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Looking for 'home': Two intriguing Houston art exhibits rethink its meaning



Scott Cantrell, Special Contributor

HOUSTON — Home, sweet home. Where the heart is. No place like home.

Those are easy sentiments for those of us living in reasonable comfort and safety. But what we think of as a happy home is far from the experience of many in worlds troubled by systemic poverty, wars, civil uprisings and natural disasters.

Refugee flights on vast scales are daily news stories. According to a 2005 book by Robert Neuwirth, roughly one third of the world's urban population — around 1 billion people — lives in squatter settlements.

Two current art exhibitions in Houston address ambiguities of house and home. At the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, "Home — So Different, So Appealing" explores perceptions of contemporary Latino artists from the Americas. At the Menil Collection, works by Beirut-born Mona Hatoum include familiar household items blown up into presences at once beautiful, as pure design, and

While contemporary Latino art has been shamefully neglected by Dallas and Fort Worth museums, one show after another at the MFAH has displayed the riches of imagination and emotional impact. On display now are more than 100 works by 39 artists — U.S. artists of Cuban, Mexican and Puerto Rican origins and artists from Argentina, Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico, Uruguay and Venezuela.

A collaboration among three institutions, with support from the Getty Foundation's Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA program, the show was curated by Chon Noriega (UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center), Mari Carmen Ramírez (MFAH) and Pilar Tompkins Rivas (then with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, now at the Vincent Price Museum). A hardbound catalog has just been published.

The MFAH show, in the Caroline Wiess Law building, includes painting, sculpture, installation, performance, photography, film and video. It's organized not by country, artist or medium, but loosely by themes. The show's title comes from a campy/ironic 1956 collage by British pop artist Richard Hamilton, piling on kitsch images of postwar prosperity. It's doubly ironic in that so much of the Houston show is about disadvantage, deprivation and diaspora.

Black-and-white photographs by Perla de Leon capture scenes of bombed-out urban decay. Abraham Cruzvillegas' sprawling *Autoconstrucción* echoes squatters' housing improvised from found objects as varied as wooden beams, auto seats, a television and hi-fi speakers.





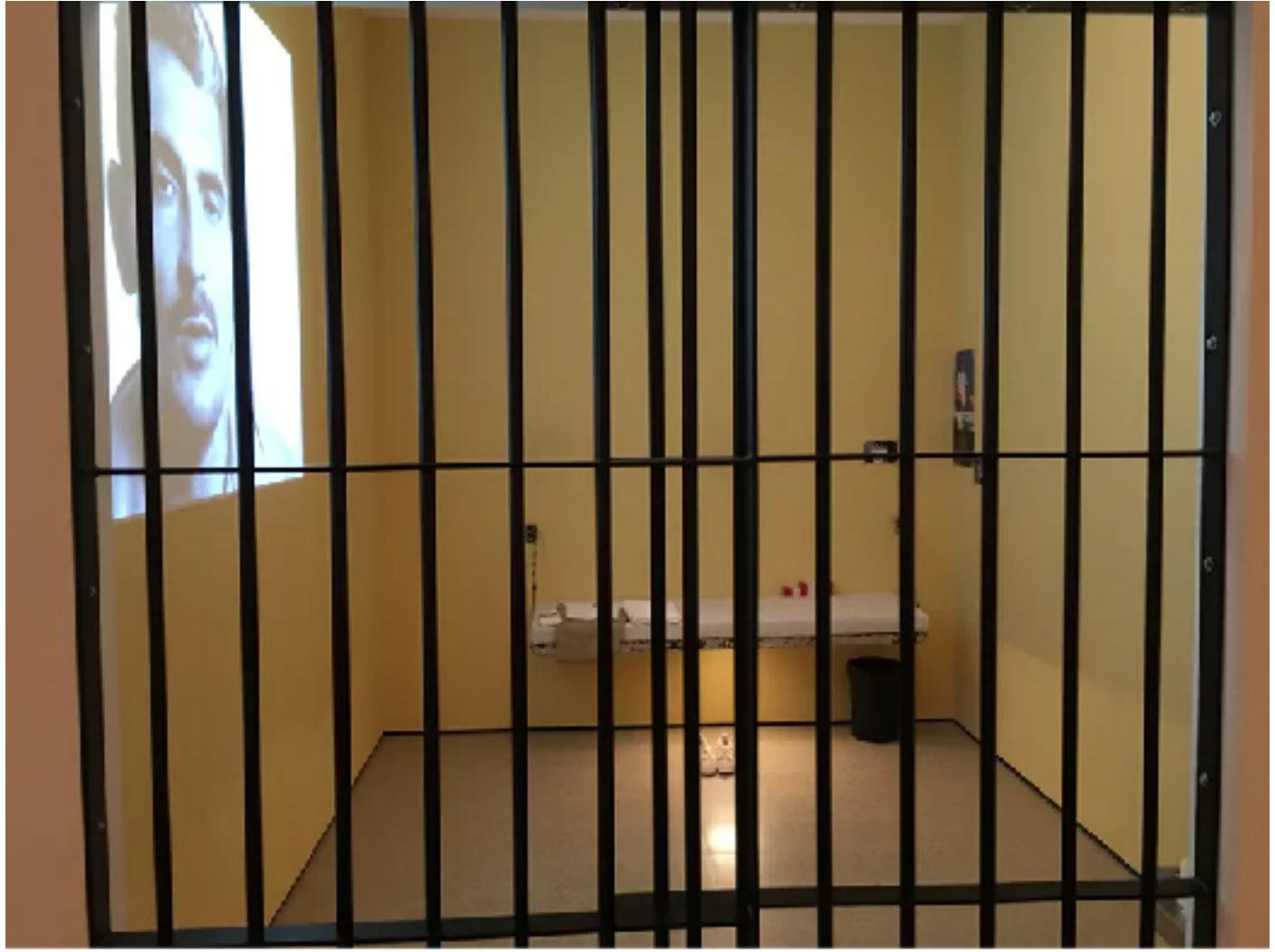
Abraham Cruzvillegas: *Autoconstrucción*, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (Special Contributor /Scott Cantrell)

