To Taste a Portal:
Contending with Cuban Colonial-era Histories through María Magdalena Campos-Pons' *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits*

Temple Marucci-Campbell

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By: Temple Marucci-Campbell

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Signed by the final examining committee:

_____ Examiner
Dr. May Chew

_____ Examiner

_____ Thesis Supervisor(s)
Dr. Alice Ming Wai Jim

_____ Thesis Supervisor(s)

Approved by _____
Dr. John Potvin Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

_____
Dr. Annie Gérin Dean Faculty of Fine Arts

Abstract

To Taste a Portal: Contending with Cuban Colonial-Era Histories through María Magdalena Campos-Pons' *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits*

Temple Marucci-Campbell

This thesis examines María Magdalena Campos-Pons' multisensory exhibition *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* (2015) as a means of resuscitating and preserving immaterial histories belonging to enslaved and indentured plantation labourers. The exhibition features immersive blown-glass installations, experimental soundscapes, an opportunity to taste freshly cut sugarcane and the faint yet persistent smell of rum wafting through the exhibition space. This thesis argues for the significance of the multisensory elements cultivating a space to contend with Cuban gastropoetics. I argue that access points to these immaterial archives are palpable and simultaneously protected through these multisensory elements. The multisensory details offer a possibility to experience the constellation of histories belonging to indentured and enslaved workers unified through Cuban sugarcane production. *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* does not scrutinize histories concerning plantation labourers—instead, Campos-Pons renders these histories opaque by privileging and questioning the role of the alimentary tract and encourages the revitalization of cogent immaterial archives. Building from theoretical foundations laid by Jenny Sharpe, Édouard Glissant, Tao Leigh Goffe, Fernando Ortiz, Okwui Enwezor, and Parama Roy, this thesis advocates for the importance of Campos-Pons' multisensory exhibition in the resuscitation and preservation of colonial-era histories degraded to immaterial status.

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To my Nama and Poppie, your support has been unwavering. My interest in gardening and farming began with you. The lessons in care and patience both of you have taught me lace my approach to research, writing and living. To my Grandad, your vibrant stories of eating Guyana as a child sparked my interest in this field. And to my late Grannie and Uncle Willet—your energies will always persist when I create. The way I think about food and memory is entirely because of both of you. I think of you always.

Everything I've ever known has begun on the palate. I grew up an incredibly picky eater, and my family—my mother in particular—always stressed that new and exciting worlds would be at the tip of my tongue if I tried new things. Without her, my dad and two sisters, I would be limited by fear of the unknown. My insights on eating and cooking are everything to me, and I would not have come even close to scratching the surface without my family. This thesis is for you.

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Introduction

María Magdalena Campos-Pons' practice combines the worlds of art and alchemy. She uses her hands, mind, and spirit to shape monuments that are intimate testaments to the intersections of her identity. The day of her birth, August 22, 1959, was the same day Fidel Castro's communist regime overthrew Fulgencio Batista's dictatorship, marking the beginning of the Cuban Revolution.[1] Although Campos-Pons dismisses it as a mere historical coincidence,[2] something is quite poetic in the coalescence of her life and significant political events in Cuba. As a child, she benefited from the broadened arts education implemented by Castro's regime, enhancing her existing creativity that unfurled into a remarkable artistic career. Currently, Campos-Pons lives, creates, and teaches in Nashville, Tennessee. Despite the significant geographical distance between Campos-Pons and her home country, her artistic practice becomes a way to make her enduring, beautiful, and complex relationship with Cuba palpable.

This thesis focuses on Campos-Pons' 2015 exhibition *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits,* commissioned by the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts. The exhibition features blown glass installations, a structure made of sugar pine, older mixed-media photographs and a performance. I will include the entirety of the exhibition in my analyses but with a more in-depth focus on the blown glass installations and performance. Campos-Pons' *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits,* uses a variety of curatorial and artistic tactics to uncover overlooked histories of enslaved and indentured labourers in Cuba. This uncovering becomes especially evident through the artist's incorporation of multisensory elements that invite olfactory and gustatory engagement. Grounded in *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits,* I argue that through its multisensory elements, this exhibition offers a space to contend with the

[1] María Magdalena Campos-Pons and William Luis, "Art and Diaspora: A Conversation with Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons," *Afro-Hispanic Review* 30, no. 2 (2011): 155.
[2] Campos-Pons and Luis, "Art and Diaspora," 155.

Caribbean are underrepresented partly due to their continual comparison to enslaved histories. Through this thesis, I avoid the essentializing binary of enslavement and indenturement by attending to their convergences and divergences. In evading this binary, the complex social and cultural nexus of plantation life reveals itself.

Historical Context

As the Cuban slave trade came to a head at the end of the eighteenth century,[6] thousands of people in Africa were forcibly removed from their homelands and relocated to Cuba to produce sugar and tobacco.[7] Haiti was responsible for producing a large part of the world's sugar; however, after the Haitian Revolution in 1791, the French no longer had economic leverage in Caribbean sugar production.[8] This left room for an "agricultural boom in Cuba… [which] shaped the island's culture, politics, and society…by 1868, fully one-third of the world's sugar came from Cuba."[9] The pressure to produce mass amounts of sugar incited the introduction of indentured labour into plantations. The social and cultural integration of indentured labourers into pre-existing enslaved communities laid the foundation for the present social and cultural climate in Cuba.

