultaneously suggest life and death, growth and

disintegration, beauty and pain. In many ways, this stunning installation can be seen as a contemporary rendition of the seventeenth-century Dutch still-life painting tradition, in which an arrangement of objects (skulls, fruit, flowers, or the like) addressed the fleeting nature of life. Likewise, in presenting this lush garden of exquisite lilies as a funerary elegy, *Cemetery-vertical garden* juxtaposes one of life's fundamental dichotomies: the enjoyment of earthly pleasures with the awareness of their inevitable loss.

While the philosophical or metaphysical implications of this sculpture are profound, so too are its social and political references. *Cemetery-vertical garden* speaks directly to conditions of violence, conflict, and war

ABOVE Maria Fernanda Cardoso
Still Lifes Caballitos de Mar,
 1994/2003 (Detail)
 Preserved seahorses, glue, metal
 48 1/2 x 59 inches (25 x 25 x 1 cm)

everywhere, and particularly in Cardoso's native Colombia, a nation that has been wracked by extreme violence and political instability for over a century.⁵ The flowers, Cardoso has said, symbolize the memory of those who have passed, of those who were brutally murdered, of those who are victims of violence, political and otherwise.⁶ *Cemetery-vertical garden* makes a searing but poetic political statement about the culture of violence and the disappearance and death of thousands of Colombians. On the other hand, this sculptural installation also stands for strength and hope. Cardoso has said that she developed this work as "a reflection on strategies to cope with facing death and violence on a daily basis in a country like Colombia. . . . Beauty and permanence was one of those strategies."⁷ With this statement Cardoso infers that even in the face of the most excruciating of circumstances, there is beauty. The lilies in *Cemetery-vertical garden* are not perishable; they are artificial, and in this sense, idealized. This is a garden that never decays, that is permanent. *Cemetery-vertical garden* immortalizes beauty, and stands as a poignant tribute to human faith and resilience.

NOTES

1. Ron Platt, *Maria Fernanda Cardoso: Recent Sculpture*, exhibition brochure. (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, List Visual Arts Center, 1994), 6. See also: Elizabeth Ann MacGregor, Carolina Ponce de Leon, *ZOOmorphism: Maria Fernanda Cardoso*. Exhibition catalogue. (Sydney, Australia: Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2003.)
2. *The Cardoso Flea Circus* was shown at the Centre George Pompidou, Paris (1998), the Sydney Opera House, Sydney (2000), the New Museum in New York (2000), and was presented in an extensive U.S. tour organized by Independent Curators, Inc. and titled *All Things Warm and Fuzzy: Childhood and Contemporary Art* (2000–2002).
3. Platt, 26. See also David Weintraub, "Natural Selections," *ARTNews*, May 2000, 176.

4. Ibid.
5. Cardoso references: "the ongoing civil wars of the 19th century, the 'War of the thousand Days' 1890–1903, the wars of the 1930s, the period called 'La Violencia' from 1948–mid 1950s, the political repression under president Turbay in the early 1980s, the war between drug lords and the State from the mid-1980s–the present, the guerrilla wars that have continued for more than 30 years, the paramilitary groups that massacre people every day, or the kidnapping industry and the horror of common street violence..." Personal communication with the author, October 10, 2003.
6. Personal communication with the author, October 29, 2003.
7. Personal communication with the author, August 28, 2002.



Maria Fernanda Cardoso
*Crown of Chibcha Thorns / Corona de
Espinas Chibcha, 1990-2002*
Dried lizards, metal