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HOW TO ALTAR THE WORLD

While **Amalia Mesa-Bains**'s art was shifting the way we see art history, her writing and activism were changing art's present

BY MAXIMILIANO DURÓN

PORTRAIT BY AUBRIE PICK

On her way to the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University one day in the fall of 1993 to assemble her large installation piece, *Vanitas: Evidence, Ruin and Regeneration*, in the exhibition "Revelaciones/Revelations: Hispanic Art of Evanescence," Amalia Mesa-Bains thought about her plan for the piece. She had already arranged to incorporate objects from the museum's collection, including Teotihuacán artifacts and a 17th-century painting by Dutch artist David Bailly, *Vanitas with Negro Boy*, which shows a young black boy, probably a slave, standing next to a tabletop on which are heaped his master's treasures, among them a human skull. She planned to frame the Bailly painting in lengths of green satin tacked to the wall to look like stage curtains, and place a telescope next to it. An adjacent wall would hold an *ofrenda*—a temporary traditional Mexican altar for Day of the Dead—that she had made in honor of César Chávez, who had died earlier that year, as well as a glass case filled with the Teotihuacán artifacts. On the floor between the vanitas painting and the *ofrenda*, she would set a veterinarian's autopsy table holding numerous objects including a microscope, a globe, glass bottles, and a human skull that would echo the one in the painting.

When Mesa-Bains arrived at the museum to begin installing, she learned that she would no longer be able to use the original Bailly painting, but would be given a to-scale reproduction. She was told that the museum director was concerned that her recontextualization of the European masterpiece would "undermine the integrity of the object." Mesa-Bains installed her artwork as she'd planned, using the reproduction, but she wrote the director's words of explanation on the wall directly beneath it. "I just feel like museums need to be slapped around from time to time," she said recently, beginning to laugh, "because that was without a doubt one of the most bizarre things I've ever seen."

A few days into the run of the exhibition, an outdoor sculpture by the artist Daniel Joseph Martinez was defaced with swastikas and racial epithets. Students protested the incident, and Mesa-Bains responded by tacking to the edges of the autopsy table in her installation photographs of African-American students taking over Cornell's student union in 1969. Before the exhibition closed, she was at least partly responsible for a different, permanent change in the museum: the title of the Bailly painting on the wall label became simply *Vanitas*, which it remains to this day.

It is exceedingly rare for artists to play a role in altering

the title of an artwork not their own. But if anyone were to be involved in such a matter it would be Mesa-Bains, who has been agitating for institutional change since the 1970s.

An artist, activist, educator, and scholar, Mesa-Bains, who is 74, creates large installation works comprising dozens, at times hundreds, of objects: photographs of friends and family, strings of beads, scientific instruments, perfume bottles, her personal medical equipment, holy cards, her wedding veil, Mexican flags, her father's glasses and mother's necklace, statuettes, fabric and clothing, sugar skulls, crucifixes, calendars, stamps, candles, shards of glass, dirt, scattered woodchips, plants. At the beginning of her career, she took inspiration from home altars and Day of the Dead *ofrendas*, adapting them for her own artistic aims. Her installations are sacred spaces imbued with memory: of the dead, of history and all its atrocities, of innocence lost, of the mystical and mythological.

When Mesa-Bains arrives at a museum to install, she does so lugging bags bulging with her objects. "I've had maybe 50 objects that have moved from piece to piece," she told me at the kitchen table in her home, a 10-acre ranch called Casa Sol that overlooks a lush vista of the hills outside of town in San Juan Bautista, California. "I've always [made] the joke that I really can't ever have a retrospective because I would have to replicate those 50 objects about seven times in order to do the pieces."

Incorporating objects from museums' permanent collections into her installations has long been part of Mesa-Bains's practice. Removing them from the usual institutional display highlights that they weren't necessarily made for museums and "helps us understand and value a lot of art that was not valued prior to her making it so," said curator Franklin Sirmans, who included one of her installations



THIS SPACE: AMALIA MESA-BAINS; COURTESY THE ARTIST. OPPOSITE: COURTESY THE ARTIST

in his 2008 exhibition "NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith" at MoMA PS1 in New York. Adriana Zavala, a professor of U.S. Latinx art history at Tufts University, suggested that Mesa-Bains arranges these disparate objects, and the ideas they represent, in such a way as to be "in tension, so that they are never simple dichotomies."