Indentured labour is a type of bound labour linked to a debt or contract.[10] Once workers complete the necessary labour, they fulfil the contract or debt.[11] Indentured labourers were "not

[6] Herbert S. Klein, "The Cuban Slave Trade in a Period of Transition, 1790-1843," in *The middle passage: comparative studies in the Atlantic slave trade,* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), 210.
[7] Elizabeth Pérez, "Crystallizing subjectivities in the African Diaspora: Sugar, Honey, and the Gods of Afro-Cuban Lucumí" in *Religion, Food & Eating in North America* , ed. Benjamin E. Zeller, Marie W. Dallam, Reid L. Neilson and Nora L. Rubel (New York City: Columbia Univeristy, 2014), 177.
[8] Pérez, "Crystallizing subjectivities," 177.
[9] Pérez, 177.
[10] Rosemarijn Hoefte, "Indentured Labour," in *Handbook Global History of Work,* ed. Karin Hofmeester and Marcel van der Linden (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourge, 2018), 364.
[11] Hoefte, "Indentured Labour," 364.

the legal property of their employers…[and] there was a time limit to the contracts."[12] The contracts presented to indentured labourers promised consistent monthly wages, sufficient food and healthcare and relaxed work hours on Sundays and holidays.[13] Freedom was also promised once overseers amended the labourer's contract; however, despite these contractual guarantees, indentured labourers' experiences were similar to those of enslaved labourers.[14] Benjamín N. Narváez draws similarities to enslaved and indentured experiences from their voyage through the Atlantic to their treatment on plantations. He writes:

> The voyage echoed the African Middle Passage, with thousands dying from imprisonment, beatings, malnourishment, and unhygienic conditions. Once in Spanish America, [indentured labourers] seldom received their pay and adequate care. Instead, they faced long work hours and harsh treatment, including whippings, imprisonment, shackles, and death. Patronos[15] often forced [indentured labourers] to work beyond the original contract as well. Many [indentured labourers] in Cuba worked alongside slaves in a slave society, which encouraged exploitation.[16]

Consequently, despite the formal differences in their legal status and some minor social privileges, indentured labourers were subject to the same systemic exploitation and violence as enslaved labourers, blurring the lines between bound and forced labour.

The Cuban state introduced indentured labourers to meet the global demand for sugar and to avoid a slave revolt by "whitening the island."[17] Chinese indentured labourers were classified as legally white, granting them certain social privileges on the island. However, this was a tactic for Cuban elites to ensure further social and cultural distance from enslaved labourers.[18] The

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[12] Hoefte, 364.
[13] Benjamín N. Narváez, "Abolition, Chinese Indentured Labor, and the State: Cuba, Peru, and the United States during the Mid Nineteenth Century," *The Americas* 76, no. 1 (2019): 10.
[14] Benjamín N. Narváez, "Abolition," 11.
[15] Patrono means employer. See: Benjamín N. Narváez, "Abolition, Chinese Indentured Labor, and the State: Cuba, Peru, and the United States during the Mid Nineteenth Century," *The Americas* 76, no. 1 (2019): 6.
[16] Benjamín N. Narváez, 11.
[17] Benjamín N. Narváez, 9.
[18] Benjamín N. Narváez, "Subaltern Unity? Chinese and Afro-Cubans in Nineteenth-Century Cuba," *Journal of Social History* 51, no. 4 (2018): 872.

socio-cultural role of indentured labourers in the eyes of the state rendered them as a tool to create a further divide between Cuban elites and enslaved people.[19] Indentured and enslaved labourers had different expectations and roles on the plantation, yet both groups faced similar working conditions and were othered in Cuban society.

Narváez indicates that indentured and enslaved labourers were ambivalent towards one another. While there were instances of solidarity, the groups were generally disparate. Despite these uncertain sentiments, there were convergences in their experiences of plantation life—for example, eating. Tao Leigh Goffe traces the poetics of plantation life and notes that in the mid-19th century, "Chinese contract labourers and the enslaved Africans alike were confined to barracoons and fed in collective troughs."[20] This act of eating together "show[ed] the common degradation of their roles, clearly intended to demoralize and dehumanize. The labourers were treated like animals, fed like livestock and forced to fend for food that was not portioned out. The experience was probably not uncommon to Campos-Pons' forebears."[21] With these social intricacies of plantation life in mind, I look to Cuban sugar production and its social nexus to contend with the poetics of plantation life.

Scholarship with a focus on colonial-era histories frequently discusses enslavement and indenturement within reductive categories.[22] This erasure is in part due to the endurance of racism and xenophobia that trickles into contemporary scholarship and a lack of archives and accounts centring on the experiences of plantation labourers. Despite these academic oversights,

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[19] Benjamín N. Narváez, "Subaltern Unity?," 870.
[20] Tao Leigh Goffe, "Sugarwork: The Gastropoetics of Afro-Asia after the Plantation," *Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures and the Americas* 5, no. 4 (2019): 49.
[21] Goffe, "Sugarwork," 49-50.
[22] Examples can be found in Fernando Ortiz's *Cuban Counterpoint* (1995, originally published in 1945). Ortiz frequently refers to enslaved labour as unskilled, and rarely acknowledges the presence of indentured labourers on plantations in Cuba. Instead he uses the lives and experiences of plantation labourers as catalysts for his conceptualization of Cuban plantation life. There is no humanity offered to the labourers, they are objectified through their conflation with the goods they produce. See: Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

Campos-Pons uncovers the poetic gossamer that emphasizes the coalescences that unify these seemingly disparate groups. My discussion of the poetics of plantation life is not to conflate the experiences of indentured and enslaved labourers but to understand how their struggles are intrinsically tied.

Methods and methodology

The primary methodologies guiding my analysis are anti-colonial and care. These methodologies intersect in their ability to refuse the potential of cruelty enmeshed in academic research. In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples,* Linda Tuhiwai Smith grapples with the imperial and colonial tendencies concealed within Western research practices.[23] Tuhiwai Smith's book highlights how research becomes a battleground where Western interests and ways of knowing clash with the resistance and alternative perspectives of marginalized groups.[24] [25] Tuhiwai Smith asks how someone (such as myself) whose research concerns colonized people avoids the propagation of colonial ideals. Essentially, it is a fine line between conveying the realities of a Cuban colonial past while ensuring the people directly affected are not exploited again. Thus, implementing care and anti-colonial methodologies ensures that my work does not probe in a way that reproduces the violence it aims to subdue.

