



MIT LIST VISUAL ARTS CENTER  
MARIA FERNANDA CARDOSO

15 JANUARY *through* 27 MARCH 1994



This catalog is published in conjunction  
with the exhibition

MARIA FERNANDA CARDOSO: RECENT SCULPTURE

at the MIT List Visual Arts Center  
15 January through 27 March 1994

Photography on pages 12, 13, 16, 17, 20, 21 by Bob Hsiang  
All other photography by the artist  
All works courtesy the artist and Ruth Bloom Gallery  
Catalog design by Michael Rock.Susan Sellers Partners

This publication was funded in part by Merrill Lynch  
and Bank of Bogota

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank my colleagues at  
the List Visual Arts Center; Michael Rock, for a sensitive and sophisticated catalog design. Rhona Edelbaum of the Ruth  
Bloom Gallery; Ana Sokoloff at the Colombian Mission in New York; Isabel Londono, Consul General of the  
Colombian Consulate, Boston; Johanna Kovitz, and Katy Kline and Matt Lyman for their editorial acumen. Most of all I  
want to thank Maria Fernanda Cardoso for her insights and enthusiasm.

Ron Platt *Assistant Curator*

Colombian artist Maria Fernanda

LIFE PRESERVER  
by Ron Platt

relevance to people in the United

Cardoso investigates the physical and associative properties of unusual, non-traditional art materials in her sculpture and installation work. Cardoso's work is steeped in twentieth century art traditions such as minimalism's reductive geometry and found-material constructions. These Northern hemisphere influences jostle against the artist's distillations of the rich decorative abstraction of pre-Columbian art.

For example, Cardoso has fashioned unwrapped blocks of pink and white guava candy into sculptures which recall Carl Andre's minimalist floor constructions, and bulbous gourds into configurations recalling the work of European Modernists Jean Arp and Constantin Brancusi. She has utilized other "exotic" materials such as corncobs, fish scales, cattle bones and dried animal hides whose cultural significance is instantly understood by citizens of the culture from which they are borrowed. Though these materials have little

States, the syntax of Cardoso's work is accessible to a North American art audience, and the materials deliver a gradual message that adds complicated social undercurrents to their beguiling appearance.

Born to an artistically-inclined family in a suburb of Bogota, Cardoso familiarized herself with European and North American historic and modern art through writings, reproductions and museum exhibitions. Collections of pre-Columbian artifacts and richly decorated churches in her native country also made lasting impressions. In the late 1980s Cardoso left Colombia for school in the US. Her art education culminated in an advanced degree in sculpture from Yale, where she began to put sophisticated training in the western modernist tradition to the service of some of her original cultural assumptions.

The focus of this exhibition is the artist's significant body of



recent work which explores the utilitarian, symbolic, aesthetic and emotional relationships between humans and other animal species. For several years Cardoso has been constructing sculpture from preserved animals and other organic materials. Occasionally she fashions them into stylized positions and configurations reminiscent of pre-Columbian animal representations. She works the animals into taut, minimalist-inspired forms, such as circles and columns, or sensuous, organic shapes which continue the materials' natural growth patterns.

The viewer is startled upon realizing that these delicate and familiar geometric and abstract creations are fashioned from dead animals. Unlike media images of death to which we all become inured, Cardoso's sculptures present us with an actual (dead) life form, not a representation of one. Like *memento mori*, Cardoso's elegant works carry dual meanings. They are precious reminders of the fleeting nature of life, while they

also serve as reminders of humankind's struggles, particularly our conflicted relationships with the natural world.

The animals which comprise Cardoso's constructions have highly personal and rich cultural associations for her. Snakes, lizards and frogs were familiar denizens of the neighborhood backyards and empty lots of her childhood, and they featured prominently in the animal legends of pre-Columbian societies with which the artist was familiar from an early age. Pre-Columbian cultures possessed numerous tales of interactions and transformations between humans and god-like animals.

Ceramics and goldwork were abundant with stylized animal imagery, which held a wealth of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic associations. Cardoso is not so influenced by the pre-Columbian tales as by the formal qualities of their animal representations, and their fascination with and reverence for the animals with which they shared their environment.

