



CHELSEA ART MUSEUM
HOME OF THE MIOTTE FOUNDATION

MARIA
FERNANDA
CARDOSO

DEATH BECOMES HER

OCTOBER 5 - DECEMBER 9 2006

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Experiencing for the first time, Maria Fernanda Cardoso's combinations of organic specimens, we are compelled by the fascination of, am I looking at something real? On closer inspection we realize that it is real, it was alive and it now stands as a metaphor for life and death on a much grander scale. While her installations are beautiful and enchanting, drawing us into underwater wonderlands, insect forests and earthy landscapes, we are also confronted with symbols of violence, pain, sacrifice and death. Spaces are devoid of the water their inhabitants need to survive; animals having been preserved are suspended in an airless moment in time; synthetic, man-made materials mimic nature with absurd irrationality.

In this choice of material, Cardoso's works expand the boundaries of contemporary sculptural practice by engaging with their audience and the spaces they occupy on new terms. Her engagement with formalist design and complex geometric shapes linked to references of culture and history that go far beyond the notion of working with dead animals, breaks new territories of aesthetic engagement. These readily available specimens are her tools and while sometimes confronting, their purpose is not provocation, but rather representation of reality and truth, preserving moments in time.

Maria Fernanda Cardoso positions herself between two very diverse cultural dialogues. Born and raised in Colombia's capital Bogotá, she grew up in an environment where violence and death are part of daily life. She then spent her student days living in America and then relocated to Sydney, Australia, which she now calls home. In reflecting on her artistic career, it is evident that a sense of place and identity plays a crucial part in the development of her work.

Looking first at her earlier work, in particular *Crown of Chibcha Thorns / Corona de Espinas Chibcha* (1990) and *Dancing Frogs on Wall / Ranas Bailando en la Pared* (2002), she explains this necessity of place and culture, "Preserved animals gave me the chance to conserve an instant. In that work there is an allusion to death but also to Chibcha culture because of the position of the frogs [and] lizards in the exaggerated geometry of the animals we see in pre-Colombian representations, where angles are square and stylized. I was also returning to my roots by using real animals, the same animals I played with as a child".

Other works *Sea Horses / Caballitos de Mar* (2003) and *Large Starfish Ball / Bola de Estrellas Grande* (1994), ephemeral and vulnerable in their nature and assemblage, refer to the impossibility of denying reality. The audience becomes a witness to the complex symbols and signification inherent in nature. We are asked to contemplate, in a new way, the natural elements extracted from the world around us. We are curious as to whether what we're experiencing is real and enamored by the harmony with which these relics of the natural world combine with absolute geometry and symmetry.

What really fascinates Cardoso is the idea of an excessive degree of perfection and the act of mimicry to achieve it. A more recent work, *A Garden of Insects (that look like plants)* (2006) is a representation of formalism and behavior, exploring how animals negotiate the perfection of their identity through mimicking plants. For the artist, it is a self-reflective piece and is one of her most important works as its notions of camou-

flage and mimicry open a window onto the artist's own identity. Throughout her childhood and then her more public career as an artist, Cardoso was intensely shy yet her position as an artist and performer situated her in highly visible positions (particular reference is made here to Cardoso Flea Circus (1994-2000), first performed publicly in 1995). It was necessary for her to adopt a survival strategy that allowed her a public persona that also camouflaged her introversion and shyness. The butterflies (named 'dead-leaf butterflies') and stick insects used in *A Garden of Insects* (that look like plants) (2006) are metaphors for this strategy. Their survival is in their ability to imitate plants, and dead ones at that. The essence of this survival is a perfection of appearances and successful imitation of behaviors that essentially renders them invisible to predators. In this case, the animal, for fear of being attacked, represents itself as a dead or decaying plant to the point where even its shadows are hidden. But the minute security is assured and the butterflies are able to fly away, they reveal the incandescent blues and yellows that pattern the inside of their wings. It's a duality that reveals itself in the formalism and logic of nature and remains the primary focus and fascination for Cardoso's artistic practice.

With the artist's physical relocation from the Americas to what she deems a 'self-imposed' exile in Sydney, Australia, so too her work relocated from its Latin American references to reflect her adopted Australian culture. No longer was there the necessity to confront death and sacrifice, but rather an opportunity to explore the depths of antipodean identity and local discourse. These recent works exhibited in *Death* becomes her identify with a new freedom of expression and draw on the 'tactileness' of both natural fibers and feathers and inorganic matter to create highly textured surfaces in earthy tones of muted browns, yellows and ochres, prevalent in the Australian landscape.