Katherine McKittrick draws on Édouard Glissant's theories of opacity to conceptualize a *black methodology* that considers Black knowledge as "spirited, energetic and operational, rather

[23] Linda Tuhwai Smith, "Introduction," in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1999), 1-2.
[24] Tuhiwai Smith, "Introduction," 1-2
[25] Tuhiwai Smith employs this term to refer to the similarities of experiences of colonized people. While her theories primarily concern Indigenous peoples, her analysis is important to consider when writing about the experiences of people violently implicated by all forms of colonialism and imperialism. This is not to co-opt or appropriate Tuhiwai Smith's methodology, instead I reference it to ensure my research and writing practice is attentive to people implicated by the varied colonial violences. See: Linda Tuhiai Smith, "Introduction," in Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1999), 2-3.

than discursive flattened artifacts that we study."[26] McKittrick offers critiques of discourses concerning Glissant's opacity, specifically how it is frequently positioned as *the* tool for liberation.[27] Instead, McKittrick thinks through opacity as a series of lessons that encourage "black people to tell stories that move in and out of clarity, without participating in a narrative economy that functions to objectify them."[28] McKittrick's approach highlights Campos-Pons' complex identity by rejecting singular or binary classifications that overlook the cultural and ethnic intricacies of Black identity.

My analysis of *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir of the Spirits* relied on first-hand accounts from the artist, curators and scholars who attended while it was on view. I primarily pulled from interviews between Campos-Pons and various scholars to center her voice and intentions with her exhibition. Most of the artwork in the exhibition draws from Campos-Pons' personal experiences and ancestral history. She is at the center of the web of histories she mobilizes and materializes. Of course, my inability to attend the exhibition complicates the embodied visual analysis I advocate for through this thesis. Despite that, the various articles and chapters analyzing *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* (Adriana Zavala's work in particular) offer rich firsthand accounts that allow me to infer people's possible experiences with the exhibition. My methodology ensures attentiveness to the multisensory elements of the exhibition, which my positionality further fortifies.

Growing up, I often visited my paternal grandmother, Rita, in Florida. She was born in Guyana and moved to Florida once she retired to escape the cold weather of the American Northeast. One of my most vivid memories is from one of my first trips to Florida. I was four

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[26]Katherine McKittrick, "Curiosities (My heart Makes My Head Swim)," in *Dear Science: and Other Stories* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1999), 5
[27] McKittrick, "Dear Science," 7.
[28] McKittrick, 8.

years old, spending most of my time running in the backyard through the thick Floridian heat. I would spend only a few minutes outside attempting to catch lizards and quickly find respite in her air-conditioned home. My step-grandfather, Willet, would keep an eye on me while I was outside. He grew up in Guyana and was used to the intensity of the heat, unlike me. He would sit at what I remember to be a lacy-white wrought iron table and chair set with a clear view of the backyard, usually occupying himself with something. The day I remember specifically, he was peeling the skin off sugarcane stalks, revealing their fibrous insides and prepping them to be juiced. He called me over during the process and asked if I had ever tried sugarcane. Initially, I was unsure of the sugarcane offered, but Willet assured me it was sweet and that I should treat it like a popsicle. I remember the smell of the sun hitting the grass, Willet's booming words of assurance and an intense feeling of belonging—something I couldn't articulate at the time but can understand now, almost twenty years later.

I can remember the intricacies and details of this memory through the sugarcane I tasted. The subtle sweetness and fibrous texture have archived this memory within me, referring to what Goffe calls a sensate epistemology,[29] which makes palpable the sensuous ties with my paternal side of my family. I have experienced the cogency of taste and smell in fortifying the link between the present and the past. Therefore, I can infer what may happen when Campos-Pons offers museumgoers a piece of fresh sugarcane to chew on during her performance. Through this personal anecdote, which has enriched my position as a Black-mixed race scholar, I have a proximity to the histories activated through *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits*. It is an intimacy that cannot be learned through academic texts but something I have inherited and strengthened through my commitment to this research. Thus, while my inability to see the

[29] Goffe, "Sugarwork," 35.

exhibition in person slightly hinders me, my experiences grant me unique insights that research connot replicate.

Literature Review

Jenny Sharpe coined the term "immaterial archive" to "refer to the degraded status of African-derived knowledge, languages and cultures within colonial archives."[30] Sharpe's exploration of the immaterial allows a more attentive analysis of histories beyond the material. Further, this "term is… gendered as [her] book traces a female gendering and regendering of the elusive, silent and invisible spaces of immateriality."[31] Her description of African-derived knowledge as degraded attests to the destruction and forced relocation of objects belonging to African peoples. The immaterial has the potential to preserve bits and pieces of knowledge and history despite the destruction of material traces. Thus, the immaterial becomes a third space through its position as an "interstitial passage,"[32] elastic and undulating. The immaterial preserves the knowledge of displaced peoples through its ability to attend to the ephemeral nature of knowledge degraded to immaterial status. Despite the transient nature of immaterial archives, they may be accessed and engaged with through the material, such as literature and art. Rather than mourning histories degraded to immateriality, Sharpe employs the immaterial to resuscitate histories assumed to be lost or non-existent. I will extend Sharpe's conceptualization of the immaterial to *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* and argue that the multisensory aspects of the exhibition play a significant role in the ability to access immaterial archives.

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[30] Jenny Sharpe, "Introduction," in *Immaterial Archives: An African Diaspora Poetics of Loss* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020), 4.
[31] Jenny Sharpe, "Introduction," 4.
[32] Anne-Lise Agossa and Nour Hamade, "Third Space," *Architectural Association School of Architecture,* no. 77 (2020):10.