Her appreciation of fauna was formed also by the taxidermy

displays in the Museum of Natural History in Bogota. These myriad influences converge in Cardoso's artwork, resulting in an unexpected re-presentation of the natural world. We are accustomed to viewing live animals in zoos and circuses, preserved animals in natural history museums, likenesses of animals in art. But aestheticized animal images are not natural, nor are displays of "lifelike" dead animals, or live animals in unnatural environments. Cardoso is striving for a more truthful presentation, and the deadness of her animals is part of this truth – having real animals represent themselves. Conceding that her presentation, too, is skewed, Cardoso still aims to show how natural – how real – the dead animals which comprise her constructions actually are by demonstrating their unnaturalness in a museum setting.

In *Crown for a Chibcha Princess* (1990), a metal ring strung with eleven tiny lizards hovers nearly seven feet above the floor, suspended within an arched steel rod. The Chibcha

were indigenous South American farmers and traders who inhabited the verdant Andes near where Cardoso was raised. The artist has fashioned each reptile into the same stylized position, bodies and limbs at rigid angles, their tails and toes in airy curves and tight curlicues, recalling the rhythmic geometric patterns on ancient Chibcha ceramic bowls and gold works.

In scale and form the hoop of delicate reptiles suggests a halo or crown of thorns, popular Christian symbols of suffering and redemption. Cardoso considers the piece a meditation on the deaths of the lizards themselves, yet their deaths can also symbolize the many Colombians who are victims of the violence racking their contemporary society. In the aftermath of violence comes a paradox: the best and worst come together, violence begets sacrifice. On rare occasions, someone who dies at the hand of violence becomes a hero or martyr – a mythic being. In the same way, Cardoso's reincarnated

lizards assume an extra-aesthetic function.

A series of untitled works dating from 1990 employ frogs fashioned into large hoops. As with the lizards, Cardoso works the frogs into positions reminiscent of pre-Columbian stylizations. They are then impaled by the artist onto the hoop and adhered to its rigid geometry. The frog sculptures were in part inspired by a popular childhood joke Cardoso remembers in which a frog is flattened by and adheres to the bottom of a steamroller. An amphibious being, the frog belongs to two worlds – the water and the land. Cardoso's hoops of frogs, suspended above the floor, hang in limbo between their aquatic and terrestrial domains, displaced – essentially steamrolled – from both environments.

In another untitled piece from 1990, a pair of writhing snakes are plied around a steel rod which juts from the wall in an elegant conflation of organic fluidity and rigid geometry. Cardoso intends her animal constructions to function as

drawings, thick and thin lines or positive and negative shapes against a gallery's white walls. The minimal metal structures which suspend several of the sculptures further blur the boundary between these mediums. Cardoso reasons that seducing the viewer with familiar aesthetic beauty, coupled with humankind's inherent attraction to the natural world, may make people 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. What concerns Cardoso is a human tendency to view other species as insignificant and expendable.

A series entitled *American Marble* (1992) is constructed of hundreds of nearly identical cow tibia which Cardoso organizes in straight rows or other geometric groupings. The series is inspired by Moorish designs in Spanish tile floors, of which there are a few examples in Spain's South American colonies. Unable to afford the marble used in the European

