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EL MUSEO DEL BARRIO PRESENTS

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: ARCHAEOLOGY OF MEMORY

The Pioneering Multimedia Artist's First Retrospective Opens in New York

May 2 to August 11, 2024

Press Preview: Wednesday, May 1 at 5pm



NEW YORK, February 12, 2024 – El Museo del Barrio presents *Amalia Mesa-Bains: Archaeology of Memory*, the first retrospective exhibition by the pioneering installation artist, curator, and theorist. Born in 1943 to a Mexican immigrant family, Mesa-Bains has been a leading figure in Chicana art for nearly half a century. Her practice explores intersectional feminist themes, environmentally centered spirituality, and cultural diversity to counter the racist and gendered erasures of colonial repression. On view May 2 to August 11, 2024, the exhibition features over 40 works including the artist's large-scale altar-installations, as well as prints, artist books, and codices. Anchored by the multi-chapter "Venus Envy" series, *Archaeology of Memory* is a rare opportunity to view three decades of Mesa-Bains's genre-defying artworks, many of which are on display together for the first time.

“We are honored to present *Amalia Mesa-Bains: Archaeology of Memory*. The exhibition is an extraordinary milestone in our relationship with an artist that began 30 years ago and underscores El Museo’s commitment to presenting highly relevant yet underrepresented Latinx artists,” said **Patrick Charpenel**, Executive Director, El Museo del Barrio.

El Museo del Barrio is the only East Coast venue to host the traveling retrospective, which is organized by the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive in collaboration with the Latinx Research Center at UC Berkeley. The presentation at El Museo expands on Mesa-Bains’s longstanding association with the institution, where her work has been exhibited since the 1990s. Most recently, her art and critical writing served as the direct inspiration for the acclaimed 2022 exhibition *DOMESTICANX*, an intergenerational Latinx group presentation that expanded on Mesa-Bains’s canonical theory of *domesticana*.

“Amalia Mesa-Bains has long been a leading voice in the critique of Eurocentric, sexist, and classist art histories and museum practices in the Americas. *Amalia Mesa-Bains: Archaeology of Memory* is the most significant presentation of her life’s work to date, and a validation of her impact on the contemporary art world,” said **Susanna V. Temkin**, Curator, El Museo del Barrio.

In the mid-’70s, Mesa-Bains’s research in Mexican ancestral traditions led to her reimagination of sacred forms—*altares* (home altars) and *ofrendas* (offerings to the dead)—through a contemporary lens as installation art. In the following decades, the artist expanded her altar-based practice, converting domestic furniture such as a desk, table, armoire or vanity into places of devotion and memory. Subsequently, Mesa-Bains began to consider spaces at the intersection of the private and public to explore the lives of female figures from historical and religious contexts, including Mexican nun and intellectual Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and La Virgen de Guadalupe. These sites, which include a library, harem, garden, and laboratory, provide the settings for Mesa-Bains’s archeological inquiry into women’s histories and their colonial erasure.

Mesa-Bains’s groundbreaking developments are showcased in the multi-part *Venus Envy* series, created between 1993 and 2023 and on view in four galleries of El Museo del Barrio. *Archaeology of Memory* marks the first time that *Venus Envy* is being shown in its entirety, having originally been staged in four chapters across different institutional settings, including the 1993 Whitney Biennale; Williams College Museum of Art; Bernice Steinbaum Gallery; and Menil Collection. Riffing off the Freudian term “penis envy,” Mesa-Bains’s title is suggestive of women’s empowerment throughout history. Other installations speak to the experience of migration, women’s solidarities, and ancestral knowledge to reclaim the histories that have been absented from public memory through the patriarchal institutions of nation, religion, and museum. These large-scale pieces are complemented throughout the exhibition by works on paper that illuminate the artist’s aesthetic of textual and image-based layering and excavation in two-dimensional form. Drawing on familial histories, personal experiences, and artistic legacies, these prints, handmade books, and codices inform Mesa-Bains’s conceptual practice and serve as maps for her artistic trajectory.

To RSVP for the press preview, please email: elmuseo@suttoncomms.com.