Tall Emu (2006) and *Soft Emu* (2005) act as metaphors for the artist's connection with the Australian landscape, truly believing that this connection can only occur by communication through the native animals. Given her adopted status, initially Cardoso did not feel entitled to work directly with clichéd animals such as kangaroos or emus so her first pieces worked with sheep and the processes of shearing, preparing and dyeing the wool, seen in *Sheep (yellow) / Ovejas (amarillo)* (2002). Ten years later, Cardoso feels she had earned the right to work directly with one of Australia's iconic symbols, the flightless, second largest bird in the world, the emu. *Tall Emu* (2006) and *Soft Emu* (2005) are two examples of work that are a culmination of two and half year's research on the symbolism and use of the emu in Australian history. The outcome revealed the importance of native bird feathers in the ceremonial clothing of indigenous tribes, not just for Australian Aborigines, but also in New Zealand's Maori culture and many other south pacific island cultures. In an ironic combination of histories, Cardoso's first work in this series is influenced by a feathered cloak presented to Captain James Cook, the British explorer who first claimed Australia for the British colony, by the indigenous peoples of Hawaii and which is now held in the National Museum of Australia, Canberra. Cardoso began working with feathers from 20 emus, farmed in Western Australia specifically for their oil and meat. Initially shocked at their unattractiveness and relative roughness in comparison to the colorful and flamboyant feathers associated with 'exotic' native birds, she quickly understood that again, she was working with materials developed for survival, with the emu's feathers mimicking the colors and textures of the Australian bush. Cardoso started this series of work by weaving and stitching the feathers into cloaks and outfits, referencing this historical ceremonial clothing. These items of clothing have since progressed into wall pieces that

highlight their texture and color and in effect resemble abstract paintings of the arid, sunburnt outback landscape.

The representation of landscape is also evident in Cardoso's most recent work *Rain Wall* (2006), an abstract yet fluid piece that invites the audience to interact with its layers of nylon rods. The color and formation of the nylon rods are reminiscent of the sparse wheat fields of Australia as well as the farming lands of her native Colombia. The landscape here however is dislocated by its sheer vertical position. This installation is an extension of the artist's earlier works where she arranged plastic flowers on vertical surfaces, *Cementerio*, *Jardin Vertical: Cemetery*, *Vertical Garden* (1991-1999). This piece however reveals a more whimsical approach that borders on the absurd, again, a result of her experimentation with the kinetic appeal of a material and its inversion in place and time. The work also afforded Cardoso an opportunity to move away from using organic materials. The first and only other incarnation of this work was made of Teflon rods (installed as a public art piece in Miami Basel, 2005). While completely indestructible, their movement and flexibility was limited. Nylon rods however 'bounce back', they have a freedom of movement and a memory that gives life to the work and a translucency that is unattainable within the boundaries of organic matter and its pre-determined purpose.

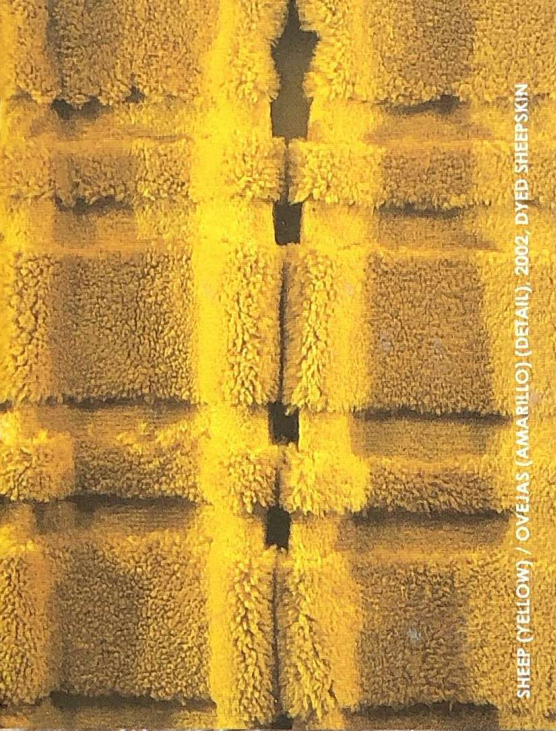
For the artist, *Rain Wall* (2006) makes particular reference to Jesús Rafael Soto's "penetrables", interactive sculptures. Soto, a Venezuelan sculptor and painter best known for his op art works, was recognized for his kinetic installations and Cardoso has very clear memories of when she was seven years old in Bogotá and experiencing his work for the first time. What attracted her, in particular, was the way in which she was able to interact with the work, its sense of fun and playfulness. It is also suggestive of the plastic and latex works of German-born, American sculptor Eva Hesse. A pioneer in the 1960s and 70s in conceptual and minimal art, Hesse's use of traditional and non-traditional materials negotiated ideas of process and geometric versus biomorphic form. Her "interests lay in the organic, the absurd and the irrational"ⁱⁱ, qualities all prevalent in Cardoso's work.

