

In Dialogue

Cristina Córdova \ Kukuli Velarde

FERRIN CONTEMPORARY presents contemporary ceramic art, sculpture, and selected works by represented artists and masterworks from private collections. Located in North Adams, Massachusetts on MASS MoCA's 16-acre campus, our airy, white-box space serves as both a project incubator and traditional gallery program. Curated exhibitions are presented in conjunction with partner galleries, museums, and educational institutions throughout the country. Visit ferrincontemporary.com for more on our exhibitions and our collection or estate management programs.

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FERRIN
CONTEMPORARY

cover image, left: Cristina Córdova, *Desde mi balcón*
cover image, right: Kukuli Velarde, *I SPEAK SPANISH, YO HABLO INGLÉS*

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In Dialogue

Cristina Córdova \ Kukuli Velarde

We placed Cristina Córdova and Kukuli Velarde IN DIALOGUE for many overlapping reasons. The first and most obvious is they both work in clay and use the medium to represent the female experience. But theirs is a very specific experience, and this is where the dialogue really begins. Both artists are from Latin countries, Córdova from Puerto Rico and Velarde from Perú, and choose to make the United States their homes. Of course, Puerto Rico and Perú are vastly different cultures but they do share a deep Catholic faith that permeates the visual culture. Both women are also mothers, teachers, and each of their works branch into other media in order to fully explore the cultural, generational, and personal identities that make up their worlds.

IN DIALOGUE: Cristina Córdova and Kukuli Velarde presents some of the most significant works to-date from each artist. Córdova's *Cosmologia isleña* and Velarde's *I SPEAK SPANISH, YO HABLO INGLÉS* were made during the height of the pandemic. As challenging as the pandemic is, and as harrowing as the lockdowns were, it also provided the necessary, uninterrupted time for the artists to take on major projects. This time, coupled with bearing witness to the ongoing protest movements around colonial histories and Latin cultural identity, pushed the artists to respond in momentous ways. The works mark the challenging times we've all been through. As we watch monuments fall and question what they represent, these works and these artists bring attention to the issues of diversity, gender, and cultural identity. We are honored to have these works in the gallery.

In the following pages, please explore the beautiful, challenging, and inspiring works from this exhibition. The artists have crafted detailed statements to accompany their pieces, giving more insight and context to this complex pairing of artists.

Leslie Ferrin
Founder & Director

Cristina Córdova

Cristina Córdova | installation view of *Altar* and *Desde mi balcón*



Desde mi balcón

The balcony is an iconic location in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean. It offers a momentary escape from the domestic realm, a furtive viewpoint to survey the world from above. Balcony dwellers are part of the street insofar as they can watch life with its protests and processions, yet they are separate and contained in their own sheltered moment. After creating several of her own, the balcony has started to become an archetype in Cristina Córdova's studio. "Beyond describing a specific narrative," says Córdova, "I am interested in staging a composition that triggers an emotional charge through the recognition of certain repeating elements as part of a series." Those elements include architectural components, the nude figure and unruly foliage, symbols related to the experience of femininity in a religious and masculine culture, notions of exposure and vulnerability, and the psychology of place.

Cristina Córdova | *Desde mi balcón*, 2021, ceramic and steel, 32 x 15 x 9.75"





Cristina Córdova | *Desde mi balcón*, detail





Cristina Córdova | *Altar,* 2019, ceramic and photograph installation, 83 x 75 x 82″

Photography

Cristina Córdova considers photography a background practice to her primary focus of sculpture. She employs it to expand the context of the figure by engaging the wall behind or the pedestal underneath her sculpture. It all began when after a few material experiments and some research, Córdova started looking at old landscape photographs of Puerto Rico. She came across the work of Jack Delano, a Ukrainian born, American photographer who wound up in Puerto Rico through the Farm Security Administration. After becoming the official government photographer for Puerto Rico, he took innumerable heroic images of daily Puerto Rican life, rural and city-center alike. Córdova began combining Delano's copyright-free images with her own photography. "I persist on the idea that I'm referencing the viewpoint of someone I know through these images," she explains. "I'm trying to capture or build a sense of veracity through the careful selection of real places portrayed in current and historical photographs. By combining them with my sculpture I'm proposing a new relationship, a fantasy that is grounded in reality, a feigned diorama of sorts in the museum of my imagination."



