



Notes  
on Sugar

Like the  
lonely traveler

# María Magdalena Campos-Pons



A two-part exhibition curated by  
**NEON QUEEN COLLECTIVE**

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Phillip Townsend)

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# Preface

## Notes on Sugar: The Work of María Magdalena Campos-Pons

Christian-Green Gallery | January 25–May 5, 2018

The career of artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons has spanned several decades and as many continents. Truly exemplifying the diversity of the global Black experience, Campos-Pons has investigated her Afro-Asian-Cuban heritage through a prolific body of work in an array of media. With *Notes on Sugar*, the Neon Queen Collective focuses on the history of the African Diaspora and critical race theory through the lens of this influential and innovative artist's work.

The Christian-Green Gallery is a central feature of Black Studies' Art and Archive Initiative, which collects and displays art, archival materials, and special collections relating to the Black experience. The gallery provides a space for intellectual inquiry and collaboration between

art historians, artists, curators, scholars, and viewers. Jessi DiTillio, Kaila Schedeen, and Phillip Townsend of the Neon Queen Collective have realized an

extraordinary project involving the work of one important artist across two separate exhibitions. Collaborating with faculty and staff, these students mobilized the resources of the gallery, the Warfield Center, and the university at large to bring their vision to life. The fruit of these efforts, *Notes on Sugar* and *Like the Lonely Traveler*, will inspire audiences to reflect on how art engages with migration, the history of the Caribbean, and the power of creative transformation.

### Lise Ragbir

Director of The Art Galleries at Black Studies at The University of Texas at Austin and Interim Director of the John L. Warfield Center for African and African American Studies

## Like the lonely traveler: Video Works by María Magdalena Campos-Pons

Visual Arts Center | September 21–December 8, 2018

The Visual Arts Center in the Department of Art and Art History is proud to present the first ever retrospective of video work by María Magdalena Campos-Pons. Born in Cuba to parents with African, Asian, and Hispanic heritage, Campos-Pons later relocated to the US; she uses her art to explore the palimpsest of history imprinted upon her. This presentation of a selection of videos in differing formats and styles spans the thirty years of her career. These works have been previously exhibited at the Venice Biennale, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Dak'Art Biennale in Senegal, and other venues.

As noted in my colleague's preface, the curatorial force behind this exhibition is the Neon Queen Collective. Jessi DiTillio, the

Visual Arts Center's Curatorial Fellow 2017/18, determined she would work collaboratively with her fellow doctoral students Kaila Schedeen and Phillip Townsend.

As an interdisciplinary space

within the Department of Art and Art History, the Visual Arts Center provides a platform for projects that demonstrate the creativity and academic rigor of our students. We are pleased to host this project and are honored to welcome María Magdalena Campos-Pons and her transdisciplinary inquiries to our campus.

### Amy Hauff

Acting Director of the Visual Arts Center and Leslie Waggoner Professor in Sculpture in the Department of Art and Art History at The University of Texas at Austin

Truly exemplifying the diversity of the global Black experience, Campos-Pons has investigated her Afro-Asian-Cuban heritage through a prolific body of work in an array of media.



FIG. 1 (ТОП) & FIG. 2 (БОТТОМ)  
**Caribbean: Crossroads of the World**  
 The Studio Museum in Harlem, June 14, 2012–October 21, 2012

Image courtesy of The Studio Museum in Harlem. PHOTO: Adam Reich.

## Introduction

### María Magdalena Campos-Pons: Some Considerations

by Eddie Chambers

Professor, Department of Art and Art History  
 University of Texas at Austin

The exhibition *Notes on Sugar* presents an exceedingly rare opportunity for us to see a body of work by María Magdalena Campos-Pons, a Cuban-born artist whose practice represents a dynamic and compelling aspect of contemporary art with pronounced links to the history of Cuba, the largest island in the Caribbean. Though a major curatorial undertaking that took place in New York about five years ago declared the Caribbean to be “at the Crossroads of the World,” it is, sadly, very much the case that beyond those who live there or who have familial connections to the region, the Caribbean is a zone that scarcely registers on the wider international, cultural, or political stage (FIGS. 1 & 2).<sup>1</sup> What looks like willful disengagement or indifference is all the more perplexing if we acknowledge that so much of what we know as modernity, several centuries in the making, was fashioned in the so-called New World (with the Caribbean at its epicenter).

It was of course the Atlantic Slave Trade, taking place between the sixteenth and late nineteenth centuries, that saw the forging and honing of globalization, of the commodification of people as units of labor, of the embedding of capitalism in pretty much all aspects of the ways in which we live. This regarding of the Caribbean as a laboratory for globalization—that is, the seemingly unstoppable international flows of capital, in pursuit of ever greater dividends that benefit fewer and fewer people outside of the financial elite—is seldom acknowledged by the world’s economists and historians, beyond those with pronounced connections to the region.

