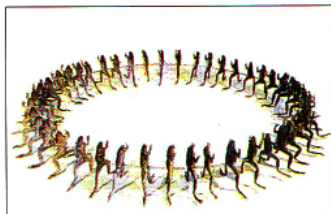


Natural Selections

María Fernanda Cardoso has received positive reviews for her art using animals—and her fleas get fan mail

BY DAVID WEINTRAUB



Earlier this year, visitors to the second floor of New York's Museum of Modern Art came across a 158-foot-long array of white plastic lilies, 6,000 of which had been placed in small holes in the wall. Titled *Cementerio—Vertical Garden*, the installation was the work of María Fernanda Cardoso, a Colombian-born artist now living in Sydney, Australia. The display referred to flower-covered mausoleums in traditional Latin American cemeteries, and Cardoso sees it as a commentary on the political violence that besets her homeland. The work may have struck viewers as mournful, but the 36-year-old artist says that it has helped her "deal with death in a different way, one which expresses life also and beauty."

Contradictory references to nature occur throughout Cardoso's art. Her master's thesis at the Yale University School of Art consisted of arrangements of dead animals—lizards, frogs, and grasshoppers. She obtained the creatures, preserved in formaldehyde, from companies that sell them to educational institutions, and she then arranged and dried them. "From a distance, people thought they looked very delicate, like drawings," says the slim, dark-haired artist. "Closer, they were shocked." The work won first prize at the 1990 Bogotá biennial.

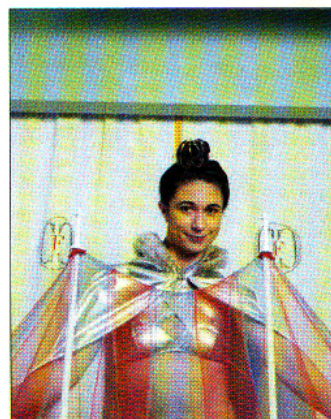
In other sculptures, Cardoso has used starfish, sea urchins, and even dried Amazonian piranhas, all bought from souvenir vendors. She linked them together to form geometrical shapes such as circles, spirals, and, in the case of 3,000 starfish, polyhedrons resembling Buckminster Fuller's geodesic domes. Working with animal life, she explains, enables her to explore the emotions that people project onto living things and how humans have used other creatures for decoration and ritual display. As the critic José Hernán Aguilar has observed, "Cardoso instills her sculptures with a soothing, dark sense of humor, a cathartic, gentle eroticism, and baffling, formal purity."

In 1995 Cardoso started working with live animals. Dressed in what she describes as a "sexy fluorescent-yellow lab coat and silver boots" and using a small whip, she became the ringmaster of her own flea circus. "It's a very obscure subject," she says. "I couldn't find a real flea circus, but I talked to elderly people who had seen them and did research in rare-book libraries."

The insects' stunts include walking a tight-rope, pulling a toy locomotive, and high-diving into a thimble full of water. They receive fan mail, which Cardoso keeps in a box labeled "Flea Circus Files." The artist opened her act at the San Francisco Exploratorium in 1995 and has since brought it to the Museum of Natural History in Mexico City and the Sydney Opera

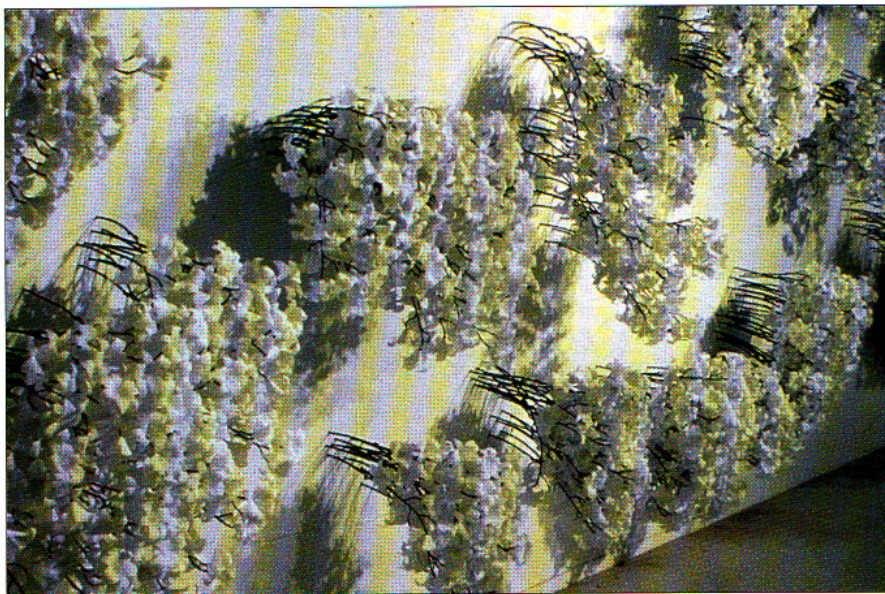
House as part of the city's Millennial Festival.

Cardoso's sculptures now sell for \$5,000 to \$75,000 at Haines Gallery in San Francisco, her principal dealer. This fall, she will show some of them in an exhibition at the Centro Nacional de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid organized by Gerardo Mosquera, adjunct curator at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. Of all her projects, however, the flea circus has attracted the most attention. Her minute performers have appeared on TV and in magazines and newspapers internationally. "It is interesting to touch an audience that is much larger than the art world," Cardoso says. "Everything is on a gigantic scale, but the fleas are so tiny." ■



The artist in costume with her flea-circus tent.

COURTESY HAINES GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO (2)



COURTESY MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NY

TOP *Dancing Frogs*, 1990, made with real animals.

ABOVE *Cementerio—Vertical Garden* (detail), 1992–99.

David Weintraub is a San Francisco-based writer and photographer.