Cristina Córdova | *Altar*, detail



Cosmologia isleña

In *Cosmologia isleña*, artist Cristina Córdova makes manifest her deeply personal thoughts about the systems and structures that organize the story of the island of Puerto Rico. "With the term cosmology, I was thinking about invoking the origin of a place or culture: what are the ruling forces that impact the destiny of that system?" Eschewing a specific narrative, Córdova thought broadly across dominant cultural systems to arrive at a strong, grounded figure with culturally and historically important symbols as active agents in the work.

Stressing that one of the functions of any cosmology is "to satisfy a need for order and appease existential anxiety," it makes sense the sculpture came about in response to the pandemic's global impact during 2020. She began to examine her Catholic, Caribbean home with a new perspective; Córdova recognized a shift in her relationship with the iconography that filled her childhood home in San Juan. "In the past, I was comfortable saying my work is connected to religious sculpture and the history of Catholicism," she says. "But now I'm developing my own iconographic, cultural figure—a personalized deity that speaks to the narratives of the island, as I experience them." This is when she shifts back to thet cosmology aspect, toward creating a figure that emerges from the Puerto Rican collective imagination, a figure that functions as a metaphorical map, built to embody hope for the future with strong regard for the culture and history.

Many elements of the sculpture will be immediately recognizable to Puerto Ricans specifically and Caribbean residents broadly. "I am speaking to the people who are of this place," she says. Those recognizable elements include the plantain, a complex and long-standing symbol of masculinity, race, and class; the African mud-cloth patterned skirt symbolizing the cultural impact of slavery embedded in daily life; and the runny, light-colored glaze representing the European impact across the Caribbean. The youthful age of the figure speaks to the strength and potential of the country's future. "Our culture is much older than our status as a country. Politically, as we are structured now, we are very young. So a fully adult woman holding plantains would have a much different meaning," she says. "In the overwhelmingly masculine system of Catholicism, sculptures, specifically those of the Virgin Mary with her soft skin and upward cast eyes, became symbols of empowered femininity throughout my youth. Nonetheless, Mary's figures were always presented in regal settings, somewhat detached and firmly within the confines of organized religion. I wanted this to be a female figure, from my own pantheon, bearing weight and exuding resilience."

Cristina Córdova | *Cosmologia isleña*, 2021, ceramic, metal, resin, wood, 60 x 27 x 26"





Cristina Córdova | *Cosmologia isleña*, detail

Kukuli Velarde

Kukuli Velarde | installation view of *I SPEAK SPANISH, YO HABLO INGLÉS* and *Isichapuitu Vessels*



IN DIALOGUE:
Cristina Córdova
& Kukuli Velarde

I SPEAK SPANISH, YO HABLO INGLÉS

I SPEAK SPANISH, YO HABLO INGLÉS is an intersectional feminist work dealing with themes of America and immigration, the Latin diaspora, femininity, and motherhood. "You have an idea of what America is, which is not in many ways the America you encounter," says Velarde, who stresses that she chose to leave her native Perú. "I was never pursuing 'the American dream.' I'm an immigrant by choice but I can certainly imagine what it's like for many people who do have to flee or escape." Expressing her personal immigrant experience, honoring Indigenous peoples, and communicating the myriad realities of vast diasporas led to a deeply layered and symbolic work.

The immediately recognizable iconography is a many-faced female body atop an American flag. The white stripes showcase the Lenni-Lenape wampum belt pattern. The Lenni-Lenape people are from Lenapehoking, their expansive historical territory that includes northeastern Delaware, New York City, Western Long Island, the Lower Hudson Valley, New Jersey, and eastern Pennsylvania along the Delaware River Watershed; Velarde now lives in Philadelphia, Lenni-Lenape unceded territory. It's believed the Lenni-Lenape offered these traditional belts to William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania, as peace treaty between Penn and Tamanend, a chief of the Lenni-Lenape in 1683. "The flowers in the red stripes have always been here, regardless of humans. They are indigenous to the land," says Velarde. The flag is fenced off, referring to the difficulties that exist to get the opportunity to live 'the dream,' there's always an obstacle, real or imaginary. The fence become such a symbol in the Trump era, which is part of what provoked this painting."