In engaging with this body of work by Campos-Pons, we are in many respects obliged to consider another vexatious legacy of the making of the New World; that is, racial hierarchies in which the default position is to locate whiteness is positioned at the top of a pyramid of humanity, with increased gradations of color, ending with the world’s darkest people, at the base of the pyramid. We might argue or speculate about the extent to which Cuba’s post-1959 governance has sought to challenge racial hierarchies, but it certainly remains the case that across the Caribbean region, notwithstanding the majority

We must instead regard sugar as a  
 pseudonym for slavery itself.

populations of African descent, white privilege continually manifests itself within the spheres of the economic and the social. We here in the US might perhaps need to disabuse ourselves of the notion that these concerns are abstract. With tourism being a leading earner of much sought-after US dollars and equivalent currencies, for many nations in the Caribbean, we would do well to recognize that it is perhaps within this industry that we see the most explicit manifestation of the power and operating of whiteness, in its interactions with, or proximity to, black bodies.

*Notes on Sugar* ensures that we as visitors to the exhibition must consider the multiple ways in which sugar figures in Caribbean/Cuban histories. We are of course obliged to regard sugar not as simply, or merely, a sweet crystalline substance obtained from various plants, especially sugarcane and sugar beet, consisting essentially of sucrose, and used as a sweetener in food and drink. We must instead regard sugar as a pseudonym for slavery itself. Along with cotton and tobacco, no single commodity so represented slavery's barbarism as much as sugar. In one of his many books on the histories of the Atlantic Slave Trade and enslavement, James Walvin noted:

Few slaves were spared the rigours of labour on sugar plantations. The old and the young, the sick and the marginal, all were marshalled into suitable jobs for their age and condition. On a sugar property, the enslaved people endured the harshest of conditions, especially in the crop time between the new year and midsummer, when they were exposed to sun, heat, tropical downpours—all good for sugar, but hard on the labour force. . . . Sugar cultivation was the most gruelling of labours, a fact reflected in the demography of sugar slavery. Human suffering was at its worst on the sugar plantations: life expectancy, infant mortality, low fertility and sickness formed part of the persistent pattern indicating that sugar slaves fared worse than slaves in other industries and occupations.<sup>2</sup>

Were it not for the ravages of diabetes amongst populations of the African Diaspora, we might perhaps regard the infinitely destructive capabilities of sugar as history's revenge, particularly given that sugar is not a food and interacts with the human body with characteristics more akin to a narcotic than a form of edible nourishment. Going back to at least the time of Campos-Pons's birth, Caribbean artists, and artists of African and Caribbean backgrounds, have utilized the subject, or the materiality, of sugar in their work. For example, in 1960, the Guyanese painter Aubrey Williams executed a graphic and bloody painting recalling the 1763 Berbice Slave Rebellion (FIG. 3). The painting,



FIG. 3  
Aubrey Williams. *Revolt*. 1960

© Estate of Aubrey Williams. All rights reserved. ARS NY and DACS/Artimage 2017.  
PHOTO: Jonathan Orenstein

titled *Revolt*, depicts an unshackled slave—Accara, one of the rebellion's leaders—cutlass in hand, wreaking terrible and dreadful revenge on his tormentors. An important aspect of the painting is the symbolism of the sugarcane stalks that stand in a corner of the painting, near the scene of carnage. Thus, within the painting, Williams references sugarcane production as emblematic of the slaves' wretched, miserable, and dehumanized condition. As novelist, playwright, and poet Jan Carew observed, "The gold Guiana yielded was to come mainly from sugar and slavery."<sup>3</sup>

In more recent decades and years, other artists of African heritage, from British practitioners such as Keith Piper and Donald Rodney, to Beninese artist Meschac Gaba have, much like Campos-Pons herself, been compelled to make provocative work that has at its core investigations into sugar and its sordid and complex histories. Gaba's *Sweetness* (2006) was a large-scale model (deliberately occupying a large proportion of the gallery floor on which it was installed) of a fantasy futuristic city featuring many instantly recognizable landmark structures from around the world, all constructed, or sculpted, from sugar. According to Jérôme Sans, "Meschac Gaba's installation makes an utterly sensitive statement, providing an alternative to the usual interpretations of our globalized world. This sugar mock-up of a utopian urban development reveals a unified yet incredibly fragile society, pure in its ideals but toxic in its realization."<sup>4</sup>



FIG. 4  
Keith Piper. *Seven Rages of Man* (detail), c. 1985, mixed media

© Keith Piper. PHOTO: Eddie Chambers.

Keith Piper, for his part, referenced the symbiotic relationship between enslavement and sugar in his mid-1980s work *The Seven Rages of Man* (FIG. 4). This grand, expansive work featured seven busts—each a partial cast of the artist’s head, and each set against a montage of compelling and graphic images and text. Piper took the viewer through seven stages of his existence as an African man, beginning with a recollection of life in the precolonial days of Africa’s great ancient kingdoms. The narrative then progressed to a section recalling the brutality and horror of the slave trade. Piper’s second and third sections recalled the barbarity of the Middle Passage, life on the plantation and the days of slavery. It was one of these panels that not only put sugar in the dock as far as slavery was concerned, but for good measure, brought with it several additional, equally cogent, narratives.