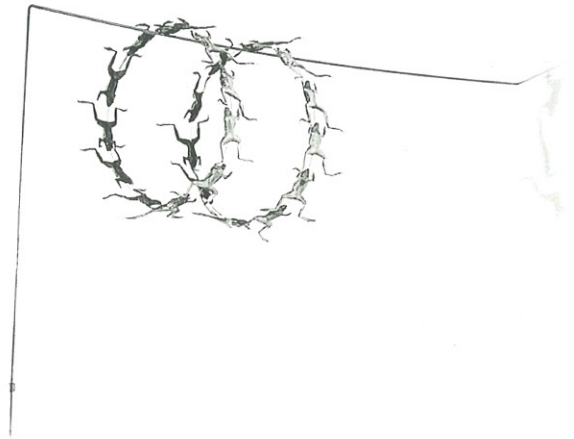
continued

fig. 1



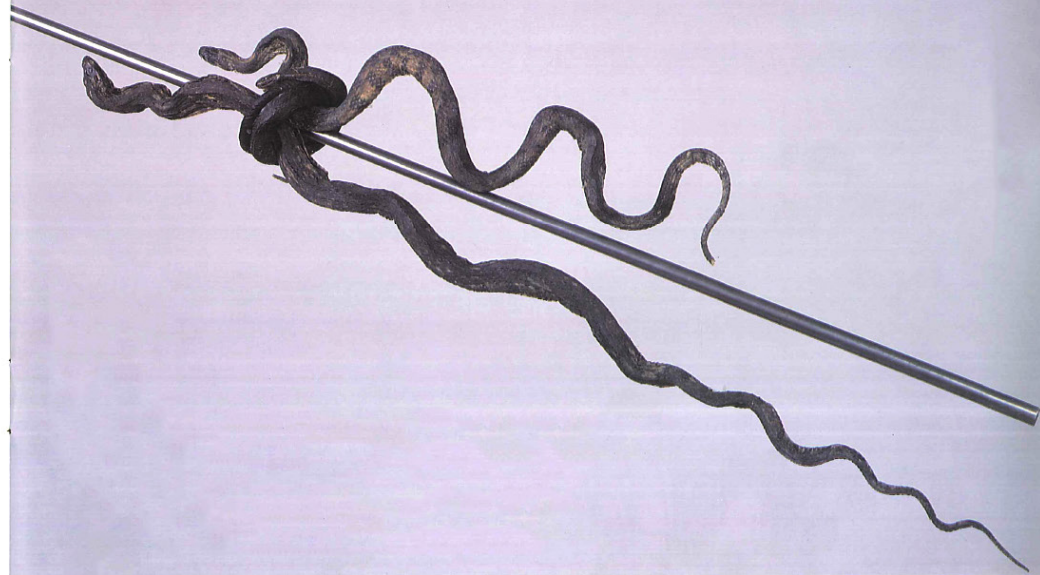


*figs. 2/3*





*figs. 4/5*







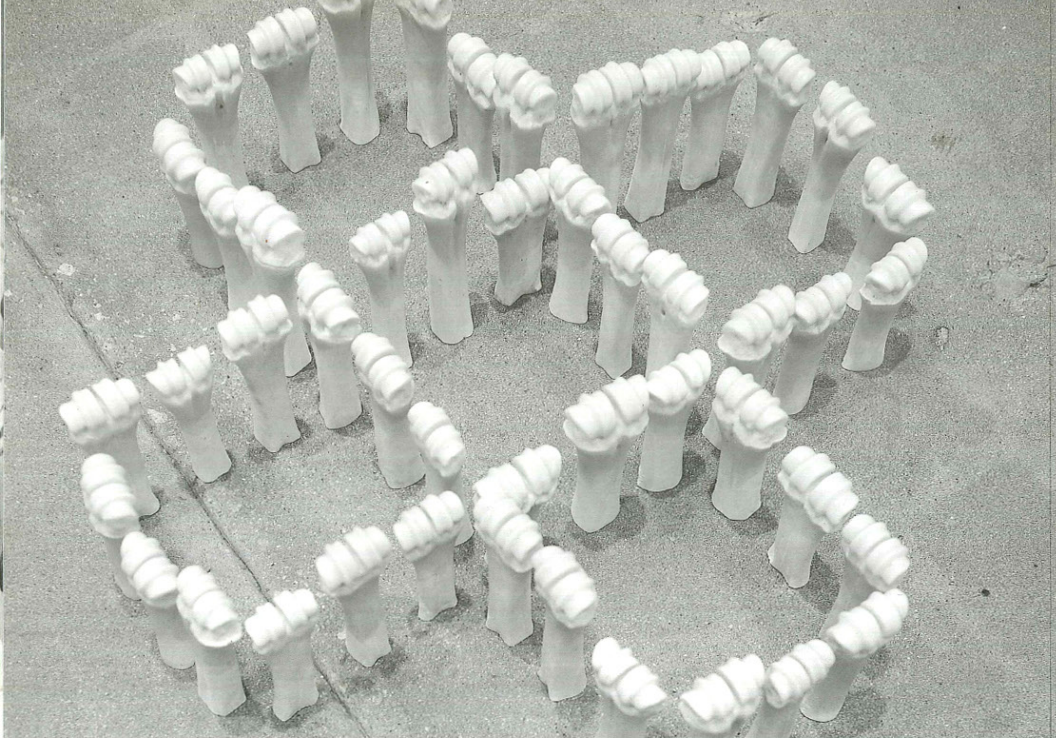