Gastropoetics is a field developed by Parama Roy to explore how food and culinary-related prose can be used as a method to better understand colonial impacts on South-Asian alimentary tracts. Tao Leigh Goffe adopted Roy's definition and argued that in an art historical context, gastropoetics similarly concerns the materiality of foodstuffs to "examine the failure of the archive to digest certain subjects/the enslaved and the indentured."[33] In both definitions, questions of hunger in the context of colonialism come into play, with Roy and Goffe examining the colonial appetite for subjugation while also looking to internal organs, specifically the stomach, to facilitate colonial encounters.[34] Goffe writes, "In Greek, 'gastro' means stomach or gut, and 'poetics' is derived from *poiesis*...[which] is the act of creating a concept or object that did not exist before. It is production, formation at its essence."[35] Grounding this thesis in gastropoetics instead of food studies emphasizes the colonial entanglements that unfurl from global food production and trade. Food production's role in the global colonial project cannot be overlooked. Therefore, scholars working within gastropoetics look to food production and consumption as a generative site of inquiry, notably how the colonized or marginalized alimentary tract may offer alternative entry points to colonial-era histories.

I incorporate Glissant's conceptualizations of opacity to engage with Cuba's gastropoetics. Glissant's theories, which center on Caribbean and anti-colonial praxis, emphasize relationality. This focus is integral to analyzing Campos-Pons' work. I position Sharpe's concept of the immaterial within Glissant's framework of opacity, particularly how the immaterial provides a veil of opacity to the colonial-era histories Campos-Pons engages with, thus protecting them from potentially exploitative encounters within the Peabody Essex Museum.

[33]Goffe "Sugarwork," 41 & Parama Roy, "Alimentary Tracts: Appetites, Aversions, and the Postcolonial," (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010)," 7.
[34] Goffe, "Sugarwork," 7.
[35] Goffe, 41.

Often, histories concerning Black ancestry are positioned as "both as absence and as excess within narratives of nation."[36] Narratives of excess frequently exploit trauma and obscure histories concerning everyday life. However, histories of indentured labourers fall through the cracks, often leaving their stories unsaid due to the monolithic hypervisibility of enslaved histories. My application of opacity hinges on its ability to protect indentured and enslaved histories by not explicitly showcasing suffering. The only body Campos-Pons subjects to visibility in *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* is her own. She appears in the photographic works and her performance, so her presence within the works meditates her audience's experiences with the immaterial histories she activates.

Gastropoetics grants agency to the gut, and by positioning gut reactions and instincts as methods of inquiry, it encourages people to engage with multisensory artworks more attentively. Within Afro-diasporic religions, Elizabeth Pérez positions the stomach as a keeper of knowledge, influencing individuals' understandings of the world. Her book, *The Gut: A Black Atlantic Alimentary Tract,* examines the centrality of gustatory perceptions in Afro-diasporic religions. *Santería*, a Cuban spiritual practice, includes rites of passage encouraging gustatory organs as "site[s] generative of emotion, affect and agency."[37] Campos-Pons integrates motifs and practices that pull from Santería across her body of work, including *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* in a performance titled *Agridulce.* The emphasis on the alimentary tract in Santería positions the gustatory as an integral mode of analysis of Campos-Pons' exhibition. Raymond D. Boisvert and Lisa Heldke assert that the "stomach is the agent of interaction,"[38] which must be considered when grappling with the histories tied to *Alchemy for the Soul, Elixir of the Spirits.*

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[36]Andrea Fatona, "In the presence of absence: Invisibility, black Canadian history, and Melinda Mollineaux's pinhole photographs," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 31, no. 1 (2006): 229.
[37] Elizabeth Pérez, *The Gut: A Black Atlantic Alimentary Tract* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 46.
[38] Raymond D. Boisvert & Lisa Heldke, *Philosophers at Table: On Food and Being Human* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2022), 75.

The exhibition taking place in Salem makes visible the subtleties of trade and violence that economically endure between Cuba and the region of New England. Adriana Zavala notes that *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* reveals connections between distilleries throughout "Salem, Medford, and Boston…along with Briston and Newport"[39] and sugar plantations in Cuba. Although pertinent, these connections remain largely overlooked in New England's regional history. Like Zavala, I look to Campos-Pons's exhibition as a site of activation of colonial-era histories, specifically how the multisensory elements tether to the more transient immaterial histories by incorporating olfactory and gustatory engagement. However, I depart from her work by undergoing a more robust analysis of the olfactory and gustatory elements and their significance to art historical inquiry. Thus, through "Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits," Campos-Pons' engagement with the immaterial addresses the enduring colonial entanglements between New England and Cuba, revealing these historical ties and letting them take shape.

The poetics of memory, identity and place are grounded in sugar production in Cuba. Goffe asserts that: "Food is an archive of global desires" and "is a fossil record of the Anthropocene, narrating the culinary story of globalization."[40] Food is an exemplary medium for contesting and grappling with the intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, and economics. In the case of racially marginalized groups, relationships to food can become more complex, primarily through ancestral ties to enslavement and indenturement. The advancement of various colonial empires across the globe marked the emergence of an enduring comparison between plantation labourers and objecthood. Eve Tuck and K.Wayne Yang grapple with notions of objecthood and think through the portrayal of enslaved people as "desirable commodit[ies]"

[39] Adriana Zavala, "Blackness Distilled, Sugar and Rum: María Magdalena Campos Pons's Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits," *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture* 1, no.2 (2019), 25.
[40] Goffe, *"*Sugarwork*,"* 39

while "the person underneath is imprisonable, punishable and murderable. The violence of keeping/killing the chattel slave makes them deathlike monsters in the settler imagination; they are reconfigured/disfigured as a threat, the razor's edge of safety and terror."[41] The enslaved person is expendable; there is no personhood or spirit afforded to them in the settler imagination.[42] Fernando Ortiz draws connections to the mass production of sugar and the experiences of enslaved people on plantations in Cuba. Ortiz discusses that within the processes of growing and refining sugar, the goal is to produce "the most."[43] Within this pursuit of 'the most,' there is also an aim of "chemical purity where all difference of class and origin is obliterated."[44] The sugar manufacturing process lends a metaphor for the social perception of enslaved and indentured labourers. There is no sense of individuality or interiority lent to the labourers; instead, they are undistinguishable, presented as a mass of bodies and limbs working towards the goal of the purest and highest yield of sugar.