The enslaved African in one of Piper’s panels is depicted manacled by his neck, a few links of chain dangling earthwards. Stenciled (or, more accurately perhaps, branded) onto the chest of Piper’s second incarnation, as a captured African bound for hell, were the words “PROPERTY OF TATE & LYLE,” this being one of the largest producers and marketers of sugar in Britain. It should also be noted that the one of the most important museum collections in Britain owes its existence to one half of the original Tate & Lyle sugar baron partnership.

It may possibly be an uncomfortable fact for the artist, but Campos-Pons (now a longtime resident of the United States) is exactly the same age as the Cuban revolution that swept away the right-wing dictatorial government of Fulgencio Batista. Cuban artists, within the country as well as beyond it, have given us an astonishing variety of paintings, sculpture, performance, and installation pieces that comment, or reflect, on particularly uncomfortable and challenging aspects of Cuba’s histories. For Campos-Pons, relocation to the US has encouraged, or enabled, her

to make no end of cogent, fascinating work that reflects on the histories of her native Cuba. She has produced a highly significant body of work that unflinchingly, and with pronounced creative resonances, comments on the consequences of enslavement and its inextricable links to the cultivation of sugar. The most discerning of visitors to this exhibition will be mindful not only of the previously mentioned metaphor of sugar representing histories of enslavement, but also the ways in which cultural investigations of Afro-Cuban identities are located at the heart of Campos-Pons’s singular artistic practice. ▶

1. Spread across three venues, the exhibition *Caribbean: Crossroads of the World* (June 12, 2012–Jan. 6, 2013) was originated by El Museo del Barrio, New York, and took place there, at the Queens Museum of Art, and the Studio Museum in Harlem.

2. James Walvin, *The Trader, the Owner, the Slave: Parallel Lives in the Age of Slavery* (London: Vintage, 2007), 125.

3. Jan Carew, “Revolt,” *Tropica* (Dec. 1960): 4. This article, on the Aubrey Williams’ painting *Revolt*, references the 1763 slave uprising in British Guiana.

4. Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (website), “Meschac Gaba: Sweetness,” <http://ucca.org.cn/en/exhibition/meschac-gaba-sweetness>. Accessed Nov. 12, 2017.

## Notes on Sugar:

### The Work of María Magdalena Campos-Pons

by Phillip Townsend

Among the several cash crops—tobacco, rice, cotton, and sugar—cultivated and harvested by enslaved Africans from the sixteenth to the late nineteenth centuries, during the operation of the transatlantic slave trade, sugar is perhaps the most overlooked in terms of its continuing impact today. As sugar became a household staple—used as medicine, a spice, a condiment, decorative material, a sweetener, and a preservative—in North America and Europe, it became a major contributor to rapidly expanding global economies. This in turn caused an increased demand for slave labor. Although slaves were primarily captured through raids and kidnappings, a significant number were acquired through commercial trade agreements forged between European merchants and Beninian and Kongonian royals. A large number of these newly enslaved Africans were shipped to the Caribbean, where vast acres of sugarcane awaited their arrival.<sup>1</sup> While sugar has played a major role in the social and political history of the West, contemporary societies rarely acknowledge this pervasive influence. The exhibition *Notes on Sugar* aims to encourage dialogue and provoke critical thought on the insidious impact of sugar on enslaved Africans and their descendants through the creative vision of the Afro-Cuban artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons.

Born in 1959, Campos-Pons bears a familial history that is intermingled with the sugar industry and slavery's legacies. Her African ancestors were enslaved and brought from Nigeria to Cuba as laborers in the sugar industry. Familial roots also tie her to Asia and the indentured Chinese workers who also labored on sugar plantations. Even while growing up immersed in the rich African diasporic culture of the Cuban province of Matanzas, Campos-Pons did not fully consider her contemporary environment until after her own political self-exile. Immigrating to the US in the early 1990s, Campos-Pons left her homeland believing that she would likely be separated from her family for the rest of her life. This trauma prompted her to use her artistic practice to meditate on the original displacement of her African and Asian ancestors.