But if Mesa-Bains is not as well-known an artist as perhaps she should be, it may be because her activism for a more equitable art world has often come first. I first met her two years ago, when she was one of ten artists who took part in a symposium on the future of Latinx art in the United States at the Ford Foundation in New York. She was the only one to talk about the day's premise rather than her practice. Her presentation, "Postcards from the Past to the Future," chronicled her struggles as an art-world activist, among them the four separate times the catalogue proposals for the foundational 1990 exhibition "Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation" were approved by the National Endowment for the Humanities review panels, only to be vetoed by then NEH chair Lynne Cheney, because "the term Chicano was unacceptable as too political a term and should be changed to Mexican American."

"I think she missed the point," Mesa-Bains said of the future U.S. vice president's wife. "Observation: art-historical knowledge is needed."

Alongside her activism is a formidable body of writings. "Amalia's impact on the art world is not just in terms of being a preeminent artist associated with the Chicano Movement," said curator Lowery Stokes Sims, who has frequently collaborated on projects with Mesa-Bains. "Through her writings and her theories, she's one of the few to successfully combine a visual practice with a critical one, and her voice and her writings have been important beacons for talking about and impelling a lexicon for Latino and Chicano art." Friends and colleagues have jokingly called her Amalia Mesa-"Brains."

Mesa-Bains was born in Santa Clara, California, in 1943. Her parents were born in Mexico, both having crossed as children sometime after 1917.

The women in her family were a strong influence on her. Her mother was gentle and prided herself on her hospitality; her grandmother, physically commanding with a quick temper, achieved mythic status within the family. "There were so many stories about her physical strength and her capacities," she said. "If a man insulted her, she might punch him. [Once,] when she drank too much, she threw one of her *compadres* through the window and broke his arm." Her grandmother's home altar, which included images of saints and the Virgen de Guadalupe, alongside family photographs and even a velvet image of JFK, would become a reference point for Mesa-Bains's later work with altars as installation art.

Because her parents were undocumented, they knew returning to Mexico was a near impossibility, so they left that part of themselves behind. The history was rarely spoken about, and that sense of displacement informed the ways in which the family navigated the

LEFT: *Vanitas: Evidence, Ruin and Regeneration*, 1993, at the Johnson Museum of Art. ABOVE: Richard Bains and Amalia Mesa-Bains, ca. 1970s.



world. They opted always to be polite, even in the face of blatant racism, including when a white community prevented the couple from renting a cottage near Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles. Their response: "You don't want to be with people who don't want you. *Son maleducados.*" ("They're impolite.")

As such, accepting her Chicana identity didn't come easily. "Internally, you always knew it," she said of early experiences with racism. "You were treated a certain way and you knew it, but you kept trying not to engage with it."

Mesa-Bains began to wrestle with her identity after transferring to San Jose State University to pursue an art degree. In an English Romantic literature class, she met a fellow Chicano student, Luis Valdez. A playwright, Valdez carried himself with an air of confidence, and embraced his identity. He wore Ray-Bans and a black leather jacket. "He scared the living daylights out of me because up until that point I was trying really hard to be white," she recalled. "I didn't fool anybody, but I was trying."

It was at this time, in the mid-1960s, that Chicano consciousness—the politicization of Americans with Mexican heritage—was beginning to be formulated across California and the Southwest. Seeing Valdez's first full-length play, *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa*—with characters struggling to reconcile their Mexican and American identities—marked a turning point for Mesa-Bains. "I'm



starting to think, What is this? What is *this*? And it made sense to me, but it also was very frightening to me," she said.

Meeting Valdez was the spark that would eventually set off Mesa-Bains's activism. "I changed my mind," she said. "But it took a long time. If you ask me what I am now, being Chicana and being an artist are the two defining aspects of who I am."

After graduating from San Jose State with a B.A. in painting in 1966, she exhibited at the Legion of Honor Museum in San Francisco, which led to the earliest purchase of her work. During the Summer of Love, she and her husband, Richard Bains (they're now married 51 years), moved to the city, living the "ultimate hippie life." She started showing textile pieces at a local gallery, but the work felt hollow to her. "I realized I had no purpose," she said. "I felt very aimless as an artist." In 1969 she showed drawings of cacti in a group exhibition of Chicano art at the Casa Hispana de Bellas Artes of San Francisco. When the show traveled to Delano, California, the gallery never returned her drawings, but she says it's just as well.

To earn an income, she joined the California Teacher Corps, working for the San Francisco Unified School District. Her Teacher Corps team, which served the Mission District and focused on bilingual and multicultural education, was led by Yolanda Garfias-Woo. A fellow artist with extensive knowledge of precolonial Mexican history and traditions, Garfias-Woo became a mentor, encouraging Mesa-Bains to begin making ephemeral *ofrendas* for Day of the Dead celebrations,

the first one in 1975, being dedicated to Frida Kahlo.