While harmful, the conflation between goods and labourers identified by Tuck and Yang creates a tension that invites alternative historical inquiries through sensuous engagements with foodstuffs. The production of sugar functions as a metaphor for the societal perceptions of plantation labourers, which aligns with Tuck and Yang's idea of the "desirable commodity."[45] While Ortiz's theories provide insight into the relationship between labourer and product, the lack of personhood he extends to the labourer, specifically the enslaved labourer, renders them dispensable. Although Ortiz's interpretation is quite reductive, the implicit link between plantation labourers and the goods they produce cultivates a site where their interpersonal and

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[41] Eve Tuck & K.W Yang, "Decolonization is not a metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no.1 (2012): 6.
[42] While Cuba is known for its plantations and production of sugar and tobacco, it began as a settler state. The Cuban Elites who are frequently discussed through this section refer to the ancestors of Spanish settlers. See: Richard Gott, "Latin America as a White Settler Society," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 26 no.2 (2019), 25.
[43] Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995) 24-5.
[44] Ortiz, "Cuban Counterpoint," 24-5.
[45] Eve Tuck & K.W Yang, "Decolonization is not a metaphor," 6.

working relationships can be further understood. Additionally, Goffe asserts that "reading food as an object in material relation to the human body illuminates the boundary between subject and object,"[46] thus positioning foodstuffs produced through enslavement and indenturement as a bridge to the histories of plantation life. Similar to Goffe's intentions, *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits,* reorients the link between labourer and product away from essentialism and towards a level of proximity, where a taste of sugarcane or a sip of rum allows a level of intimacy with history. Campos-Pons employs sugar and its by-products to re-animate histories belonging to indentured and enslaved labourers. They become an elixir, possible through Campos-Pon's incorporation of alchemy through the exhibition. That is not to say the weight of violence perpetuated through the past and contemporary production of sugar unravels completely. Instead, sugar and its by-products are reframed as a tool of analysis, a way we can uncover and sit with the immaterial histories produced in its wake.[47]

Alchemy invites insight into humanity's interest in nature, spirituality, apothecary and the natural life cycle. As outlined by Tara E. Nummedal, alchemy has become a way to understand the literary, artistic, and scientific forces of the early modern period.[48] I argue that alchemy provides insight into cultural and scientific contributions far after the early modern period, especially as it permeates contemporary art practices from the last century. Alchemic themes have persisted in contemporary art, particularly in the surrealist movement. Artists, especially ones associated with radical avant-gardes, implemented "alchemical discourse in the promotion of radical, liberal or even leftist, political convictions."[49] Urszula Szulakowska outlines how alchemic concepts incorporated into art open up a site of potential. She writes, "For alchemic

[46] Goffe, "Sugarwork," 51
[47] Using the term wake directly references Christina Sharpe's notion of "Wake Work" which describes the way contemporary Black practitioners, academics and artists work within the legacies of colonialism. See: Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 13.
[48] Tara E. Nummedal, "Words and Works in the History of Alchemy," *Isis* 102, no. 2 (2011): 337.
[49] Urszula Szulakowska, "Introduction," in *Alchemy in Contemporary Art* (Farnham: Ashgate 2016), 3.

concepts of transmutation and transcendence offer a possibility, that amidst the traumatic memories, there might be found reasons for hope and for the redemption of evil."[50] Further, she writes, "Allegory serves to universalize historical reality, replacing individual history with myth so that the pain of lived experiences is anesthetized, turning historical fact into emotionally distanced spectacle, more palatable for audiences."[51] While I disagree with Szualakowska's interpretation of alchemic practices as an obstruction of historical truth, it is important to consider how alchemy was used for manipulation, especially in its promise of immortality or resurrection. Later in her book, Szualakowska looks at how alchemy was a tool for women within contemporary art (specifically Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo) to "critique…the social forces determining [female] subjectivity and controlling sexual desire."[52] It can be inferred that the exclusion of women in alchemic discourses lends itself to the association of witchcraft with the sphere of sensory experience traditionally associated with femininity.[53] [54]

Alchemic concepts permeate Campos-Pons' artistic practice, contextualizing her implementation of alchemy as a prevalent theme and method for the resuscitation of immaterial histories. In a conversation with Campos-Pons, Sarah Lewis-Cappellari frames alchemy as a method of inquiry.[55] Alchemy is a method and metaphor that distills the Cuban colonial-era gastropoetics into more accessible and less violent historical accounts. This metaphorical

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[50] Szulakowska, "Introduction," 4.
[51] Szulakowska, 4.
[52] Szulakowska, 4.
[53]Constance Classen, "The Witch's Sense: Sensory Ideologies and Transgressive Femininities from the Renaissance to Modernity," in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Cultural Reader* (London: Bloomsbury Academic 2005), 70-1.
[54] Classen interorgates Kantian aetshetics, paricularluy how 'lower' senses (such as touch, smell and taste) were associated with femininity. Because of this association, any manipulation of these senses outside of the domestic were considered lustful, hence the assumption that a woman indulging in taste, smell and touch outside of the household be considered a witch. See: Constance Classen, "The Witch's Sense: Sensory Ideologies and Transgressive Femininities from the Renaissance to Modernity," in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Cultural Reader* (London: Bloomsbury Academic 2005), 71, 73, 74.
[55] María Magdalena Campos-Pons and Sarah Lewis-Cappellari, "On the Art of Alchemy and Unfolding Desires: A Conversation with María Magdalena Campos-Pons," *Theatre Journal* 72, no. 3 (2020):, E-2

distillation does not avoid violence for the sake of palatability. Instead, this method ensures no reproduction of violence.