The central figure offers her back to the viewer. This Velarde's way of blocking objectification and refusing common narratives about the female body. The head sports three faces, while a fourth one stays hidden to the public but is facing the flag, facing the country. Velarde recalls seeing a four-faced character presenting its backside in a mural painted by Tadeo Escalante during the colonial era in Huaro, her mother's town church. Velarde's figure is looking forward toward America, side-to-side, and behind as an attitude of awareness. All of this is painted as an almost-but-not-quite-Vitruvian-meets-the-crucified-Christ-woman to comment on the the cultural expectations of femme and female bodies in a culture that prescribes an impossible physical paradigm. "With these ideas of universal human aesthetics that nobody can achieve, we all become ugly. It's a commentary on erasure."

Finally, the half superhero, half saint figure is talking to the audience through an endless conglomerate of ribbons that signify speech. She is speaking English and Spanish, defending her rights to be herself within a social environment that has become toxic and dangerous for diversity and community. What is her power? Perhaps her only power is not to allow others to silence her, to keep going—to exist and to resist.

Kukuli Velarde | *I SPEAK SPANISH, YO HABLO INGLÉS*, 2021, oil paint on stretched canvas & wood panel substrate, mounted on 7 aluminum panels, 96 x 96"




WESTERN CULTURE IS RIGHT TO FLUNK
IT IS SO TIRED
AM So TIRED
WE ARE NOT GOING ANYWHERE
YOU WANT US TO BELIEVE
YOU ARE NOT BETTER THAN YOU YOURSELF
WE MASTER
WE ARE NOT GOING ANYWHERE
WE ARE NOT GOING ANYWHERE
WE ARE NOT GOING ANYWHERE

Kukuli Velarde | *I SPEAK SPANISH, YO HABLO INGLÉS*, detail

Isichapuitu Vessels

An oral tradition from Cusco, Perú tells the story of a priest who was wildly in love with a woman who died. In his despair, he procured a "vessel of death" for summoning her spirit, and loved her one more time. The "vessels of death," known as Manchaypuitu (male) and Isichapuitu (female), were human-like vessels known to be powerful tools for bringing the spirits from the past.

Kukuli Velarde created 74 Isichapuitu vessels between 1997-2006. Each of the figures responds to a very different need, as delineated by Velarde in her series statement:

I feel my body populated by memories, impressions, beliefs, fears, and desires. They are imprinted deeply, almost etched. They follow me, tormenting me, or sweetening my path. At the stage of my life when I created *Isichapuitu*, I wanted to summon their presence, thank them for being, and make peace with each of these emotions and memories. I didn't know how, until I saw a photograph of a Mexican statue from the Rockefeller Collection at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. The figure was a 2,000 year old, obese, male child with his arms up and yet I believe it looked like me.

It is said that every work of art is a self-portrait. I imagine the Huastecan artist modeling the clay, giving it his or her eyes, his or her full cheeks, his or her protruding upper jaw. I imagine him or her looking like me, and then, I imagine myself making the Huastecan piece 2,000 years ago. I believe I am continuing something I began long ago. I am remaking it over and over, as if I don't want to depart from it, as if it were possible to prolong the moment of creation and continue an eternal labor of love.

My figures are different organs of a single body presented on the floor, next to each other, as a metaphor of wholeness. Each of us are the sum of viscera and flesh, expectations and disappointments, memories and oblivion, generosities and pettiness. They go on the floor because I want them invading our realm. They go next to each other, because they were not created to be observed and qualified as objects. Their value lies not in my skills but in their mere existence. They exist, first for me, and then for everybody else. The *Isichapuitu* installation is an exorcism, but it is also a farewell, and a new beginning.

