Fowler
MUSEUM AT UCLA

Artist Gala Porras-Kim's *The weight of a patina of time* opens July 9 at the Fowler Museum at UCLA

July 9–October 29, 2023 | Contact: Erin Connors, 714.270.6426, erinconnors@arts.ucla.edu

Los Angeles—The Fowler Museum at UCLA presents *The weight of a patina of time*, a series of works by artist Gala Porras-Kim (b. 1984, Bogotá, Colombia; lives and works in Los Angeles and London). Porras-Kim's research-based practice looks closely at the layered meaning of objects in the 21st-century museum. The exhibition spans drawing, sculpture, and installation, as well as objects from and projects based on the Fowler's collections. The works on view reflect the artist's affinity for fragments, conflicting histories, undeciphered texts, and other instances of uncertainty within the space of the museum.

Porras-Kim advocates for the complex histories within any museum collection. Her work reflects the Fowler's long-held vision for curatorial research and experimentation, going back to its earliest incarnation as the Museum and Laboratories of Ethnic Arts and Technology. Her interdisciplinary work asks viewers to consider the limits of academia that may create blind spots in interpretation.

"*The weight of a patina of time* reflects on the visible and invisible structures of the working museum, through its methods of conservation, registration, and display," says Porras-Kim. "These become an institutional patina that weighs on the understanding of objects in the collection over time. All of the histories related to the object become additive elements that are considered as subjects of this show."

In preparation for this exhibition, Porras-Kim worked closely with the museum's chief curator, Matthew H. Robb, a specialist in the art and archaeology of ancient Mexico. They share an interest in the cyclical nature of knowledge—its creation, maintenance, decay, and recovery in ancient and modern institutional contexts. The five projects on view simultaneously expose and bridge the gaps in our understanding of the past, especially when it is based on incomplete material and textual remains.

About the Exhibition

Reconstructions

Porras-Kim created ***Reconstructions*** (2016) for the Hammer Museum's 2016 Made in LA: *a, the, though, only*. Working with Fowler staff, she selected yet-to-be identified fragments in the collection: a clump of raffia, a scrap of cloth, a ceramic "wing," and their attendant plastic bags and post-its. These objects lie at the boundary of an institution's capacity to provide historical explanation. For each of these culturally unmoored objects, Porras-Kim created a speculative sculpture that could include the fragment. She then documented the sculpture in a delicate graphite drawing, calling attention to the ways institutional processes—assigning an accession number, attaching curatorial notes, etc.—place objects into new systems of knowledge, each requiring its own layer of documentation. Combined, the fragment, the new object, and its documentation constitute a reconstruction: a single work of art integrating several systems of knowledge.

Mesoamerican Writing

Since 2012, Porras-Kim has created works that examine the writing systems of ancient Mesoamerica. The three pieces in this section emphasize the time and

space that separate ancient objects from our present experience, as well as the distance introduced by representations like line drawings and photographs. To rely on such copies risks losing a sense of the original's size and materiality—and a great deal of meaning as well.

A kinetic sculpture entitled ***La Mojarra Stela incidental conjugations*** (2019) parallels the academic practice of taking apart the individual components of a writing system in order to recreate a legible whole. Porras-Kim's sculpture offers an alternative process of alignment, one with infinite iterations, some making sense and others—nonsense. ***Noriega Slab 1 Illuminated Text*** (2022)—a luminous ground overlaid with flickering glass beads—depicts Zapotec glyphs on an ancient carved stone of the same name. It prompts viewers to consider the distorting effects of line drawings that form the basis of archaeological scholarship, and often stand in for unknown traditions and cultures.

Precipitation for an Arid Landscape

In 2019, Porras-Kim began a series of works that contemplate the cycle of creation, placement, and removal of objects found at the Sacred Cenote, a gigantic sinkhole at the Maya site of Chichen Itza, in Yucatán. ***Precipitation for an Arid Landscape*** (2023) is a sculpture made of copal mixed with dust and residue from objects removed from the cenote. It follows the artist's instructions to bring local rainwater into contact with the copal. Conceptually, these materials and actions generate a circuit of knowledge, action, and responsibility that echoes and inverts the system of original offerings to the Maya rain god of the cenote.

254 offerings for the rain at the Peabody Museum (2021) is one of 14 scale drawings of materials removed from the cenote and housed at Harvard University's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. In this section, visitors can sit at a desk and read copies of institutional correspondence, newspaper clippings, books, academic papers, and international treaties on cultural patrimony—all illuminating the history of the objects taken from the Sacred Cenote. The room demonstrates some of the research Porras-Kim has carried out in her efforts to document these objects. Contrary to the omniscient and concise details that appear on museum labels, this project reveals the conditional and evolving nature of knowledge production surrounding these cultural belongings.