A level of alchemy happens within the body through gustatory and olfactory engagements. Sugarcane entering the mouth and into the digestive tract, or the subtly sweet aroma of rum wafting through the space and into your nose, can transform into nutrients or vignettes of history. Campos-Pons emphasizes this kind of bodily alchemy by incorporating practices and aesthetics borrowed from Santería, an Afro-Cuban religion originating in the West Coast of Africa. Santería is a creolized version of Yorùbá rituals and practices that enslaved people carried with them through the Middle Passage.

As outlined by Aisha Beliso-De Jesús, "Santería emerged within [the] colonial system, maintained through violence, repression, racial ordering, as well through its counter-technologies of rebellion, sabotage, secret religions and other resistance."[56] Embodiment and feltness are central to Santería, with the body functioning as a tether to the spiritual and human world. Elizabeth Pérez indicates that within religions developing in the Black Atlantic, the Black-Caribbean alimentary tract is positioned as a repository, a way to maintain and preserve culture and history.[57] Further, the intestines become "a site generative of emotion affect and agency,"[58] therefore privileging the gut as a site of remembrance. Moreover, Beliso-De Jesús describes the senses as "culturally encoded"[59] and the practice of Santería "is thus an acknowledgement of the historical memory-in-our-own-cells, that is how muscle tension, pain, despair, suffering, domination and pleasure are tightly bound with postures of perception and consciousness."[60]

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[56] Aisha Beliso-De Jesús, "Santería Copresence and the Making of African Diaspora Bodies," *Cultural Anthropology* 29, no. 3 (2014): 510.
[57] Elizabeth Pérez, "The Gut: A Black Alimentary Tract," 39.
[58] Pérez, 46.
[59] Beliso-De Jesús, "Santería Copresence," 515.
[60] Beliso-De Jesús, 519.

This link between cultural and autobiographical memory with taste and smell is not just speculation; scientific evidence links the senses to the recollection of memory. This sensuous occurrence is called *The Proust Phenomenon,* which describes the process "whereby a currently perceived odour causes spontaneous recollection of a past event."[61] According to Ryan P.M. Häcklander, Steve M.J. Janssen and Christina Mermeitinger, olfactory and gustatory experiments are under-researched in the field of psychophysics. Despite that, the authors lay a solid foundation to argue for the link between smell and memory. The report traces the most notable contributions in the field to see how researchers should approach this topic in future studies. The authors focus primarily on olfaction in this report, but they include that the Proust Phenomenon "involve[s] multiple sensory cues, including not only olfactory but also gustatory, textual, and temperature cues."[62] This report, coupled with theories of haptic aesthetics, makes a strong case for the significance of terms like "bodily memory" or "embodied ways of knowing," privileging the body (specifically the nose and gut) as a carrier of histories and knowledges.

By invoking the sense of smell and taste, the exhibition provides access points to immaterial archives that center Cuban plantation life and resuscitate histories omitted from art historical discourses. The scientific evidence linking the senses to the recollection of memory through the Proust Phenomenon further supports the significance of multisensory experiences in artistic and literary works. Given the under-researched nature of olfactory and gustatory experiments in psychophysics, Campos-Pons' exhibition provides a rich ground for further exploration of the link between the senses and memory through the Proust Phenomenon.

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[61] Ryan P.M Hackländer, Steve M.J Janssen and Christina Bermeitinger, "An in-depth review of the methods, findings and theories associated with odour evoked autobiographical memory," *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 26, (2019): 401.
[62] Hackländer et al., "An in-depth review," 401.

Overview

This thesis is organized into three sections, excluding the introduction and conclusion. The first section provides a visual analysis of the exhibition, laying a foundation for a more rigorous theoretical study in the following two sections. The first section provides some historical context, specifically tapping into regional history and some of Campos-Pons' autobiographical history. I will additionally discuss the mixed-media photographic works produced before the exhibition's conception. While they are not the focus of my analysis, they provide necessary insight into Campos-Pons' relationship with diaspora.

The second section focuses on the conceptual thread of alchemy that persists throughout the exhibition. I situate alchemy as a method to engage with the exhibition on conceptual, material and corporeal levels. These levels of alchemy create a grammar of possibility that carefully attends to the endurance of Cuban gastropoetics within the immaterial. The possibility of transformation through distillation, olfaction and taste becomes more apparent by including alchemy as a theoretical and methodological thread.

The final section will focus on *Agridulce,* a performance staged by Campos-Pons at the Peabody. Through the performance, this section will argue how the artist reframes sugar and its by-products as an elixir for the pain that endures in Cuban colonial-era histories. Campos-Pons holds her body in temporal tension while performing and activates the immaterial histories tied to the exhibition. Campos-Pons' performance is a resurrection, a process of grieving the lives lost, but also a celebration of how we may remember—even through the tiniest immaterial traces. Goffe's notion of sugarwork as preservation is necessary to this section, specifically when considering the offering of sugarcane in Campos-Pons' preformance.

Following the final section, I conclude by discussing the contemporary relevance of this exhibition. Despite taking place almost a decade ago, the exhibition remains unexplored regarding multisensory engagement, immateriality, and gastropoetics. The essays in the exhibition catalogue pay a significant amount of attention to the sonic elements of the exhibition and overlook the olfactory and gustatory elements. Emerging scholarship has been more attentive to the multisensory aspects of the exhibition. However, it has yet to argue for the importance of these elements as a tool to access immaterial archives. Moreover, I will grapple with how the necessity of the immaterial will shift, primarily through the literary and artistic works that look to ground the immaterial to the material. The conclusion will frame *Alchemy for the Soul, Elixir of the Spirits* as a jumping-off point for this area of research. It will point to what can be explored in the fields of gastropoetics and art history to advocate for the potential of this area of study.