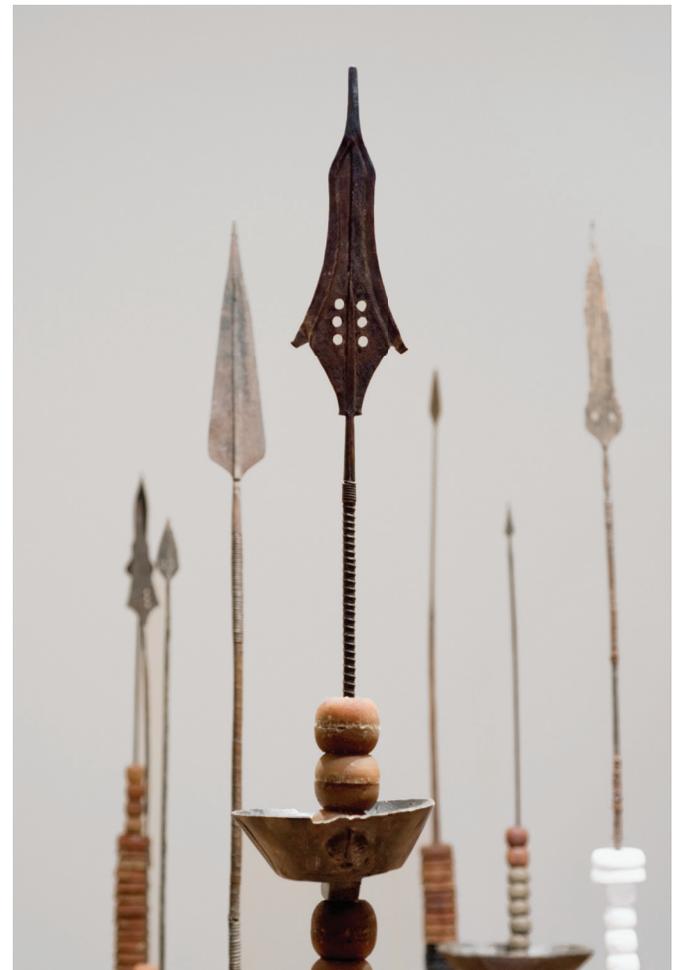
Since immigrating to the United States, Campos-Pons has garnered praise as one of the most important artists to emerge from post-revolutionary Cuba. Her oeuvre bears witness to

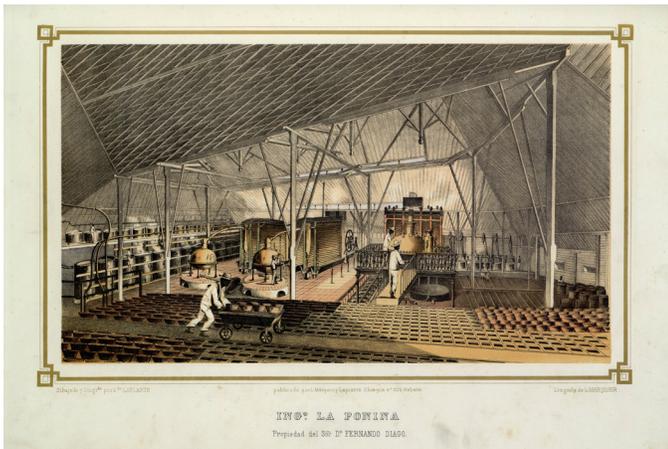
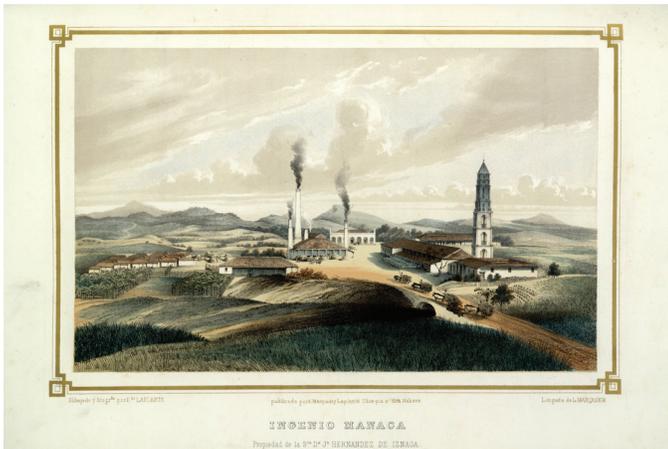
issues central to the experience of diasporic populations by investigating history and memory, and their roles in the formation of identity. *Sugar/Bittersweet* (FIGS. 5 & 11), the centerpiece of *Notes on Sugar*, represents the artist's clearest articulation of the transatlantic slave trade. The work addresses the participation of African royals, the impacts of Chinese migration to Cuba, and the subsequent labor performed by both enslaved Africans and Chinese indentured servants in the sugar fields. This mixed-media installation combines sugar, glass, African spears and stools, and Chinese stools to create a sculptural sugarcane field.

FIG. 5

María Magdalena Campos-Pons. *Sugar/Bittersweet* (detail), 2010, mixed media installation, dimensions variable

© María Magdalena Campos-Pons. Image courtesy of Smith College Museum of Art. PHOTO: Stephen Petegorsky. Loan courtesy of the Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African & African American Art at the Hutchins Center, Harvard University.





**Justo Germán Cantero**

FIG. 6  
 TOP: Ingenio Manaca, Propiedad de la Sra. Da. Ja. Hernández de Isnaga (Manaca Sugar Mill, Property of Ja Hernández de Isnaga), 1857, lithograph

FIG. 7  
 BOTTOM: Ingo La Ponina, Propiedad del Sor. Dn. Fernando Diago (La Ponina Sugar Mill, Property of Fernando Diago), 1857, lithograph

Courtesy of University of Miami Library, Cuban Heritage Collection. This material is in the public domain in the United States.