Raphael Montanez Ortiz mounts trashed pieces of upholstered furniture. Leyla Cárdenas presents a literal slice of life in *Excision*: a domestic scene reduced to the depth of a 2x4.

Crime and immigration issues that have so destabilized — and often terrorized — Latino communities are suggested by Pepón Osorio's installation diptych *Badge of Honor*. One side is a teenage boy's baroque bedroom celebration of sports, walls covered with baseball cards and posters. The other side is the spare jail cell of his father, imprisoned for an unknown infraction. Each occupant speaks to us via an audio-video projection.



Pepón Osorio: *Badge of Honor* (one part), at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
(Special Contributor/Scott Cantrell)



Pepón Osorio: *Badge of Honor* (another part), at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
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Images ostensibly representing progress, like Livia Corona Benjamin's color photos of vast swaths of ticky-tacky new housing, suggest not homeyness but a rootless emptiness.

At the Menil, in a show organized by Michelle White, some of Mona Hatoum's works are admirable purely as material and geometry, but darker implications also are at work. A tradition of aestheticizing household objects can be traced to Duchamp, of course, through the surrealists and pop artists. Hatoum's super-sized kitchen implements come closer to the surrealists' sinister visions.



Mona Hatoum, *Grater Divide*, 2002. Mild steel, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. © Mona Hatoum. Image courtesy of White Cube. (Iain Dickens/Special Contributor)

Three panels of a common four-sided grater are enlarged and linked together as a folding room divider. One admires the geometry of *Grater Divide* — and fears being shoved against it. A rotary food mill, with alternative disc blades, is blown up into an 18-foot-tall monster, with a mouth big enough for slivering a human body. Cordoned off by metal wires, *Homebound* is a room-size installation of furniture and kitchen utensils, with sinister crescendos and decrescendos of lights and electrical hums.

It's somehow sobering to realize that a delicate hanging grid has been woven from human hairs. What from a distance appears a shimmering square hanging from the ceiling turns out to be made, unsettlingly, from barbed wire.

Art, of course, has no obligation to be harmlessly pretty, although Yeats' "terrible beauty" applies to

Formerly classical music critic of The Dallas Morning News, occasionally also writing about art and architecture, Scott Cantrell continues contributing as a freelance writer.

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"Home — So Different, So Appealing," through Jan. 21, 2018 at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1001 Bissonet, Houston. 1-713-639-7300, mfah.org.

"Mona Hatoum: Terra Infirma," through Feb. 25, 2018 at the Menil Collection, 1633 Sul Ross, Houston. 1-713-525-9400, menil.org.

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By Scott Cantrell