While continuing her education, Mesa-Bains started to explore how her work in the school district intersected with her art. By the late 1970s she was studying for her Ph.D. in clinical psychology at the Wright Institute in Berkeley, California, taking classes at night and working during the day. For her dissertation, she conducted extensive interviews with ten Chicana artists in order to understand how they had developed their sense of identity. One of them was Judith F. Baca, who at the time was working on her monumental mural, the Great Wall of Los Angeles.

"She began to create for us an understanding of what our connection was, how we were mining the same kind of content and information," Baca said. "That created a bond between us that has lasted all these years."

Mesa-Bains's research led her right back to art, but this time within a community of peers. In 1983, the same year she completed her Ph.D., she had a creative breakthrough while building an altar installation for the actress Dolores del Río, who had just died, at the Mexican Museum in San Francisco. She had met del Río a few months earlier, and felt compelled to honor her life and legacy. But she had started to feel "limited by the *ofrenda* as a model," and began experimenting with ways to expand and enlarge the notion of an altar. For the del

ABOVE: An *Ofrenda* for Dolores del Río (detail), 1984, revised 1991.

Río piece, rather than using the traditional three-tier structure of an *ofrenda*, she constructed a woman's vanity as the installation's base.

Surrounded by del Río's Hollywood publicity photographs and film stills, framed by pink satin and lace, and decorated with a jewelry box, sand, black satin gloves, shells, and dried flowers, the altar seemingly celebrates del Río's famous beauty. As suggested by the art historian Zavala, however, the work can be seen as "an altar to an empowered woman who was able to navigate, very masterfully, two very distinct cultural arenas at a moment when it was not OK for women to do that and not OK for a Mexican to do that."

With the del Río piece, Mesa-Bains hit on a new form. "She's one of the few American artists who introduced a new genre, that of altar installations," said Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, the preeminent scholar on Chicana art history. "There were installations and altars but there was never a thing called an 'altar installation' until she started working in that way."

At any given time throughout the 1980s, Mesa-Bains had at least three jobs at once, among them administrator for the school district, art commissioner for San Francisco, producer and host of a local TV show, and artist and writer—all while traveling across the country and to Europe for presentations, exhibitions, and residencies. (Her CV lists more than 70 "selected presentations" made between 1981 and 1998.) "I'm the queen of FOMO," she told me. But in 1991 she had a setback: a pulmonary disease limited her ability to travel for almost two years and required her to delay or take leave from projects, as well as seats on institutional boards and advisory committees.

Earlier that year, she was having dinner with artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña at the Algonquin Hotel in New York when he gave her some canny advice. Telling the story, she mimicked his deep, velvety voice, "Amalia, now in the next year if anybody asks you for your slides, you must send them." She assured him that she would, but he nevertheless repeated, "No—you must."

"Because he knew I would never do it or even remember about it until later," Mesa-Bains told me.

As it happened, Mesa-Bains got a request for her slides shortly thereafter, when the Seattle Art Museum invited her to give a talk to its trustees. They asked that she send the slides in advance so that Patterson Sims, the museum director, could review them. Weeks went by. She'd send the slides, but forgot about the talk. She was back in New York finishing up the installation of her contribution to "The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s" at the Studio Museum in Harlem when she received a phone call reminding her of the presentation in Seattle the next day.

"That's on the other side of the country," she said to herself, but she flew there—and it was that presentation that led Sims to nominate her for a MacArthur "Genius" grant, which she won in 1992. (Gómez-Peña had won the year before.) Today, she jokingly attributes it to her illness. "I think people just thought I was going to die," she said. "They didn't say anything too terrible, that's just my theory."

She remains the only Chicana artist ever to receive the prize, and one of only three Chicana artists. In response to the honor, she received

more than 150 letters and cards. "It was the strangest thing—they wrote me that they felt it was theirs," she said. "It was that Chicano art was on par that year with someone who studies the Roman Empire—that we were on a par with that level of cultural exceptionalism," she continued. "They felt that I somehow had done something that they could identify with."

She began to think about the importance her art had for the Chicana community. She'd long prided herself on the ephemerality of her work: "If you didn't get to the show," she said, "you didn't get to see it." But her thinking about this way of working began to change in 1993, after an encounter she had at her solo exhibition titled "Venus Envy Chapter One (or the First Holy Communion Moments Before the End)," at the Philip Morris branch of the Whitney Museum.