Campos-Pons created the disks that are used throughout the installation by melting and molding sugar by hand. This act metaphorically embodies the work of enslaved workers handling the sugarcane throughout the refinement process. During the sugarcane harvest—*la zafra*—slaves with machetes cut the cane by hand in the fields before it was loaded into oxcarts and hauled to the mill (FIG. 6). There, the cane was ground in a *trapiche* or grinding mill; the resulting *guarapo* (syrup) was boiled, then cooled, clarified, drained, and crystallized in molds of clay pots (FIG. 7).<sup>2</sup> The sugar and *pâte de verre* disks range in color from white to dark brown, referencing the colors and grades of sugar, as well as the skin colors of the Cuban population.<sup>3</sup> Campos-Pons also incorporated disks and balls of actual brown sugar—*panela* from Colombia—in the form in which they are sold today. The labor that Campos-Pons performed in creating the various components of the conceptual sugarcane field serves as a metaphorical reclamation of the power held by those figures who controlled and participated in the sugar and slave trades.

Another work included in this exhibition, *Are Those Tears or Pearls, My Beloved One?* (FIG. 10), articulates Campos-Pons's complex relationship with the places she has lived. The etching features a single female figure, with a bag hanging over her right shoulder, standing upon a shore of pearls or tears while looking across a large body of water. The figure's gaze is fixed on strings of tears or pearls falling from the sky into the sea. From her bag, thin stems flow down onto the bolus shore and gradually transform into sprawling strings of tears or pearls, feathers, hair, leaves, and other lamina type forms. The imagery and title refer to William Shakespeare's "Sonnet 34" (1609), in which the poet addresses a former lover who has rejected him; this lover cries tears of shame and expresses regret, and the poet likens these tears to pearls that make up for the lover's "ill deeds." Thus with this etching of tears or pearls, Campos-Pons addresses the wounds she has received during her life. The transatlantic slave trade and the broken promises of the Cuban Revolution, which forced her to leave her home country, are important subjects in the work. But America has caused her disappointment as well. She failed to find the antiracist and antisexist society promised in the country's rhetoric of freedom, leading to psychological and emotional injury. The collective shame and sorrow felt by contemporary Americans does nothing to heal the scars of enslaved Africans and their descendants; however, this work posits that if Westerner's tears of shame are as genuine as pearls (which were believed to possess healing properties in the Elizabethan era, in addition to being costly and precious), they might elicit forgiveness.<sup>4</sup>

## Like the lonely traveler:

### Video Works by María Magdalena Campos-Pons

by Phillip Townsend

The exhibition *Like the Lonely Traveler* traces the evolution of María Magdalena Campos-Pons's video production over the last three decades, from her early documentary and autobiographical photographic series to her more recent conceptual explorations. The works included in this first video retrospective of Campos-Pons attest to how seemingly fragmented elements of an artist's lived experiences coalesce into a multifaceted identity. Indeed, these works show how Campos-Pons's continuous investigation of her complex international identity has yielded new perspectives on issues such as gender, exile, dislocation, race, religion, and memory.

Campos-Pons's first filmic work, *Rito de Iniciación/Rite of Initiation* (FIGS. 8 & 18), marked the beginning of the artist's more "sustained reflection on race and ethnicity."<sup>5</sup> This was also Campos-Pons's first collaboration with the experimental musician and composer Neil Leonard, who is now her husband. During the following thirty years Leonard and Campos-Pons have continued this creative conversation through their work. As Nancy Pick writes, the two "have created a synthesis of art and music, Afro-Cuban

FIG. 8

María Magdalena Campos-Pons. *Rite of Initiation Sacred Bath / Rito de Iniciación*. 1991. DVD. 31 min. 23 sec. Sound by Neil Leonard.

© María Magdalena Campos-Pons. Loan and image courtesy of the artist.



and American, ancestral and electronic. They have created something new and entirely their own, as syncretic as the cultural intermingling that has taken place in Cuba itself between Europeans, Asians, and Africans."<sup>6</sup> Seeking a sonic analogue for the visual poetry and spirituality of Campos-Pons's work, Leonard has drawn on sounds such as bells, synthesized percussion, flowing water, and even samples of Jimi Hendrix. As seen in *Rite of Initiation*, this protean soundscape enriches the experiential impact of the film.

In *Rite of Initiation*, Campos-Pons addresses the power and symbolism of female bodily cycles through an interpretation of Santería and Yoruba rituals. The central figure, played by the artist, enacts a cleansing ritual using water, milk, and blood, which symbolize sustenance, sexuality, pleasure, and nourishment.<sup>7</sup> According to Campos-Pons:

*Rite of Initiation* traces the journey from childhood to womanhood of a black Cuban woman. In the piece I used nudity as a celebration of the body and the purity of the naked self. Also as a mark of difference with the credo of the time in which Western feminists were very concerned with the representation of women's bodies. One idea was self-representation in a symbolic realm and empowering the body.<sup>8</sup>

By representing her body, Campos-Pons claims ownership of her own form and uses it as a vehicle for the investigation of identity. Yet rather than mere personal introspection, this bodily performance suggest an investment in concepts beyond the artist herself. Similarly, in *Cuba Walk* (FIGS. 9 & 16), Campos-Pons employs fragmented images of her body to evoke the relationship between identity and the physical experience of a place. The film shows only Campos-Pons's legs and feet as she promenades down a Cuban sidewalk. Voices and the sounds of car engines and horns—a familiar urban soundscape—are audible. The video highlights both the simultaneous presence and invisibility of exilic bodies in post-revolutionary Cuba. The partial display of Campos-Pons's body suggests a fragmented return to her home country and harkens back to *Rite of Initiation*, in which the movement of the artist's feet addresses the challenges and dynamism of self-representation. Near the end of the video, the camera angle shifts from Campos-Pons's feet to her point of view, looking fixedly down at the sidewalk as she marches forward. In this moment, through the shakiness of the camera, the viewer is put in Campos-Pons's position, pushing through the wind with a determined gait.