*figs. 6/7*



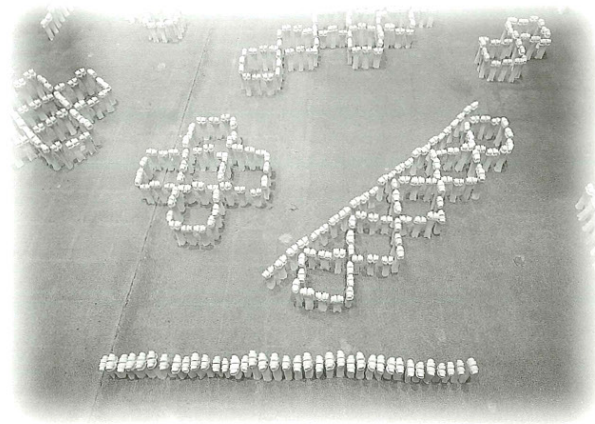
*figs. 8/9*





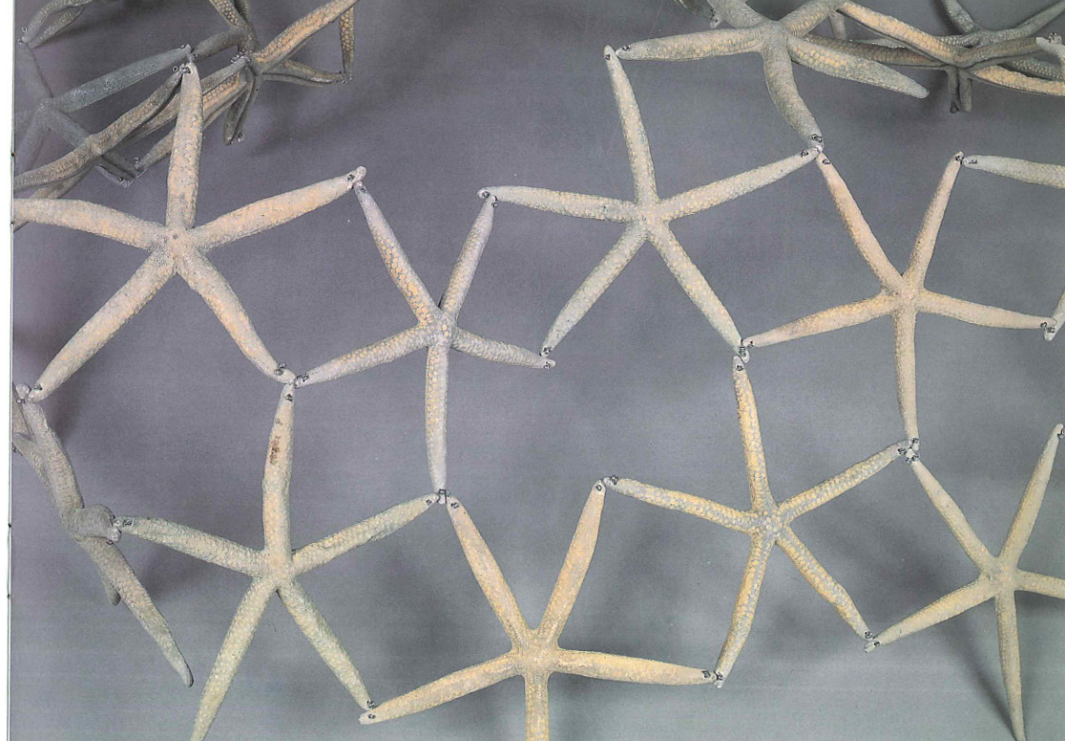
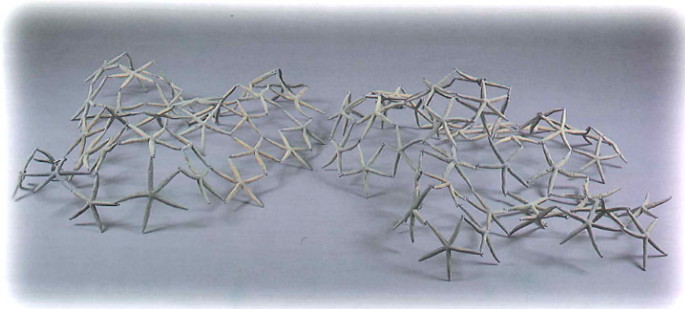