NEW PUBLICATION

Amalia Mesa-Bains: Archaeology of Memory is accompanied by a fully illustrated monograph featuring an essay and interview by the artist, as well as texts by scholars exploring her interdisciplinary practice in relation to ecofeminism, migrant histories, spirituality, and the politics of erasure. Contributors include the artist herself, exhibition curators Maria Esther Fernández and Laura E. Pérez, as well as Lowery Stokes Sims, Jennifer A. González, Adriana Zavala, and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto. *Amalia Mesa-Bains:*

Archaeology of Memory is co-published by the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive and University of California Press.

CREDITS

Amalia Mesa-Bains: Archaeology of Memory is organized by the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive in collaboration with the Latinx Research Center at UC Berkeley. The show is curated by Maria Esther Fernández, Artistic Director, The Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art & Culture of the Riverside Art Museum and Laura E. Pérez, Professor of Chicana, Latinx, and Ethnic Studies and Chair of Latinx Research Center, UC Berkeley. The exhibition is made possible by generous lead support from the Henry Luce Foundation and The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.



The presentation of *Amalia Mesa-Bains: Archaeology of Memory* at El Museo del Barrio is made possible by the Mex-Am Cultural Foundation, with additional support provided by Tony Bechara, Juan Domingo Beckmann, Estrellita and Daniel Brodsky, Agustín Coppel Luken, Craig Robins, Stanley Stairs, and Maestro Dobel Tequila. Public support provided by the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs.



ABOUT AMALIA MESA-BAINS

Amalia Mesa-Bains's work is in the collections of leading art institutions, including the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Smithsonian American Art Museum and Williams College Museum of Art, and has been shown at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Carrillo Gil, Mexico City, Biblioteca Luis Angel Arango, Bogota, Contemporary Exhibition Center of Lyon, El Centro de Arte Contemporaneo de Santa Monica, Barcelona, and Kulturhuset, Stockholm. Mesa-Bains is a distinguished author, curator, and educator who holds a Ph.D. in clinical psychology from the Wright Institute in Berkeley. She has been the recipient of numerous international awards throughout her career, among them, the prestigious MacArthur "Genius" Grant in 1992. She is the first and thus far the only Chicana visual artist bestowed with the honor.

Beginning in the '60s, Mesa-Bains became a leader in the movement that sought recognition of Chicana history in the United States, and a tireless voice in advancing that movement through education, advocacy, critical writing, and most significantly, through her own practice that created a visual archive of Chicana life. In the late '70s, as part of her dissertation at the Wright Institute, Mesa-Bains interviewed 10 Chicana artists of her generation about their lived experiences, art-making, and the influence of culture on their identities. In the following decades, she continued her work to increase the visibility of Chicana and Latinx artists, as an author contributing early scholarship to the field, and as a curator.

Mesa-Bains's influence on a younger generation of artists specifically and on the broader Latinx community is evident in her curatorial and outreach projects. At her request, the exhibition of her work at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1993 was augmented by a partnership with a school serving recent Latino immigrants. At San Francisco's Galeria de la Raza, she created a training program to empower a new generation of Chicana intellectuals to direct that institution's programming.

ABOUT EL MUSEO DEL BARRIO

El Museo del Barrio is the nation's leading Latinx and Latin American cultural institution. The Museum welcomes visitors of all backgrounds to discover the artistic landscape of these communities through its extensive Permanent Collection, varied exhibitions and publications, bilingual public programs, educational activities, festivals, and special events.

The Museum is located at 1230 Fifth Avenue at 104th Street in New York City. The Museum is open Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays from 11:00am – 5:00pm. Pay-what-you-wish. To connect with El Museo via social media, follow us on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. For more information, please visit www.elmuseo.org.

Image caption: Amalia Mesa-Bains, *Venus Envy Chapter I: First Holy Communion, Moments Before the End* (detail), 1993/2022. mixed-media installation including fabric, photographs, clothing, found objects, mementos, mirrors, found furniture, sand, dried petals, candles, laser prints on wall, pearls, and found images, 240 x 120 x 72 inches (609.6 x 304.8 x 182.88 cm). San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Courtesy of the artist and Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco

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