"Venus Envy," curated by Thelma Golden, was a continuation of Mesa-Bains's exploration of the ways women were able to negotiate space for themselves—and by extension, other women—despite their historical oppression. "Overall, her work is an effort to try to map the strength of women across time," said Jennifer A. González, an art historian who has written an extensive analysis of Mesa-Bains's work. One installation, part of the second chapter of "Venus Envy," is a meticulous re-creation of the music room and scientific laboratory of the Mexican poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, replete with globes, photographs, medical instruments, a skull, and a reading room. "Sor Juana is truly a Chicana to me," Mesa-Bains said. "She's the first feminist in the New World."

As she has done with many venues that host exhibitions of her work, Mesa-Bains required the Whitney to coordinate a community outreach program, part of her aim for "at least some of the ideas to get somewhere." This one was a partnership with a school serving Latinos who had recently immigrated to New York. One day, a young boy from that program began speaking with Mesa-Bains in Spanish as she walked with him around the installation. He was worried that his mother wouldn't be able to see it, since she wouldn't be arriving in New York for another year. She told him it would run for only a couple more months, and that afterward the work would be dismantled.

"He really scolded me," she recalled. "He said, 'No, you have to have it somewhere, otherwise we can't see it.' I realized that to some degree everything he said was exactly what I've been insisting upon for everybody else. And yet I wasn't willing to do that for myself."

She had been insisting upon equity through visibility for everybody else in her writing and activism. Mesa-Bains believes that ideas "must be written about for them to have any lasting impact" and so, in the case of Chicana artists, she did the writing herself, beginning in 1984. "You had no choice," she said. "If you wanted people to know what this [art] was, then you had to find structures that would deliver it, interpret it, and value it, and that's what we did."

In 1995, for an essay collection titled *Distant Relations: Irish, Mexican and Chicano Art and Critical Writing*, Mesa-Bains contributed "Domestication: The Sensibility of Chicana Rasquache," now considered a seminal text within Chicana art scholarship; it expounds on the theory of *rasquachismo*, a make-do sensibility that is quintessential to understanding Chicana aesthetics, and stems from many of the artists' working-class upbringing.

"Critical to the strategy of *domesticiana* is the quality of paradox," she writes. "Purity and debasement, beauty and resistance, devotion and emancipation are aspects of the paradoxical that activate Chicana *domesticiana* as feminist intervention. . . . Moving past the fixation of a domineering patriarchal language, our *domesticiana* is an emancipatory gesture of representational space and personal pose."

For Ybarra-Frausto, who first articulated the aesthetics of *rasquachismo* in 1991, Mesa-Bains completed its definition. "She added a gendered dimension to *rasquachismo* by focusing more specifically on ways in which women used bits and pieces of things," he said.

Rasquachismo is, of course, essential to Mesa-Bains's own work. Her site-specific installations respond to—and incorporate—what is available at each venue. The movement of objects from one installation to another—resulting in a lack of discrete artworks—accounts for a paucity of Mesa-Bains's work on the market. She estimates that perhaps three installations have been purchased throughout her career. Compared with how much she's spent on making them, she said, "I'm in a losing business."



"But I never cared about selling them," she continued. "In fact, I didn't really want to sell some of them because they're so personal. I don't want people to have my mother's and father's things."

Through her writings, Mesa-Bains sought to uproot the way Chicana art was thought of from the outside by defining it from the inside. "When you're working in an artistic area that is demeaned or derided or potentially dismissed by mainstream white culture or white criticism," González said, "you find that there's both a willful ignorance and innocent ignorance in that audience about what the work really means. Part of the job of the scholar, but also sometimes the artist, is to educate the viewer about what the work is trying to do and what it's not trying to do."

Throughout the 1980s and '90s, Mesa-Bains was what she calls a "cultural attack dog," appearing at mainstream art events and speaking from the Chicana perspective. "I would say what I thought should be said," she told me. "It cost me sometimes because I would mouth off too much, and then other times it was helpful because people knew me."

There were frustrations along the way. "I remember walking out of one of those places and saying to myself, 'You know what? You just need to go home,'" she said. "You don't tell a white man in his 60s, who has made a career out of a certain perspective, that he's wrong. They're just never going to change."

In the mid-'90s, she helped create a program called ReGeneration at the Galeria de la Raza in San Francisco, where she had been a board member for almost 20 years. The program sought to train a new generation of Chicana intellectuals by turning over the programming of the Galeria to them. In 1995 she relocated to Monterey to run the Visual & Public Art Department, known for its groundbreaking curriculum that sees art as participatory and community based, at the newly formed California State University, Monterey Bay. She taught there for more than 20 years before retiring.