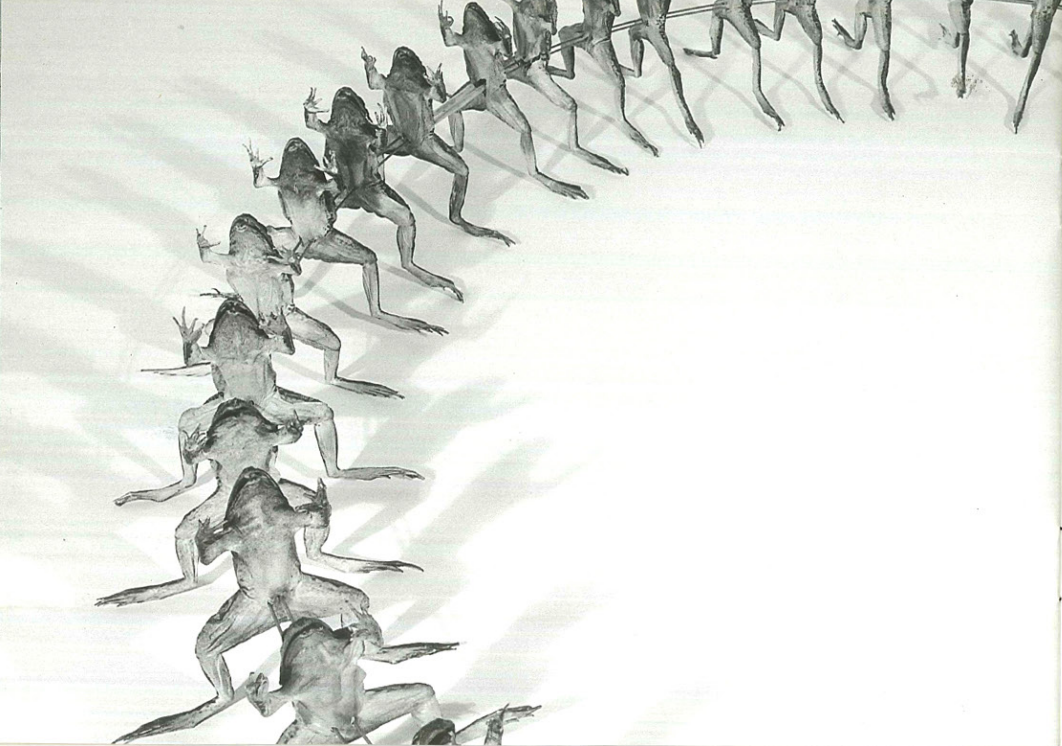
*figs. 10/11*





*figs. 12/13*





*figs. 14/15*

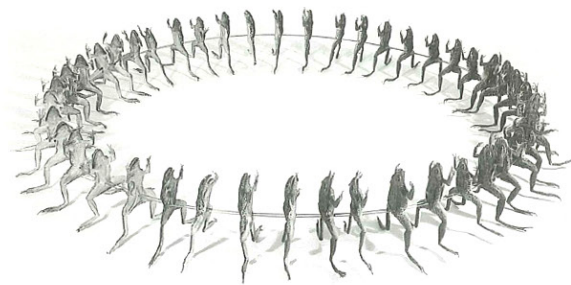
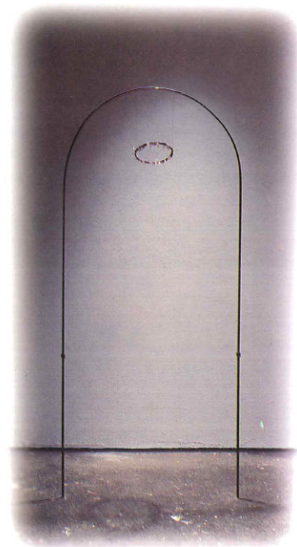


fig. 16



floors, New World colonists achieved similar effects by substituting sheep tibia in place of the stone. Only the knobby top of the bones were visible, with the remainder sunk vertically into the floor. Cardoso's arrangements of cattle tibia retain the original Moorish designs, though displaced from their architectural context, the bones seem adrift within a gallery's white-walled neutrality, like fragments of a larger skeleton, fossil remains of an ancient time.