Section One: Visual Analysis

Upon Arrival

Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits inhabited multiple spaces at the Peabody Essex Museum. The first installation is at the museum's entrance, leading into the lobby. It is constructed from sugar pine and stained a deep brown (fig. 1). The structure features a gabled roof with two thick support beams adhering the installation to the museum's walls. The structure echoes the abandoned scaffolding of sugar refineries across Cuba. It appears to be in the middle of construction or awaiting demolition. In his introductory essay of the exhibition catalogue, the exhibition curator Joshua Basseches includes a photograph of the artist standing amongst tall, dry grass facing the looming steel frame of the abandoned Sergio Gonzales sugar refinery (fig. 2). There are two main structures in the photograph: one horizontal rusted steel structure on the left of the photo and a second one on the right, reminiscent of the wood structure installed at the entrance of the Peabody. Concrete smokestacks tower behind the decaying refinery, presenting a visual metaphor for the temporal endurance of trauma. The concreteness of the smokestacks, coupled with the abandoned metal structures, convey the nuance of the intergenerational impacts of enslavement in Cuba. Some effects are concrete, weighing heavy on everyday life; others are less palpable but just as real. The abandoned factory in the photo resonates poetically with the sugar pine installation. If you were to walk under this work, you may bear its implied weight. You can’t feel it on you, yet you can imagine what it *could* feel like if the smooth wood rested on your shoulders and the apex of the roof cradled your head. It may not be tangible, but it is palpable.

The exhibition on the third floor is accessible by an elevator from the lobby. The elevator is an active part of the exhibition, equipped with wooden pallets and sugar sacks piled on top (fig. 3). The sacks are burlap with an oval-shaped image of cattle pulling a cart of what looks to be sugarcane. Directly above the image reads *recho en Cuba,* translating to *right in Cuba.* A speaker rests between the pallets, and as you travel from one floor to the next, the warm vocals of Rafael Navarro Pujuda fill the space. Navarro is an integral artist in the world of rumba, which is a musical genre that originated in Africa and "consists of two distinct and contrasting layers: vocal and percussion."[63] [64] Campos-Pons's hometown, Matanzas, is known for its rumba music,[65] which is why Neil Leonard (Campos-Pons's husband and frequent collaborator) thought it was necessary to incorporate Rumba into the exhibition's sound design. Rumba compositions are often quite complex in their layering of sounds, which would initially create a disjuncture between the soundscapes and her fragile glass sculptures.[66] Because of this, he opted for an acapella-style recording of Navarro in his home, resulting in a spoken-word style recording.[67] Gentle melodies interspersed with pauses and breaths hang in the air. Navarro's resonant inflections and riffs intend to create two portals. One portal builds "a bridge to [Campos-Pons'] Cuban youth,"[68] and the second transports museum-goers into a world of alchemy, amorphic blown glass structures, sugar cane, oceans and rum.

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[63] Nancy Pick, "Cuba Distilled: Bringing Sound to Alchemy of the Soul," in *Alchemy of the Soul: María Magdalena Campos-Pons* (Salem: Peabody Essex Museum, 2016), 1. http://alchemy.pem.org/cuba_distilled/
[64] The Peabody Essex Museum's online exhibition catalogue has video and audio recordings that you can listen to to get a sense of what the sounded like. See: http://alchemy.pem.org/cuba_distilled/
[65] Pick, "Cuba Distilled," 1.
[66] Pick, 1.
[67] Pick, 1.
[68] Pick, 1.

Barton Gallery

Upon exiting the elevator, a hallway connects you to the Barton and House galleries, the two main spaces of the exhibition. The Barton Gallery features most of the glass installations, each of which consists of blown glass and resin with black steel frames which support the fragile structures.[69] The glass in each installation ranges from clear, orangey amber, a mid-toned brown with pink undertones, a dark green and a deep purple with glints of brown (fig. 4-8). The amber and brown installations observe the endurance of colourism and the diverse populations in Cuba.[70] The brown and amber works have anthropomorphic qualities, inviting questions concerning labour and race in Cuban plantation life. The amber structure resembles a person with their arms outstretched (fig. 5), while the brown structure looks like workers along an assembly line intertwined with the machinery (fig. 6).

The green and purple installations aesthetically diverge from the anthropomorphic work and lend themselves to a more industrial aesthetic. The green structure stands out from the rest, as Campos-Pons adhered an abstractly cut flat piece of glass of the same colour to vertical glass tubes, alluding to a cloud of smoke billowing from smokestacks (fig. 7). The green blown glass work visually connects to the sugar pine structure at the museum's entrance, almost as if this blown glass installation is a maquette of a sugar refinery. The purple installation looks like a piece of equipment found in Campos-Pons' maquette, with large cylindrical receptacles held up by steel frames and tubing connecting to the floor (fig. 8). Zavala had a similar insight, partially in how the green and purple works bring forth imagery of abandoned sugar refineries and machinery. She writes:

> "the dark purplish brown and bottle-green sculpture, [evoke] the succession called a 'train' (*tren*) of boilers in a *casa de caldera* (boiling house of a refinery) where cane juice

[69] Zavala, "Blackness Distilled," 20.
[70] Zavala, 20.

> was heated to dangerously high temperatures, a process requiring great precision, usually performed by the most skilled male slaves and labourers, known as *maestro de azúcar* [master of sugar].”[71]

Each installation in this room elicits imagery of the refineries, equipment used and the people working within them. Thus, these installations are imbued with the histories of enslaved and indentured labourers who worked in the spaces Campos-Pons evokes through the installations. The final installation in this room is a clear-blown glass vessel attached to a wall with parts supported by the same black steel frames (fig. 4). There are four central vessels with glass tubes connecting them. This installation is noticeably different as each receptacle contains a frothy brown liquid that emits the smell of rum as you approach the work. This work fits in its own aesthetic category, as it isn’t anthropomorphic or industrial. It feels quite scientific as if it belonged to a chemist—or alchemist—producing rum-based potions and elixirs.

