

VISUAL ART

‘Forever, the wonder’: Artist Celia Álvarez Muñoz breaks the binding with retrospective show



“Lana Sube,” a 1988 work by Celia Álvarez Muñoz, whose work is featured this spring at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego in La Jolla. (Courtesy of Pablo Mason)

In La Jolla exhibition, Texas-raised Chicano artist will display more than 40 years worth of work at MCASD

BY SETH COMBS | CONTRIBUTOR

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“The form is dictated by the space, the space is the container.”

These words, spoken by artist Celia Álvarez Muñoz more than 30 years ago, echo through my mind as I walk with her around the La Jolla Strauss Galleries inside the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego (MCASD). In just a few weeks, the Arlington, Texas-based artist will be here again to open “Breaking the Binding,” the first career retrospective of Álvarez Muñoz’s largely conceptual and installation-based art, and which spans over 40 years of her career.

“Every site is different and that’s the beauty of it, instead of having something readymade and planting it, you can continue to explore, to branch out,” Álvarez Muñoz tells me. “Your world continues to open up. Other artists are satisfied with working on something, placing it and then moving on, and that’s fine. But for me, it’s about continued interaction.”



‘Forever, the wonder’

It can be difficult to define and contextualize Muñoz’s specific brand of conceptual art. It is multilayered, multifaceted and uses multiple mediums (photography, painting, text, sculpture, and even a mixed-media 3-D wall painting, to name a few) to explore a variety of cultural, historical and autobiographical topics. Sure, she has pieces and installations in the permanent collections of many institutions, including MCASD. But since devoting herself full-time to her art practice in 1979, Álvarez Muñoz has probably become more well known for large, site-specific and sometimes immersive installations that, to paraphrase Rodgers and Hart, bewitch, bother and bewilder the viewer.

“It’s not formulaic, that’s one thing I can say for sure,” Álvarez Muñoz says, laughing. “It has to be an adventure every time. As long as I’m discovering something new, it’s ...”

She pauses before adding, “Forever, the wonder.”

Forever, the wonder. An apt description of Álvarez Muñoz’s approach to her work, especially considering how she continues to revisit and rejigger previous works. She agrees that much of her work is site-specific, but is also quick to point out that it’s also site-dependent. All of the more than 35 pieces of art and six installations at the MCASD retrospective have been previously exhibited, but are presented here anew, refashioned by the artist and the curators to present something that’s both historical and timely.

Take “Fibra y Furia,” arguably the most evocative and immersive installation at the MCASD exhibition. Originally commissioned and exhibited as “Fibra” at the Center for the Arts in San Francisco in 1996, she later expanded the installation in both the execution and in the issues it explored.

At first, she intended it as a commentary on the marketing tactics of the fashion industry toward children, with designs that include things like lacy diapers and

bedazzled booty shorts. However, the piece took on additional meanings when she installed it as “Fibra y Furia: Exploitation is in Vogue” in 1999 at the Irving Art Center in Irving, Texas. There, she adjusted the piece to address the serial killings of young women in Juarez, Mexico, a city she was well familiar with having grown up in neighboring El Paso, Texas.



"Petrocuatl" by artist Celia Álvarez Muñoz, who is exhibiting this spring at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego in La Jolla (Courtesy of Celia Álvarez Muñoz)

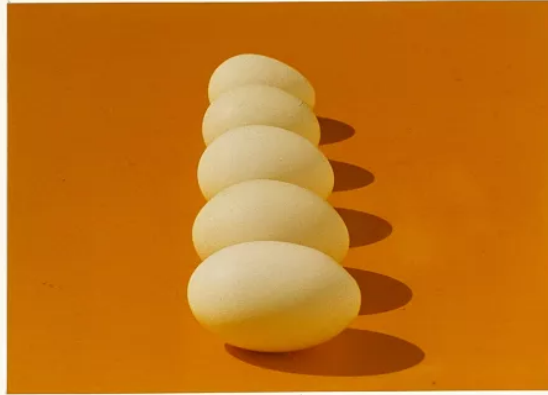
“It originally had a lot to do with the sexualization of children and women,” recalls Álvarez Muñoz, who worked early in her life as an illustrator in the fashion industry. “There’s an undertone of the dark side in most of the works, but for this one I delved a little more into it.”

Perhaps the most recognizable works on display at “Breaking the Binding” will be Álvarez Muñoz’s foundational “Enlightenment,” a multiyear series of text-and-photo works that wittily explores language barriers and growing up in a dichotomous border city. Álvarez Muñoz began the series in the late ’70s as a means to look back at certain periods of her childhood or, as she put it in [an interview with the Smithsonian in 2004](#), to look “back to fully embrace and explore the form with the knowledge that I had behind me.”

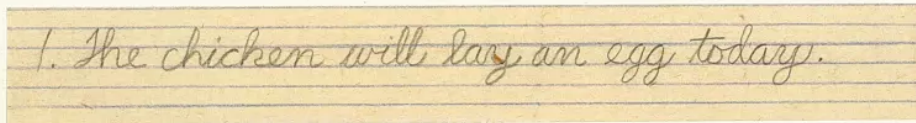
Of the entire series, “Enlightenment #4: Which Came First?” and “Ave María Purísima (Enlightenment #8)” are likely the most revered. The former displays a series of egg photos with recollections from the artist on the difficulties of bilingualism contrasted with workbook-style handwriting intended to convey a young girl having to learn the differences between words like “lay,” “lies,” “laid,” etc.

