

Art **Reviews**

Celia Álvarez Muñoz Unbinds the Artist Book

The artist's work embodies a level of confrontation that makes me contemplate our choices to explore or ignore what's right in front of our face.



Nancy Zastudil February 15, 2024



Celia Álvarez Muñoz, *Rompiendo la Liga/ Breaking the Binding* (1989–90), three-channel projection, mural, and vinyl text, dimensions variable (all images courtesy New Mexico State University Art Museum, photos by Byron Flesher)

LAS CRUCES, New Mexico — Three metal chairs — pink, white, and yellow — are arranged in a semicircle; behind them hangs one of Celia Álvarez Muñoz's large-scale airbrushed paintings of a house. The windows are dark voids and the chairs sit empty, as though on a front lawn, at the end of a psychic line leading just beyond the reaches of the porch. Three pairs of perpendicular street signs dangle overhead and display the crossings of "N SPRUCE LN" and "S ESPROOS LN," "N TAYS DR" and "S TELLES DR," and "N CYPRESS" and "S SEEPRES," reflecting the artist's signature use of mistranslations. Here, in "Lunes Washday" from the *Postales* series (1988), Álvarez Muñoz's selective images, colors, materials, language, and humor softly render memories poignant. The signs, devoid of any grounding apparatus such as sign posts, point to dislocation and displacement amid cultural intersections.

The installation is just one of several in *Celia Álvarez Muñoz: Breaking the Binding* at the New Mexico State University Art Museum, a major exhibition of multimedia works covering over 40 years of the artist's translations of her memories and experiences of living on the US/Mexico border. The exhibition revels in the opportunity to showcase her installations, and the title, like all of Álvarez Muñoz's work, embodies multiple meanings.

One of those meanings is the way that the title borrows from the artist's defiance of form, which came with "Rompiendo la Liga/Breaking the Binding" (1989–90), wherein she broke free of the artist's book format and presented "pages" as images on the walls. For that installation's current iteration, slide images of *santos* from Texas churches are projected in altar shapes onto the central wall of a small darkened room within the main exhibition space. Wrapping the room's entrance and walls is a procession of text, placed approximately three or four feet up from the floor, that tells of the artist's self-education on gender and gender fluidity through playing with dolls, dressing and undressing them.



Celia Álvarez Muñoz, "Lunes Washday" from *Postales* series (1988), one canvas (house) and one canvas (text), and three lawn chairs, overall dimensions variable, canvas (house): 72 x 103 1/2 inches, canvas (text) – scrolled: 58 x 56 inches, lawn chairs (each of three): 34 x 21 x 24 inches

The text goes on to conflate the illusive nature of patron saints with art patrons' slippery penchant for tokenization of cultures. I imagine that, if I were first of all Catholic and, second, kneeling in prayer or confession, the text would be at my eye level. And, knowing that the piece draws from the artist's experiences growing up with the saints, her "early childhood friends," I also imagine that the text would be at eye level for a young child. Both positions embody a level of confrontation that makes me contemplate our choices to explore or ignore what's right in front of our face.

In an adjacent gallery is a selection of artist books from Álvarez Muñoz's *Enlightenment* series (1980–85). The room is filled with vitrines and wall displays of accordion-style books, slip cases, and individual pages, many of which pair a written account of a childhood memory with seemingly incongruent images that nonetheless propel the narrative — for example, a lesson in innocence and purity alongside a bite-by-bite sequence of an apple disappearing concludes with a snake; a recounting of an imaginary friend accompanies depictions of a doll's head turning until its back is grotesquely, impossibly aligned with the front of the body; a punishable impulse to behead a couple of saints that “sat doing nothing” on her grandmother's bedroom trunk is complemented by photographs and collaged matches, some fresh and some exhausted by flame.

Looking up from Álvarez Muñoz's book pages, I see that the doorway of the *Enlightenment* series gallery frames another view of “Lunes Washday.” I'm reminded that the artist isn't giving us a code to decipher another's experiences but rather offering another perspective, something beyond strict translation, curiosity unbound.



Celia Álvarez Muñoz, *Rompiendo la Liga/ Breaking the Binding* (1989–90), three-channel projection, mural, and vinyl text, dimensions variable



Installation view of Celia Álvarez Muñoz, *Enlightenment* series (1980–85), mixed media artist books, dimensions variable

Celia Álvarez Muñoz: Breaking the Binding continues at New Mexico State University Art Museum (1308 East University Ave, Las Cruces, New Mexico) through March 2. The exhibition was curated by Dr. Kate Green, Chief Curator; and Nancy E. Meinig, Curator of Modern & Contemporary Art at Philbrook Museum of Art, and Isabel Casso, Associate Curator, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego.