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María Magdalena Campos-Pons

SPELMAN COLLEGE MUSEUM OF FINE ART

PATRIA ES UNA TRAMPA! (Mother country is a trap!) is carved across María Magdalena Campos-Pons's painted chest in the video *Not Just Another Day*, 1998, as she pulls a white organza ribbon inscribed with the words *identity* and *incident*, in English, from her mouth. As this survey of twenty-one works from the past two decades shows, her declaration is only partially true. The artist, who is Cuban by birth and African by heritage, and who currently resides in Brookline, Massachusetts, is indeed preoccupied in her work with the multiple layers of her national, racial, and gender identities. At times, as in this video, the relationships among them appear fraught. But more often, the artist offers pensive meditations on the ways in which the various sources of her identity do not so much trap as haunt, like spirits from other times and places that appear in even the most mundane aspects of life. The video *Shaking Sheets with Photo Apparitions*, 1998, reminds us that the past inevitably intrudes on the present: A quotidian task here reveals personal history, as Campos-Pons shakes out freshly laundered sheets imprinted with old photographs of her ancestors.

The installation *Spoken Softly with Mama, II*, 1998–2008, further elaborates the idea that everyday objects and routines provide points of connection between past and present. Glass casts of old-fashioned irons stand upright before five ironing boards that serve as film screens, two of which show still images of the women in Campos-Pons's family who worked as domestics. Playing on the other three boards are sequences of the artist carrying out various activities, most notably walking with folded laundry on her head. In this work, the artist attempts to inhabit the identity of her ancestors by performing their labor in all its physicality. The contrast between Campos-Pons's distinctly contemporary presence in the videos and the sepia photographs of her family members highlights the distance, physical and temporal, between the artist and her ancestors, while the juxtaposition of the images suggests emotional proximity.

The notion that one is and is not the sum of one's family, history, and birthplace is conveyed in some of Campos-Pons's recent large-scale works, each a grid of Polaroids that together form one composition. In the top three frames of *Dreaming of an Island*, 2008, a woman gazes out across a body of water at an island. A strand of her hair falls into and across the six frames below her. As in many of Campos-Pons's works, hair stands here for both individuality and heritage: One's hair is not only a unique trait, after all, but also a product of genetic makeup. In *Dreaming of an Island*, the strands serve as roots, branches, and waves—they anchor the figure in, but also spread outward and upward through, the water.

Is the woman trapped, rooted to the spot? Is the distant island the place from which she came, or where she yearns to go? Do the strands of hair represent the ties that bind, or the possibility of autonomy? These are questions Campos-Pons raises, suggesting that, although the ghosts of the past influence who we are, they do not determine it.

—Philip Auslander