In Colombia only a handful of ancient practices continue. *Cola* (1993) is constructed of chunks of dried black animal hides, which Cardoso has strung with wire and loosely coiled into three heavy clumps which hunker low to the floor. The hides are the raw material of a pre-industrial Colombian process with which the artist became familiar during travels through rural Colombia. Cardoso remembered seeing cans containing bits of the black hide slowly boiling over small open air fires. These were boiled down for glue; the practice

was performed outdoors because of the foul odor.

Several of Cardoso's pieces have no final form, but are amorphous, exploratory. These arrangements – whose make-up Cardoso relates to chaos theory – are constructed according to a system of finite choices determined by the material's inherent geometric structure. Appearing to float lazily as if in response to mysterious ocean-floor currents, an undulating blanket of starfish is tentative and fragile. Starfish embody both delicacy and sturdy defense. Though still airy and lyrical in their geometric weave, their armor no longer defends, as their arms have been bound together by firm wire knots. Starfish and seashells are perhaps most readily recognized as commodified objects of the vacation industry. As tourists, we buy them for souvenirs of our travels. Like postcards, they become more real to us than the reality they represent. Cardoso considers her recent animal constructions very American. In fact, the work has all been created in the US.



American industrialization of the sale of preserved animals allowed Cardoso ready access to materials; their low costs allowed Cardoso to purchase the large quantities she needed for repetition. These circumstances have strong artworld parallels – the repetitive nature of minimal art, the commercialization and mass-production of pop art, and the continuation of these themes in the contemporary artworld.

Cardoso expresses surprise at how removed people in contemporary society are from organic materials. Our foods are processed and packaged; many products we use in daily life are laboratory-developed, their sources and make-up unidentifiable. Much of what people eat, wear and live with are products of other species. Yet we do not want to be associated with the deaths of the animals we use for our own benefit. We displace from our daily lives things which remind us of our own animalness, of our own primal impulses.

In his influential 1984 book *Biophilia: The Human Bond with*

*Other Species* sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson theorized that humankind's chances for survival depend on our fascination with other life forms. "From infancy we concentrate happily on ourselves and other organisms. We learn to distinguish life from the inanimate and move toward it like moths to a porch light. To explore and affiliate with life is a deep and complicated process in mental development. To an extent still undervalued in philosophy and religion, our existence depends on this propensity."

Contemporary civilization has radically transformed our relationships with other species, and our own species' interrelationships as well. Cardoso uses animals to show that we can still have direct experiences not abstracted or mediated by our hermetically sealed civilization. Art allows us to look at things outside our consciousness and everyday reality in a different way. Cardoso prompts us to see how much a part we are of the animal kingdom, whether we care to acknowledge it or not.

# ILLUSTRATIONS

- Figs. 1/16*      *Crown for a Chibcha Princess*, 1990, preserved lizards, metal, 6'5" x 3' x 7"
- Figs. 2/3*      *Untitled*, 1990, preserved frogs, metal, 6'6" x 5' x 15" (*not in exhibition*)
- Figs. 4/5*      *Untitled*, 1990, preserved snakes, metal, 5' x 11' x 1'2"
- Figs. 6/7*      *Pirarucu*, 1992, fish scales, metal, 3' x 2' x 2' (*not in exhibition*)
- Figs. 8/9*      *Scribble*, 1993, sea snails, glue, 8" x 18" x 18"
- Figs. 10/11*    *American Marble*, 1992, cattle bones, variable dimensions
- Figs. 12/13*    *Woven Water*, 1993, green starfish, metal, 54" x 48" x 16" and 54" x 54" x 12"
- Figs. 14/15*    *Dancing Frogs*, 1990, preserved frogs, metal, 5' x 5' x 15" (*not in exhibition*)

MARIA FERNANDA CARDOSO

Born 1963, Bogota, Colombia  
Lives and works in San Francisco, California

EDUCATION

Yale University School of Art, New Haven, Connecticut  
MFA, Sculpture, 1990

Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York  
Graduate Sculpture Program, 1987-88

Universidad de Los Andes, Bogota, Colombia,  
BA, Fine Arts, 1986

SELECTED ONE-PERSON EXHIBITIONS

1987  
*Nuevos Nombres*, Casa de La Moneda, Bogota, Colombia

1991  
*Obra Reciente*, Galeria Garces y Velasquez  
Bogota, Colombia (brochure)