"What you have to do—and what we did do—is go back and raise your own generation, and they will go out and they will make the changes," she said.

Mesa-Bains has consistently spoken out about the inequities in the art world with a reasoned, if acerbic, directness. "I don't think people felt her to be simply a naysayer or a complainer," said Baca, who is a longtime friend. "She did it with a rationale and a brilliance and grace that made it heard."

Last year, Routledge reissued *Homegrown: Engaged Cultural Criticism*, a collection of conversations between Mesa-Bains and cultural critic and artist bell hooks that explore the similarities and differences between their experiences as writers of color; hooks positions their talks as a form of activism. One of their discussions is a forthright one about Frida Kahlo's legacy for women of color, which, as hooks explains, speaks to them on an "intimate experiential level—not as a symbol."

Mesa-Bains has also frequently written about her own work in the third person. "Often, when she's writing about other artists," Zavala

LEFT *Venus Envy Chapter One (of the First Holy Communion Moments Before the End)* (detail), 1993. OPPOSITE Mesa-Bains's death mask from *Dialogue with a Virgin* (detail), 1985–89, at Freedman Gallery, Albright College.



said, "she's also writing about her own work because she's writing about the ideas that she shares."

"It is unconventional and could be perceived as self-promoting," Zavala added, "but all artists are self-promoting. Nobody points a finger at it until it's a woman doing it—and a woman of color no less." Mesa-Bains echoes that sentiment in *Homegrown*: "If individual people of color are experts around their own histories and experiences, it means nothing," she tells hooks.

For a 2013 show at the Fowler Museum in Los Angeles, Mesa-Bains created a cabinet of curiosities, called *New World Wunderkammer*, using historical artifacts from the museum's collection, mixed with her own personal objects. In it, she gave equal value to the histories of the indigenous Americas, Africa, and the resulting colonial *mestizaje* (racial mixing between Europeans, indigenous Americans, and Africans). She sought to "restore spiritual meaning" to the objects—examples of the "exotic" removed, often forcibly, from their places of origin around the colonized world for display in European *Wunderkammern*. "Princely [collections]," she wrote in the show's artist statement, "were often organized according to random or fabricated categories of meaning. In seeking to know the world at large, collectors frequently developed systems of taxonomy based on partial knowledge and preconceived notions."

"If you don't understand at a deep level the historical violence and cultural truisms that she's engaging, you're not going to understand what she's doing," Zavala said. "Here's this Chicana artist who is really known for dealing with gender and with prescriptions of femininity but what she's also doing all along the way is dealing with race as an

oppressive discourse."

More recently, Mesa-Bains has started to look at aspects of her legacy, in all its complexities and outgrowths, and what she will leave for future generations. Until recently, for instance, she hadn't kept an inventory of the constituent parts for her installations. "Some of the early works, they just don't exist anymore because it was just stuff," she said. "I would go somewhere and put all that stuff together, and when it was over, I'd take it back and sometimes I'd lose things. Now, I have a little bit more of an inventory, but I'm still pretty *rasquache*."

Since a car accident in 2003 left her with multiple

injuries, including a broken neck, travel has become more difficult. After the six surgeries since then, making for a total of eleven in her lifetime, she's not sure if she can continue doing installation work. On a recent trip to Houston, installing her elegantly arresting *Transparent Migrations* (2001) for the traveling exhibition "Home—So Different, So Appealing" was a challenge. She could have assistants do the setup of her installations, but she prefers to handle the objects in them herself. Consequently, Mesa-Bains has been thinking about shifting to a studio practice—something she's never really done, as museums have typically served as her de facto studio—and doing work by hand: drawing, prints, book-binding, embroidery. She would like to do the fourth chapter of her "Venus Envy" series and display it together with the other three, instead of putting together a career retrospective or monograph. She has about seven or eight major works that she'd like to be acquired by museums, and she has some idea about where they should go.

Over the course of this year, she'll finish organizing her extensive archive before donating it to an institution—she won't say which one. "It's an odd thing about aging," she said. "You cross a sort of space in which you're looking at less time in front of you than behind you. You're psychologically tying up loose ends and you're beginning to formulate what's left behind." Her archive's crown jewel is her Frida Box, which she guards "zealously," she said. It contains the research and interviews she and other Chicana Bay Area artists did in the 1970s and '80s for a never-completed book on the life of Frida Kahlo, as well as related ephemera that Mesa-Bains has continued to add over the years, including her own "Frida wig."

It won't be easy to give it all away. "I'll probably be running after the truck," she said, "yelling 'No, no, I changed my mind!'" ■