And while Álvarez Muñoz officially completed the series in 1984, she says now that she looks at the series much like the rest of her work; that a sense of completeness is always elusive. That is, while the pieces of that work are ostensibly finished, the work will take on new meaning and new resonance depending on the site where it is displayed and how it is configured within that space.

“It’s still evolving,” says Álvarez Muñoz, not just of that series, but of her entire body of work. “As long as it continues to feed and inform, I think that’s the job still. That’s the job I want.”



Learning to speak English and understanding chickens were the hardest things for me during the primary grades.



“Which Came First?”, Enlightenment #4” by artist Celia Álvarez Muñoz, who is exhibiting this spring at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego in La Jolla (Courtesy of Celia Álvarez Muñoz)

‘It’s got to be your way’

The MCASD exhibition begins with “El Limite,” a multi-part installation that was originally debuted at a solo exhibition at MCASD in 1991. The piece incorporates mural, photography and text to explore Álvarez Muñoz’s *mestizaje* (racially mixed) upbringing growing up on the border of the U.S. and Mexico. Just as with other installations within “Breaking the Binding,” Álvarez Muñoz takes a highly personal approach to her work, essentially data mining her own life to create something that speaks to the American experience.

“Every work in the show, every installation is about storytelling,” says Isabel Casso, an Assistant Curator at MCASD who co-curated the exhibition with Dr. Kate Green. “I think that’s at the crux of her practice there’s this storytelling, whether it’s about her

mother, her father, but also by taking personal history and pairing it with historical events.”

One of the more surprising things to learn about Álvarez Muñoz is that she didn't fully start her practice until she was in her 40s when she went back to graduate school at North Texas State University (now University of North Texas, Denton). Still, she doesn't look back at her early life as a time misspent where she could have spent creating additional art, but rather as a time for “absorbing” and “ingesting” all that would ultimately inform her work.

“I was ready,” Álvarez Muñoz recalls of that time in 1977 when she decided to go back to art school. “It's got to be your way. It had to be an honest effort and I came to it as a fully-formed human being.”

One of the pieces on display at MCASD that best exemplifies this attitude is “Petrocuatl,” which just so happens to be one of Álvarez Muñoz's initial forays into art. It was initially conceived as something of a performance art piece where she presented three “found” objects (she actually created them) from a pre-conquest archeological site near Mexico City. One of those objects, a World War II-era gas mask Muñoz found at an Army/Navy surplus store, was refashioned by the artist with feathers and beading.

“I made it mine, I made it an artifact,” says Álvarez Muñoz, who later took a series of Cibachrome photographs of the mask and displayed in 1988. “It was certainly a performance piece. I thought, ‘I'm going to be the professor and I'm going to tell him about the next find, the next exhibit.’”

The intent of the piece, provocative as it was at the time, was clear and clearly ahead of its time: to both comment on and up-end

White attitudes on art and discovery. At MCASD, the iconic photo of the “Petrocuatl” mask will be displayed alongside text from the artist and appropriated imagery from vintage magazine spreads of Mexico City such as the ones seen in *National Geographic*.



Artist Celia Álvarez Muñoz air-brushing a painting. She is exhibiting this spring at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego in La Jolla (Courtesy of Celia Álvarez Muñoz)

‘It’s about the journey’

Just as with Álvarez Muñoz’s art, the title of her retrospective exhibition is multilayered. Yes, “Breaking the Binding” happens to be the same title of one her first solo shows (“Rompiendo la Liga”) and it can also certainly refer to what the artist refers to as her “breaking out” in the late ‘80s into installation work.

However, she and the curators may have chosen this title for the precise reason that the exhibition is, in its essence, a celebration of a woman, a proud Chicana and self-proclaimed “artist,” who has broken so many boundaries. Yes, the titular “binding” does, of course, refer to the book-like presentation in some of her works as well as her use of text and language within her practice, but it can also refer to the societal bindings that attempt to keep women in their place. What’s more, her work often deals in the

breaking down of things; of language, of meaning, of family, of culture, of history and of life well lived.



“Ave Maria Purisima, Enlightenment #8” by artist Celia Álvarez Muñoz, who is exhibiting this spring at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego in La Jolla. (Courtesy of Pablo Mason)

“It’s about the journey, always trying to break through to the other side,” Muñoz says toward the end of our own journey around the empty museum space. “We always want to see what’s on the other side of the hill.”

As we are finishing our talk, I recall another thing Muñoz said about her work shortly after completing her “Abriendo Tierra / Breaking Ground” piece at the Dallas Museum of Art in 1991: “As far as being a storyteller, I think that’s my mission.”

Muñoz tells me about one of her early fascinations with language revolved around the word “eternity,” and how her mother would often tell her to come outside and look at the sky.

“She would ask me, ‘do you see an end? That’s eternity,’” Muñoz says, before I ask her if it’s still a word that still holds special meaning for her. “Oh, sure. An eternity, after all, what is it?”

‘Celia Álvarez Muñoz: Breaking the Binding’

When: Opens March 16 and runs through August 13. Hours, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.
Thursdays-Sundays

Where: Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, 700 Prospect St., La Jolla

Phone: (858) 454-3541

Price: Free-\$25

Online: mcasd.org



Seth Combs