## The partial display of Campos-Pons's body suggests a fragmented return to her home country.



FIG. 9  
**María Magdalena Campos-Pons.** *Cuba Walk*. 2012. single channel video, 4 min. 1 sec.  
 Sound by Neil Leonard.

© María Magdalena Campos-Pons. Loan and image courtesy of the artist.

Displacement and the memories it elicits play a vital role throughout Campos-Pons's work. *Interiority or Hill-Sided Moon* (FIG. 17), a three-channel video loop featuring superimposed images of flowers and swirling galaxies, speaks to Campos-Pons's complex position as a Cuban expatriate. The video is accompanied by an audio recording of the artist reciting stanzas from "Deshojación Sagrada," a poem by the late Peruvian writer César Vallejo (1892–1938), while an enchanting guitar melody plays. Vallejo presents us with an interior landscape of the moon, which is invoked as a metaphor for a search for the inner self and an investigation into spirituality. The work emphasizes Campos-Pons's interest in ethereality and the power of language over time. Her life mirrors Vallejo's in many ways—both are diasporic subjects of Latin American heritage whose lives have been affected by political turmoil, dislocation, and exile. Exiled from his home country due to this political activism, Vallejo spent the last decades of his life in Europe. Campos-Pons left Cuba as a political exile to settle in the United States and did not return for over a decade. The lives and experiences of the two artists and the perpetual motion of the celestial bodies of our galaxy stand as a metaphor for the universal experiences of displaced communities. Poetically conceived, *Interiority or Hill-Sided Moon* articulates the tensions and commonalities in seemingly disparate diasporic identities. ➤

1. "The economic difficulties experienced by the British West Indian colonies during the mid-seventeenth century resulted in a shift in their agricultural production from tobacco and cotton to sugarcane. This was made possible with the help of capital, shipping facilities, and, most important, expertise both in the methods of growing sugarcane and the techniques of manufacturing Muscovado sugar cane from the Dutch who were forced to flee from Brazil after the inhabitants revolted against them around 1654." M. K. Bacchus, *Utilization, Misuse, and Development of Human Resources in the Early West Indian Colonies* (Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1990), 48.
2. Carl Bridenbaugh and Roberta Bridenbaugh, *The Beginnings of the American People. The English in the Caribbean 1624–1690* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972), 293–296.
3. Pâte de verre is the name bestowed by the French in the late-nineteenth century to one of the oldest known forms of glass working. The process involves pressing glass powders or frits into a mold, which results in a distinctive luster and allows for the addition of color.
4. George Frederick Kunz and Charles Hugh Stevenson, *The Book of the Pearl: The History, Art, Science, and Industry of the Queen of Gems* (New York: Dover, 1993), 313.
5. Lisa Freiman, *María Magdalena Campos-Pons: Everything Is Separated by Water* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 27.
6. Nancy Pick, *Peabody Essex Museum* (website), "Cuba Distilled: Bringing Sound to the Alchemy of the Soul," [http://alchemy.pem.org/cuba\\_distilled/](http://alchemy.pem.org/cuba_distilled/). Accessed Jan. 6, 2018.
7. Lisa Freiman, *María Magdalena Campos-Pons: Everything Is Separated by Water* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).
8. Freiman, *Campos-Pons*, 27.



# “Visual Healer”

## An Interview with María Magdalena Campos-Pons

by Neon Queen Collective  
(Jessi DiTillio, Kaila Schedeen, and Phillip Townsend)

María Magdalena Campos-Pons  
Image courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum.  
PHOTO: Kathy Tarantola.

**JD** You have worked across mediums throughout your career, from drawing and painting, to photography, installation, and film. How does your approach change between formats? More specifically, how does your approach to photography and self-portraiture translate into the kind of self-portraiture you're engaging in in your videos?

**MMCP** There is an overarching conversation going on, and I will add that it pertains as well to my performance work. I have admired the work of many women artists, particularly poets and writers, many of whom create extraordinary self-portraits. Some women artists I admire are Gabriella Mistral, Alfonsina Storni, Nancy Morejon, Florence Ladd, Niki Giovanni, Maya Angelou, Georgina Betancourt, Gertrudis Gomes De Avellaneda, Clarice Lispector, and Toni Morrison.

There is a stanza in a Giovanni poem when she talks about those curtains that you could see through, but you can't see in. I just can't imagine her internally and externally fighting for the right to see and be seen- for me that is a self-portrait of visibility, acceptance, solidarity, and community.

**KS** What sorts of sources do you look to when conceiving ideas for your work? Are there any figures that you admire creatively whose influences find their way into your work?