Kukuli Velarde | *Tallada,* 1997-2006, low-fire white clay, oil paint, wax, 21 x 15 x 10"




LA PROLONGA
SHAKESPEARE





page 28: Kukuli Velarde | *Mi Padre y Yo,* 1997-2006, low-fire white clay, glaze, oil paint, 22 x 15 x 18″
page 29: Kukuli Velarde | *A mi Muerto (head severed),* 1997-2006, low-fire white clay, oil paint, markers, 22 x 15 x 10″

left: Kukuli Velarde | *Fishy Love,* 1997-2006, low-fire black clay, 23 x 15 x 15″

Cristina Córdova Bio

b. 1976, Boston, MA,
lives and works in Penland, NC
artist portfolio

Native to Puerto Rico, Cristina Córdova creates figurative compositions that explore the boundary between the materiality of an object and our involuntary dialogues with the self-referential. Images captured through the lens of a Latin American upbringing question socio-cultural notions of gender, race, beauty, and power. Córdova has received numerous grants including the North Carolina Arts Council Fellowship Grant, a Virginia Groot Foundation Recognition Grant, several International Association of Art Critics of Puerto Rico awards, and a prestigious United States Artist Fellowship award in 2015.

Córdova has had solo exhibitions at the Alfred Ceramic Art Museum, (Alfred, NY), and her work is included in the collections of the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, (Washington, DC), Colección Acosta de San Juan Puerto Rico, (San Juan, PR), the Mint Museum of Craft + Design, (Charlotte, NC), and Museum of Contempo- rary Art, (San Juan, PR). In 1998, Córdova completed her BA at the University of Puerto Rico, and she received her MFA from the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University in 2002. Córdova is represented by Ferrin Contemporary.

Kukuli Velarde Bio

b. 1962, Lima, Perú
lives and works in Philadelphia, PA
artist portfolio

Kukuli Velarde is a Perúvian-American artist who specializes in painting and ceramic sculptures made out of clay and terracotta. Velarde focuses on the themes of gender and the consequences of colonization in Latin American contemporary culture. Her ceramic work is a visual investigation of aesthetics, cultural survival, and inheritance.

Velarde has had multiple solo exhibitions, most recently including *Kukuli Velarde: The Complicit Eye at Taller Puertorriqueño* (Philadelphia, PA), Kukuli Velarde at AMOCA (Pomona, CA), and *Plunder Me, Baby* at Peters Project Gallery (Santa Fe, NM). Her work may also be found in numerous public institutions, including the Museum of Fine Arts (Houston, TX), the John Michael Kohler Arts Center (Sheboygan, WI), and the Museo de Art Contemporaneo de Lima, (Lima, Perú).

Velarde is the recipient of numerous grants, including a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, a Pollock Krasner Foundation Grant, a United States Artists Knight Fellowship, and a PEW Fellowship in Visual Art. She was awarded the Grand Prize for her work exhibited at the Gyeonggi International Ceramic Biennale in Icheon, South Korea. Velarde holds a BFA (magna cum laude) from Hunter College of the University of New York. Velarde lives and works in Philadelphia, PA.

List of Works

CRISTINA CÓRDOVA

Desde mi balcón, 2021
32 x 15 x 9.75″
ceramic, metal

Cosmología isleña (Island Cosmology), 2021
full figure and pedestal: 90 x 45 x 44″
figure assembled with plantains: 60 x 27 x 26″
pedestal: 30 x 18 x 18″
ceramic, metal, resin, wood

Altar, 2019
full installation: 83 x 75 x 82″
figure: 10 x 49 x 30″
ceramic, photograph installation

KUKULI VELARDE

I SPEAK SPANISH, YO HABLA INGLÉS, 2021
96 x 96" (8 x 8')
oil on stretched canvas & wood panel substrate,
mounted on 7 aluminum panels

Fishy Love, 1997-2006
low-fire black clay
23 x 15 x 15"

ISICHAPUITU SERIES
featured works:

Tallada, 1997-2006
low-fire white clay, oil paint, wax
21 x 15 x 10"

Mi Padre y Yo, 1997-2006
low-fire white clay, oil paint, wax
22 x 15 x 18"

A mi Muerto, 1997-2006
low-fire white clay, oil paint, wax
22 x 15 x 10"

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exhibition page

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