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MFAH's striking new showcase truly hits *Home*

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Abraham Cruzvillegas, *Autoconstrucción*, 2013, installation, courtesy of the artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City. MFAH Courtesy Photo

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In a season where we cherish family and the comforts of home, and in a year when so many Houstonians still work to repair and reconstruct their homes, the Museum of Fine Arts latest exhibition *Home—So Different, So Appealing* (<https://www.mfah.org/exhibitions/home-so-different-so-appealing>) resonates with an almost wince-inducing recognition and beauty.

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Once again, showing itself as a national and international leader in the exhibiting of Latin American art, the MFAH's presentation of *Home* features over 100 works by 39 renowned U.S. Latino and Latin American artists from the late 1950s to the present.

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Instead of focusing on a single country or time period, the exhibition — organized in collaboration with the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art — revolves around the theme and questions of how we define and connect to concepts of home.

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A Home Full of Meaning

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“We did not start with an argument of home and then try to illustrate it with artists,” explained Mari Carmen Ramirez, the MFAH's Wortham Curator of Latin American Art, at an early press walkthrough of the exhibition. Ramirez and her Home co-curators, Chon A.

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Noriega from UCLA and Pilar Tompkins Rivas, the director of the Vincent Price Art Museum, looked to the artists and their art first.

“We saw in the work all of the suggestions and concerns of the idea of home,” described Ramirez who added: “Artists think of home in many different ways. Home can mean many different things, a chair, a smell, a remembrance, a mother, the house of the family, neighborhood, city, the homeland.”

These multiple meanings and definitions of home make for an exhibition that sometime also redefines our understanding of the mediums of art, with installations and large pieces created from the very wall paper, paint and plaster (Leyla Cardenas’s *Excision*) and carpeting (*720 Sq. Ft.: Household Mutations—Part B* by Carmen Argote) of real homes and the objects we collect and endow with sentiment, the photos, chairs, trophies and baubles that we sometimes use to measure our lives.

While the curators might have more obviously staged the galleries of this Home around artists’ countries of origin or chronologically through the seven decades timespan, they instead organized the artwork into “constellations” clustering the sculptures, paintings and video works into large themes or questions they found the artists asking or confronting.

Setting Home

Beginning with “Model Homes” and works that play with the concept of the single-family, ideal home, to the expanded view of home as a nation in the “Troubled Homelands” constellation, the exhibition pauses to contemplate almost every permutation of meaning we might find in home. This organization also allows the artists and works from so many countries and decades to converse with each other and with museum-goers as they wander through the sometime fully solidified rooms of the artists’ imaginations.

“We wanted to get away from proving the premises of cultural category that captures the artists, Latino or Latin American,” described Noriega. “We wanted to really get at something that’s shared by people around the world, the experience of home or the lack of home. We wanted to do that not by making a social-political or historical arguments but by allowing the viewers to come in and engage with the artwork.”

Though many of the works would likely be described as political, they also do lend themselves to universal connections and great empathy. Much of the art also tells stories, some individual, true stories while other artists paint sweeping mythologies.

We see those political-as-personal stories from the first gallery and Camilo Ontiveros's *Temporary Storage: The Belongings of Juan Manuel Montes*, the roped sculpture of the everyday, real possessions of Montes, the first DACA student deported under the Trump administration, to near the end of the exhibition with Julio César Morales's video *Boy in Suitcase*, an imagining of the true story of a boy smuggled from the Ivory Coast to Spain. Other large-scale installations address the stories of whole cultures, for example *Autoconstrucción* by Abraham Cruzvillegas, a depiction of the comforts of home in a shantytown, which gives voice and representation to a huge sub-community within many cities across the world.

Calling *Home* “one of the most important endeavors that we have presented at the Museum Fine Arts, Houston,” MFAH director Gary Tinterow, notes the exhibition has many lessons to give to viewers on identity, citizenship and even religious aphorisms like loving ones neighbor.

Yet those lessons are never blatantly didactic. And as Houston continues to rebuild with renewed understanding of the primal need for a solid roof above our heads and dry floor beneath our feet, this exhibition offers a temporary home, at least, of beauty and art.

Home – So Different, So Appealing runs at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, through January 21, 2018.

