

ART REVIEW

# Campos-Pons's ambitious 'My Mother Told Me' wanders

By Sebastian Smee | GLOBE STAFF    SEPTEMBER 12, 2013



KELVIN MA/TUFTS UNIVERSITY

From Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons's show at Tufts University Art Gallery: "Sugar/Bittersweet."

The first room of "My Mother Told Me," the small survey of installation art and large-scale photography by Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons at Tufts University Art Gallery, bristles with potential. Serried ranks of vertical spears rise up from the floor. Each one is mounted on an antique wooden stool, and each shaft skewers small doughnuts of

cast glass and cast palm sugar.

It's an aggressive opening gambit, weirdly thrilling. All the pieces, though on the face of it anomalous, fit together. If in format it feels formulaic (installation artists at a loss for ideas tend to fill rooms with a repeating grid of similar objects), the combined elements have an oddity and strange affinity that overcomes any sense of déjà vu. It's enough to convince you you've hit upon something.

Campos-Pons, who has lived in Boston since 1989 and is on the faculty at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, is descended from Nigerian-Yoruban, Chinese, and Hispanic ancestors, who came to Cuba from Nigeria as Spanish colonial slaves. They were made to work on sugar plantations and as domestic servants.

Thus, sugar, an almost universally enjoyed ingredient, does not have pleasant associations for Campos-Pons. She avoids it in her own diet. Her use of palm sugar molds, and glass molds designed to resemble them, is therefore charged — as freighted with an intimate, viscerally felt emotion as those vertical spears.

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The antique wooden stools are from both Africa and China. They function brilliantly as sturdy plinths. But they also evoke both the complexity of the artist's own heritage, and the cyclonic power of the slave trade, with its monstrous power to pick up unsuspecting peoples in one place and deposit them, ravaged, and seemingly at random, someplace else.

Stools, sugar, and spears are not quite, however, all there is to this work, which goes by the apt title “Sugar/Bittersweet.” Campos-Pons has also included a video projection of an interview with Omara Portuondo, a Cuban singer and dancer who gained international fame after she appeared in the movie “The Buena Vista Social Club.”

**Maria Magdalena  
Campos-Pons: My Mother  
Told Me**

Tufts University Art Gallery, 617-627-  
3518. <http://ase.tufts.edu/gallery>

**Closing date:** Dec. 8

Suddenly, thanks to this trendily aslant projection, we move from something that looked like art — taut, intelligent, meant-to-be — into something that feels slightly confused.

Alas, we're on a slippery slope. Losing traction, the art in the rest of the show starts to slide, losing conviction as it goes.

Campos-Pons's work is a busy amalgam of coded references to complex narratives of identity and heritage that are, when all is said and done, given little more than lip service by the artist. The artworks themselves lie around the galleries like backstage props for a future play or seminar.

One 2008 piece, "My Mother Told Me I Am Chinese," supports rows of Chinese porcelain jars on a three-dimensional structure onto which a video is projected. It's messy, both visually and conceptually. A related piece, a large-scale Polaroid showing the artist in Chinese garb, hangs nearby.

Another piece, "Spoken Softly With Mama," one of a series of installations called "History of a People Who Were Not Heroes," is billed as an homage to women in Campos-Pons's family. It's on loan from the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa.

How to describe it? In a darkened room, a six-channel video is projected onto a series of upright ironing boards. The boards are covered with silk and organza onto which photographs of the artist's aunt and grandmother have been transferred.

The floor, meanwhile, is strewn with irons and mirrors made from pate de verre and arranged in a configuration evoking a Yoruban beaded necklace of a kind used in divination rituals by Atlantic slave communities. Off to the side, more videos are projected onto piles of folded white sheets.

Everything is there for a reason. It all means something. But it's simply too convoluted. There's no way, looking at the work, to grasp the references for oneself or to do more than guess at their relevance to Campos-Pons's family story, or to any wider insight or emotion.

Even if there were, where would that leave us? In much the same position, I fear, as a reader of tarot cards. Each element of Campos-Pons's conceptually overburdened art is connected to an obscure, external meaning. But none of it really speaks for itself.

Unless, of course, the artist is there to knit it all together, to tell her story, to explain all.

And that, you can't help feeling, is half the reason this show exists. Campos-Pons, who with her husband and collaborator, the composer Neil Leonard, was among several artists from the Cuban diaspora chosen to represent Cuba at the Venice Biennale this year, will give a lecture explaining all in the Tufts galleries on Oct. 23. Her appearance is the main draw in a busy program of related activities.

Her show, and the deeply uninspiring pendant exhibition of new media art from Cuba, have been mounted to coincide with the launch of the Africana Studies program at Tufts University. Both also coincide with an exhibition of Cuban art, "Dilated Biography: Contemporary Cuban Narratives," organized by Jorge Antonio Fernandez Torres, at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts (through Oct. 19).

So much going on. So much to feel busy, vaguely political, and virtuous about. The art itself is almost redundant.

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**"My Mother Told Me I Am Chinese,"  
from Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons's  
show.**

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