It would not be fair to simplify Maria Fernanda Cardoso's artworks as reflections of a defining structure inherent in organic matter nor are they just representations of sacrifice and death. Rather, her works create a discourse on identity and personal experience using the complex language of nature's formalism and geometry. They draw parallels between human and animal behaviors and highlight the resembling features of both. The importance of this human-animal interaction woven through her installations and sculptures reflects her pure fascination with the animal world and how she views the museum space – a human habitat - as a new arena to reconnect and analyze the human-animal relationship. In the end, her approach is unconventional yet the result is an insight into significant cultural relationships and historical experiences that span the natural world.

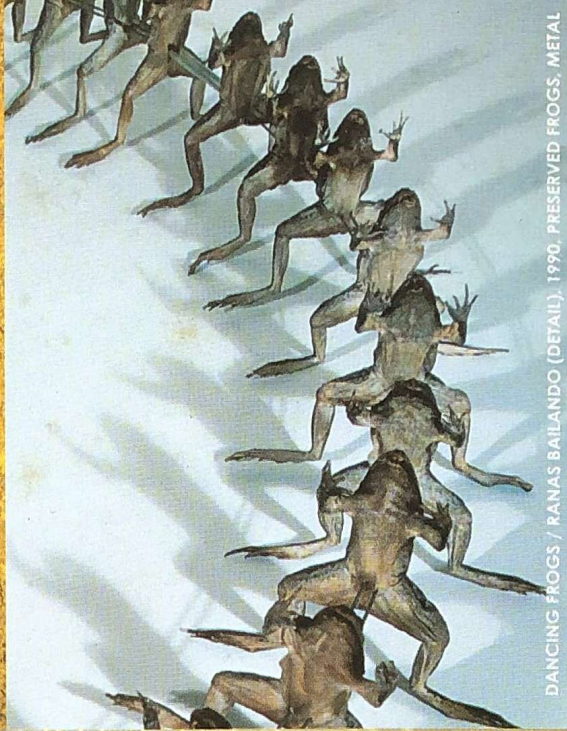
Georgia Connolly, Curator

ⁱ Diego Garzón, *Other Voices Other Art: ten conversations with Colombian artists, 2005*, Editorial Planeta Colombiana S.A., Bogotá

ⁱⁱ As discussed in Elizabeth Sussman's online essay for the exhibition, *Eva Hesse*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, February 2 – May 19 2002. Ref: http://www.sfmoma.org/exhibitions/exhib_detail.asp?id=24



SHEEP (YELLOW) / OVEJAS (AMARILLO) (DETAIL), 2002, DYED SHEEPSKIN



DANCING FROGS / RANAS BAILANDO (DETAIL), 1990, PRESERVED FROGS, METAL



SOFT LAND (DETAIL), 2005, FEATHERS, FIBREGLASS NET, CLUE



RAIN WALL / PARED DE LLUVIA (DETAIL), 2006, NYLON RODS, SILICONE

CHELSEA ART MUSEUM

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The Chelsea Art Museum and Maria Fernanda Cardoso would like to acknowledge the following people for their generous contributions to this exhibition. Sincere thanks to Monica Lorduy, Rodrigo Idrovo and Cesar Gaviria for the kind loan of their collection. Special thanks also to Maria Inés Sicardi and Sicardi Gallery, Houston and Stephen Grant and Bridget Pirrie of GRANTPIRRIE, Sydney. The exhibition would not have been possible without the financial support of the Australian Government and the Australia Council for the Arts.



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This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body. The 1st Annual Latin American Culture Week November 10-22, 2006.