Proposal for the reconstituting of ritual elements of the Sun Pyramid at Teotihuacan

In 2018, Porras-Kim became interested in the original function of two large stones excavated at the top of the Sun Pyramid at Teotihuacan. She corresponded with Mexican museum administrators, proposing to fabricate replicas of each stone or "stela" and reinsert them into the pyramid, whose structural and symbolic function had been irrevocably changed by the stones' removal. Porras-Kim's 2019 proposal—

consisting of the letter, full-size replicas of the stele, a soundscape based on scientific data gathered from inside the pyramid, and a graphite drawing—integrates multiple perspectives on the life of this iconic structure. The project describes the layers of information accumulated over centuries and the historical contingencies of understanding the building's meaning and function.

Temporal Stowaways

Porras-Kim and Robb selected the objects in this curated installation from the Fowler storage. The presentation shows them inside and alongside the boxes and bags used to protect them. In contrast to the fragments analyzed in the *Reconstructions* series, these objects are physically intact, but their interpretations evidence historic biases. ***Contents of Box Two and Box Five*** (2023) includes Mexican objects originally acquired as part of the Wellcome Trust's donation to the museum in the 1960s. Museum staff categorized many of them as fakes in the 1980s, but in 2023, they take on new meaning. Instead of being dismissed as modern forgeries, they can be seen as chronologically unstable and reflecting the uncertain state of knowledge about ancient Mexico. They serve as a reminder that our understanding of the past will continue to change. For Porras-Kim, every step in an object's history represents a moment where knowledge about it can be added to, lost, and potentially recovered.

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About the Artist

Gala Porras-Kim (b. 1984, Bogotá; lives and works in Los Angeles/London) received an MFA from the California Institute of the Arts in 2009 and an MA in Latin American studies from the University of California, Los Angeles in 2012. Solo exhibitions have been held at the Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City, and Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, Seville (2023); Gasworks, London and CAMSTL, St. Louis (2022); Amant and Kadist, Brooklyn (2021); and MOCA LA (2019). She has participated in numerous biennials, including the 12th Liverpool Biennial (2023); 13th Gwangju Biennale (2021); 34th Bienal de São Paulo (2021); Whitney Biennial (2017); and the Hammer Museum's Made in LA (2016). Porras-Kim is a recipient of numerous awards, including an Art Matters Foundation Grant (2019), Joan Mitchell Foundation Emerging Artist Grant (2016), and a Creative Capital Grant (2015). She has participated in residencies at the Getty Research Institute (2020-22); Delfina Foundation, London (2021); and the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, Cambridge (2020). Her work is in the collections of MOMA, Whitney Museum of American Art, and Brooklyn Museum in New York; MOCA, LACMA, and Hammer Museum in Los Angeles; MCA and DePaul Art Museum in Chicago; Dallas Museum of Art; Perez Museum, Miami; and the Seoul Museum of Art.

Credits

The weight of a patina of time is organized by the Fowler Museum at UCLA and curated by Fowler Chief Curator Matthew H. Robb. Major support is provided by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts. Additional generous support is provided by the Clough/Hillenburg Fund, Fay Bettye Green Fund, Pasadena Art Alliance, Kim and Keith Allen-Niesen, Allison Berg, The Audrey and Sydney Irmas Charitable Foundation, Charlotte Chamberlain and Paul Wieselmann, Connie McCreight, Formation Association, and Elaine Yang.

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About the Fowler

The Fowler Museum at UCLA explores global arts and cultures with an emphasis on Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and the Indigenous Americas—past and present. The Fowler enhances understanding of world cultures through dynamic exhibitions, publications, and public programs, informed by interdisciplinary approaches and the perspectives of the cultures represented. The work of international contemporary artists is presented within complex frameworks of politics, culture, and social action.

Museum Information

308 Charles E Young Dr N | Los Angeles, CA 90095 | fowler.ucla.edu/visit
Parking: UCLA Lot 4 | 198 Westwood Plaza at Sunset Blvd, $3/hr
Rideshare drop-off: 305 Royce Drive
Hours: Wednesday–Sunday, 12–5 pm | Admission to the Fowler is free

CAPTIONS

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Gala Porras-Kim (b. 1984, Bogotá; lives and works in Los Angeles/London), *254 offerings for the rain at the Peabody Museum* (detail), 2021; color pencil and acrylic vinyl paint on paper; Private Collection; © Gala Porras-Kim; image courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles, Mexico City. Photo: Paul Salveson

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Gala Porras-Kim (b. 1984, Bogotá; lives and works in Los Angeles/London), *La Mojarra Stela incidental conjugations* (2019), installation view, Whitney Biennial, 2019, New York; © Gala Porras-Kim; image courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles, Mexico City; photo: Ron Amstutz