

CREATIVE LOAFING

Dreaming of an Island makes waves at the Spelman Museum of Fine Art

CINQUE HICKS

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Artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons lets you know exactly where she stands the moment you set foot in the Spelman College Museum of Fine Art. The following epigram is inscribed near the museum's entrance: "Six things are difficult in this world: to be a woman; to be black; to be Cuban; to believe in love; to believe in people; and the possibility that the world can be better."

Message received. *María Magdalena Campos-Pons: Dreaming of an Island*, the artist's first solo exhibition in Georgia, doesn't shy away from race and gender politics. Instead, she places them resolutely at the center of her vision. Through mediums ranging from photography to video to installation, Campos-Pons explores themes of cultural displacement and the meaning of her female Afro-Cuban identity in the 21st century.

Oversized ironing boards stand upright like monoliths in a semi-circle in the installation "Spoken Softly With Mama, II." Images of the artist and of women in her family many generations back are projected and printed on the boards.

The women sit and stand with unremarkable attitudes that nevertheless betoken grace and endurance under hardships. On the floor, two dozen glass irons form a mandala at the focal point of the boards, balancing the photographs' ethereal, weightless qualities with the sculptural element's heavy solidity.

"Spoken Softly With Mama, II" unashamedly thrusts work and race, femininity and the forces of history into a single spatial continuum.

The irons are breakable and the boards are upright. That such utilitarian items have been made useless points in two directions at once: toward the entrapment of female labor and toward the hope that it be transformed into something transcendent and spiritual.

Meanwhile, the room-sized "The Herbalist's Tools" transforms its space simultaneously into a laboratory, a garden and an apothecary's shop. Loosely painted vegetation crowds the green walls while a collection of lemongrass, cinnamon, rosemary and other herbs sits on small stools scattered throughout the space. What keeps it all from being merely an exercise in botany is the series of chimney-like structures with open vessels at their feet. Inscribed with Spanish and Yoruba, they seem to be waiting for the herbalist's hand but also offering themselves to unseen forces above.

Campos-Pons' stock in trade is the large-format Polaroid photograph, with which the artist began working two decades ago while studying at the Massachusetts College of Art. The show's nine major Polaroid works form the backbone of the exhibition. "Classic Creole," a single image broken into three vertically stacked panels, shows a body wrapped head-to-toe in a brightly patterned fabric. The stacked framing device creates a totem of a female body that both enlivens and is trapped by the cultural symbols that envelop it.

Campos-Pons' nine-panel Polaroid "Dreaming of an Island" and the 16-panel "Constellation" are among the show's most exquisite moments. The former is a surreal dreamscape that stars the artist as the isolated outsider, gazing back at a thin sliver of island occupying a narrow band of the composition's top 6 inches. The image's remaining 5 and a half vertical feet are reserved for the water and the long tendrils of hair that flow like ink stains into the engulfing sea. "Constellation" picks up the knotty, kinky hair to make a series of intertwined, surprising sculptural forms.

The messy, painterly backgrounds visible in the photographs refer to painting's drippy late 20th-century history, and to the emulsion that literally makes the images' surfaces. In "Constellation" and "Dreaming of an Island," the artist has dared to risk deep sentiment about art, personhood and the effects of geography, but avoids becoming sentimental in the damning sense that the word is often used.

In *Dreaming of an Island*, New York-based Campos-Pons ignores the city's current fashion among many young black artists to get at matters of race mainly via innuendo and veiled references, or not at all. (See much of the work in the High Museum's *After 1968* for a few textbook examples.) Campos-Pons instead returns to the tradition of Wifredo Lam, Ana Mendieta and other Cuban artists before her whose work unapologetically susses out the African diasporic content both in life and in culture. The last time the mainstream high-art world fully championed the direct approach exhibited here, Kris Kross was running around with its pants on backward and people couldn't stop talking about what may or may not have been in Clarence Thomas' Coke. That makes a crosscurrent such as Campos-Pons all the more vital.

Campos-Pons' opening epigram ends with the belief in love and in the possibility of a better world, making the image of the artist looking back toward the island less sad. That hope gives us reason to believe that love rather than loss pulls her and each of us always back toward home.

María Magdalena Campos-Pons: Dreaming of an Island

Through Dec. 6. \$3 suggested donation. Tues.-Fri., 10 a.m.-4 p.m.; Sat., noon-4 p.m. Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, 350 Spelman Lane. 404-270-5607. www.spelman.edu/museum.