1992  
*Calabazas*, San Francisco Artspace, San Francisco CA  
*Botuto Guarura*, Sala Alternativa, Caracas, Venezuela  
*American Marble*, Ruth Bloom Gallery, Santa Monica CA

1993  
*Gold*, Nohra Haime Gallery, New York, New York  
*Cemetery*, Guggenheim Gallery, Chapman University,  
Orange CA (brochure)

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1985  
*Salon de Arte Joven*, Museo de Arte Moderno La Tertulia,  
Cali, Colombia  
*V Salon Arturo Ravinovich*, Museo de Arte Moderno,  
Medellin, Colombia

1986  
*XXX Salon Nacional de Artistas*, Museo Nacional, Bogota,  
Colombia (catalog)  
*Salon Centenario*, Museo de Arte Contemporaneo, Bogota,  
Colombia

1987  
*XXXI Salon Nacional de Artistas*, Aeropuerto Rionegro,  
Medellin, Colombia (catalog)

1988  
*I Bienal de Arte de Bogota*, Museo de Arte Moderno, Bogota,  
Colombia (catalog)  
*Nuevas Tendencias*, Galeria Ventana, Cali, Colombia

1989  
*New Work*, New Haven, Artists Space, New Haven CT  
*Trienta anos de arte Uniandino*, Biblioteca Luis Angel Arango,  
Bogota, Colombia (catalog)

1990  
*II Bienal de Bogota*, Museo de Arte Moderno, Bogota,  
Colombia (catalog)  
*Arte Colombiano de los 80 Escultura*, Centro Colombo  
Americano, Bogota, Colombia (catalog)

1991  
*Cuarta Bienal de la Havana*, Centro Wilfredo Lam, Havana,  
Cuba (catalog)  
*Faculty Show*, California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, CA  
*Instalaciones*, Museo de Arte Moderno, Medellin, Colombia

1992  
*Entre-Tropicos*, Museo de Arte Contemporaneo Sofia Imber,  
Caracas, Venezuela (catalog)



*Colombia: Contemporary Images*, Queens Museum of Art, Flushing Meadows, New York (catalog)  
*Ante America*, Biblioteca Luis Angel Arango, Bogota, Colombia. Travelling to Museo de Artes Visuales Alejandro Otero, Caracas, Venezuela; Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA; Centro Cultural de la Raza, San Diego, CA; Spencer Museum, Lawrence, Kansas; Queens Museum of Art, Flushing Meadows, New York (catalog)

1993

*Cartographies*, Winnepeg Art Gallery, Winnepeg, Manitoba, Canada. Travelling to Biblioteca Luis Angel Arango, Bogota, Colombia; Museo de Artes Visuales Alejandro Otero, Caracas, Venezuela; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada; The Bronx Museum of the Arts, Bronx, New York (catalog)

*Voces Recientes*, Museo Municipal de Bellas Artes, Montevideo, Uruguay (catalog)

*Klima Global-Arte Amazonas*, Museo de Arte Moderna de Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Travelled to Staatliche Kunsthalle, Berlin, Germany (catalog)  
*Space of Time: Contemporary Art from the Americas*, Americas Society, New York, New York (catalog)

#### SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Baker, Kenneth. "New Art that Appears Ancient," San Francisco Chronicle, October 24, 1992, p. C1.

Brooke, James. "Earth Summit brings Rio a Deluge in the Arts," The New York Times, June 1, 1992, p. B4.

Curtis, Cathy. "An Artist does Violence to Violence," The Los Angeles Times, Orange County Edition, November 2, 1993.

Fawcett, Dennis. "New Haven Artist's Works Twist the Concept of New," New Haven Register, July 9, 1989, pp. D1-5.

Herkenhoff, J. Paulo and Geri Smith. "Global Outreach," Artnews, October 1991, pp. 90-93.

Kandel, Susan. "Cow Cow Bogy: Maria Fernanda Cardoso," Los Angeles Times, December 17, 1992, p. F11.

Porges, Maria. "Maria Fernanda Cardoso at San Francisco Artspace," Artforum, December 1992, pp. 98-99.

Sullivan, Edward J. "Fantastic Voyage: The Latin American Explosion," Artnews, Summer, 1993, pp. 134-137.



MIT List Visual Arts Center  
Wiesner Building, 20 Ames Street  
Cambridge, MA 02139

ISBN: 0-938437-46-1