I love too many people to mention. I would not be the person/artist/citizen I am without the very early influence of my mentor Antonio Vidal. At the age of fifteen when he first saw my work he told me I could fly as high as my wings and might would take me. So he is always in my mind.

I was an avid cinema follower as well. I see lots of movies now, but I devoured Italian, French, Russian, Polish, Czechoslovakian, Belgian, Brazilian, Cuban, and American cinema. Cinematic culture in Cuba was extraordinarily rich and my generation was an obsessed pack of culturally hungry kids. One of my joys in Boston is the Harvard Film Archive, which I found in 1988, and always to my surprise and terror it was almost empty- for me that was unthinkable.

Spending lots of time in Italy made me a devoted follower of Italian Art and I still use certain things in my work that I took from there.

**KS** Can you talk a bit about the process of making *Sugar/Bittersweet* from both a conceptual and logistical level? How did you originally envision the piece?

The final piece is very close to how I envisioned the image of sugar fields, and juxtaposing certain aspects of the narrative, such as complicity and complacency, with the triangulation of cultures. Re-positioning existing cultural objects and contextualizing them in the visual narrative was very important, such as conceptual or linguistic paradoxes. For example, in Spanish, sugar is sometimes called *crystal*, which also means glass and reminded me of the similarly granular quality of sugar. The line quality of the entire installation, which is like a drawing in space, was opposite to the heaviness and fragility of the materials. Transparency and translucency are so important in the work. The piece combines cast glass and cast sugar, and the physical quality of those materials are very different, but they appear very similar, so from the physical viewpoint there is a careful order regarding weight and distribution.

**PT** In 2016, after a six-year hiatus, you returned to themes of sugar and slavery in your exhibition 'Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirit.' Why the return to this complex theme/topic? Were there new concerns you wanted to address or were there things you weren't able to address in previous works like *Sugar/Bittersweet* (2010) and *History of People Who Were Not Heroes: A Town Portrait* (1994)?

My entire body of work is one book with many chapters. I am not done with sugar; how could I be? Sugar production, trade, and consumption contains the power structures of the world, and its repercussions are still present today. Sugar caused the first and most cruel human trafficking in history; the lesson learned there is disguised in other forms today, and the imbalance of power that structures its reign are still alive in the twenty first century.

**KS** How do you find a balance in your work between the overwhelming histories of trauma that you explore and the joy of creative production?

I did have a relatively joyful childhood. Even when I was quite reclusive as a young girl, and encountered traumatic events, I developed a sort of "optimistic resistance." I read a lot of monumental classic works as a young woman that in ways allowed me to see redemption in the ability of art to access the darkest side of human experience. I was reading Dostoyevsky, Stendhal, Chekhov, Tolstoy, Ousmane Sembene, Martí, Tagore, Thomas Mann, Upton Sinclair, Mark Twain, Lewis, Achebe, Malcom X, Rilke, Vallejo, Alberti, Hernández, Lorca, and Whitman. A bunch of fantastic revolutionary and romantic poets. Later, I read philosophy and Latin American authors Borges, Márquez, Carpentier, Cortázar, and Benedetti. I went to bed every night with a lover in the form of a book. I guess if you read Don Quixote you become a dreamer.

I found affirmation in what I read and I grew very proud of my heritage, my family, the place I was coming from. My father used to tell me stories of his grandfather, who came as a slave from Africa, but they were always affirming narratives of how he was a basket weaver, and the songs he learned from him, he sang for me. He loved reading anything he could get his hands on, and he read and shared with me. He went to work in the sugar fields as a nine-year-old boy, but there was not one sign of resentment. He was loved by everyone in the community. He knows horrific histories, but I was grateful for the way he chose to share the truth with me. He was elegant and composed. He had so much dignity, and humiliation didn't bring him down- that is the message my family instilled in me.

In town when I was young there was still an older man that had been enslaved, and elsewhere the architecture of slavery remains present- it's a history that won't be forgotten. When I stepped for the first time into the National Museum of Fine Arts in Havana, Cuba, I told myself I would get my work and the narratives of place and people I knew on those walls. So I did. Making art is a way to win over oppression, and also a mirror where society cannot turn away from certain truths. Art-making provides access to true freedom, and finding balance and justice. I see the work I have done as healing pieces of history and having the opportunity for catharsis of historical wounds.

So I came of age and decided that I could make some rules and make the art I wanted and not what the market or individuals wanted, or expected, me to do.

**PT** You made your first video, *Rite of Initiation Sacred Bath (Rito de Iniciacion Bano Sagrado)* in 1991, and your most recent video work was featured in 2017 at documenta14 as a part of your moving and critically acclaimed interactive installation, *Bar Matanzas*. What has changed from your first experience with video to now?

My very first piece in 1988 was film, and I am always longing to return to film. I think my next moving image piece will be film again, though I'm not sure as I have lots of video work waiting to be edited. I think the work is more meditative in the later pieces. I was recently in Cuba after a great storm, and all I wanted to do was film the extraordinary story that was taking form in my sister's yard. There is so much drama in minutiae.

**JD** How has your work changed with your location, i.e. moving from Cuba to the U.S., to different parts of the U.S., and then becoming a highly international artist working across the globe? Does the specificity of certain places come into play in different bodies of work? Has the experience of international migration taken on new resonance for you in our current political moment?

I come from an island. Continental experiences and borders are so meaningful, and to be surrounded by water is quite a unique and magnificently humbling thing. There is no place to go except to the sea.

When I moved to Italy I produced an entire body of work, *SONO QUI*, that traces the insertion of black experiences in Europe, especially in the Veneto region of Italy. That body of work has not been seen in the US but it charts an important moment in a sense of the transient nature of the body and other narratives I have focused on.

My invitation to the Guangzhou Triennale in China produced another view of heritage, history and the sugar trade. Coming to the US gave me a perspective of Cuba I could not see when there. I am just in the middle of processing both my work and myself—we are in progress.

I want to be a “Visual Healer,”  
I want to allow people to  
encounter an experience that  
allows them to ask a question  
or open a conversation.

**JD** Your performance work often draws on the form of rituals or rites, and evokes the figures and deities of Santería. Could you talk about the relationship between spirituality, ritual and performance in your work? Is there a difference between performing a spiritual rite for its own sake, and performing it for an art world audience?

Those works are informed by childhood memories and dreams. Most of my work evolves from dreams. I want to be a “visual healer,” I want to allow people to encounter an experience that allows them to ask a question or open a conversation. There is privilege in having people's attention for any given space of time, and I want to give back a gift to every viewer. I try my best to carry some truth in my accounts. Every time I start a new piece, I am in pain and almost afraid—I gather all of my courage to show my dreams and observations to others.

I want to help people to see more. I ask for forgiveness for believing that my work can do just that. 📖

Works in Exhibitions

**Notes on Sugar: The Work of  
María Magdalena Campos-Pons**



FIG. 10  
RIGHT: *Are Those Tears or Pearls, My Beloved One?*,  
2008, etching and aquatint, 30 15/16 in. x 22 7/16 in.

© María Magdalena Campos-Pons.  
Loan and image courtesy of The Blanton Museum of Art,  
The University of Texas at Austin, Anonymous Gift, 2009.  
PHOTO: Rick Hall.

FIG. 11  
LEFT/BELOW: *Sugar/Bittersweet*, 2010,  
mixed media installation, dimensions variable

© María Magdalena Campos-Pons.  
Image courtesy of Smith College Museum of Art.  
PHOTO: Stephen Petegorsky. Loan courtesy of the  
Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African & African American  
Art at the Hutchins Center, Harvard University.







***Like the lonely traveler: Video Works***  
**by María Magdalena Campos-Pons**

FIG. 12  
LEFT: *La Viajera*, 2006, single channel video,  
9 min. 40 sec.

© María Magdalena Campos-Pons.  
Loan and image courtesy of the artist.

***Notes on Sugar: The Work of***  
**María Magdalena Campos-Pons**

FIG. 13  
ABOVE: *Songs of Freedom*, 2013, Polaroid,  
29 x 21.5 inches, each

© María Magdalena Campos-Pons.  
Loan and image courtesy of Samson Projects.







**Notes on Sugar: The Work of  
María Magdalena Campos-Pons**

FIG. 14  
LEFT: *Inspired by Ghosts: María Magdalena Campos-Pons in Cuba*, 2016, video, 8 min.

Produced for the exhibition *Alchemy of the Soul* at the Peabody Essex Museum. Edited for this exhibition by Neon Queen Collective with Michael E. Stephen.  
© María Magdalena Campos-Pons.  
Loan and image courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum.

**Like the lonely traveler: Video Works  
by María Magdalena Campos-Pons**

FIG. 15  
ABOVE: *Cuba Walk*, 2012, single channel video, 4 min. 1 sec. Sound by Neil Leonard.

© María Magdalena Campos-Pons.  
Loan and image courtesy of the artist.



**Like the lonely traveler: Video Works  
by María Magdalena Campos-Pons**

FIG. 16  
BELOW: *My Mother Told Me I am Chinese*.  
2008, single channel video, 5 min. 48 sec.  
Sound by Neil Leonard.

© María Magdalena Campos-Pons.  
Loan and image courtesy of the artist.



**Like the lonely traveler: Video Works  
by María Magdalena Campos-Pons**

FIG. 17  
LEFT, TOP: *Interiority or Hill Sided Moon*.  
2005, single channel video, 11 min. 15 sec.  
Sound by Neil Leonard.

© María Magdalena Campos-Pons.  
Loan and image courtesy of the artist.

FIG. 18  
LEFT, BOTTOM: *Rite of Initiation Sacred Bath /  
Rito de Iniciación*, 1991, DVD, 31 min. 23 sec.  
Sound by Neil Leonard.

© María Magdalena Campos-Pons.  
Loan and image courtesy of the artist.



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COLLECTIVE



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**Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons**, *Campos-Pons looking at factory Sergio Gonzales (Formerly Tingüaro), Limonar, Matanzas, Cuba, August 2015*

Peabody Essex Museum, photo: Emily Fry.

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