Themes of distillation and alchemy carry through the soundscape that floats through the space. Leonard created a composition where he distorted the vocals of Ana Perez Herrera, a prominent Rumba vocalist, with gurgles and sputters, echoing the noises a distillation rig may produce.[72] Leonard slowed down Perez’s vocals, which initially were relatively fast-paced, stretching a melody to cultivate a more serene atmosphere.[73] His manipulation of time through slowing down Perez’s vocals attests to the temporal dissonance of the exhibition, as it holds the past and present in tension through the multisensory elements. I observe this temporal tension through Leonard’s incorporation of voices “and sounds from fields in Cuba where sugarcane once grew.”[74] Leonard compresses time, not in a way that obscures these histories, but quite

[71] Zavala 20-21
[72] Pick, “Cuba Distilled,” 1.
[73] Pick 1.
[74] Pick 1.

carefully, so the past, present and even future whirl around each other, splitting open silences and filling them with distant voices, diegetic sounds, and melodic phrases.

In this exhibition section, the recurring link between body and labour connects to Fernando Ortiz's philosophy on Cuban society and culture in the wake of plantation slavery. Ortiz's theories of *transculturation* and *anthropomorphization* illustrate how deeply sugar production and its by-products link to the histories of plantation labourers. Drawing upon Ortiz's theories, I acknowledge their significance while challenging his essentialist perspective on Cuban society. Further, Ortiz's conceptualizations of tobacco and sugar as anthropomorphic reveal a kind of poetics of plantation labour. While he acknowledges the endurance of varying racial and ethnic groups, Ortiz constantly focuses on Cuban society within the binary produced by sugar and tobacco. This indexation essentializes the culturally and racially diverse social landscape of Cuba. Yet despite Ortiz's oversights, he does provide invaluable analysis of the relationship between plantation labourers and the goods they produce. By critically engaging with his theories, I will demonstrate how Campos-Pons's work remedies his omissions through her intersectional positionality and approach to her work.

Scholars who have written on Campos-Pons's work, particularly Basseches and Zavala, cite how transculturation and anthropomorphization lay an integral theoretical foundation concerning the endurance of racial and social politics in Cuba. In Ortiz's book *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (1970), he explores ideas of transculturation through allegorized tales of tobacco and sugar, which are Cuba's primary exports.[75] In these tales, he uses gendered and racialized terms to describe sugar and tobacco: "Don Tabaco (black man-hood) and Doña Azúcar (*mulata* womanhood)."[76] Ortiz outlines how tobacco appears either dark or lighter

[75] Ortiz, "Cuban Counterpoint," 18.
[76] Ortiz 18.

brown, where sugar ranges from white to a lighter brown.[77] He writes that in its nascence, tobacco is dark and dies the same colour upon its use. Sugar similarly "dies as [she is] born,"[78] however, her birth and death are anonymous, which he uses as a metaphor for enslaved people, as they were depicted monolithically and lacked family names.[79] Ortiz's personification of sugar is also an apt metaphor for the role of indentured labourers. There were fewer indentured labourers on plantations, which excluded them from Ortiz's discussions of excess. Still, I would argue that their historical erasure renders them nameless,[80] like the sugar they produce. The personification of tobacco and sugar reveals enmeshed histories, emphasizing the importance of sugar and its by-products in accessing and understanding immaterial archives concerning plantation life.

Although Ortiz's theories are integral in understanding the links between Cuban society and its exports, I challenge his indexing of tobacco and sugar and argue that they are codified through the diverse populations that aided their production. In his work, transculturation illustrates the interplay between two distinct cultures, with Ortiz's examples notably underlining the exchange between European and African cultures. I contend with the details of this cultural exchange, exploring how it has shaped the rich tapestry of Cuban identity.[81] Ortiz's binaristic conceptualization contributes to the erasure of Chinese, Indian and Indigenous indentured labourers, where he fails to consider how indentured labourers are linked to the sugar they produce. Similarly, his conflation between enslaved labourers and the sugar they produce is less

[77] Ortiz, 9,10, 4, 42.
[78] Ortiz 18.
[79] Ortiz 18.
[80] According to the Nation Archives Records, while some indentured labourers had last names, they were not often recorded on official documents. See: The National Archives, "Indian Indentured Labourers," The National Archives, July 27, 2024, https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/indian-indentured-labourers/#:~:text=The%20records%20at%20The%20National,Colonial%20Office%20correspondence.
[81] Ortiz, 3.

of a critique and reinforces the notion of enslaved labourers lacking individual identity, and therefore a monolith of desirable commodites.[82] This association is harmful and not only subdues the depth of enslaved histories, but also contributes to the historical oversight of indentured labourers in Cuba.

While there was economic and social disparity between the roles of indentured and enslaved labourers, it can be largely attributed to the status of Chinese labourers as legally white."[83] Benjamín N. Narváez writes that "Chinese [labourers] lived the abstract political and philosophical debates about liberalism, race, labour, the meaning of freedom, and national identity that Cuban elites grappled with in the nineteenth century."[84] Further, he writes that "few actually believed in Chinese Whiteness… [and the] contradictory racialization produced a Chinese experience somewhere between slavery and freedom but decidedly closer to the former."[85] Campos-Pons does not essentialize indentured histories, which is the tendency of Ortiz's formulation. Instead, this exhibition's works, particularly those in the Barton Gallery, cultivate Cuban gastropoetics—one that does not reduce the experiences of indentured and enslaved labourers to static binaries; instead, Campos-Pons underlines where they overlap, diverge and clash to paint a fuller picture[86] of plantation histories that often fall in historical peripheries.

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[82] Eve Tuck & K.W Yang, "Decolonization is not a metaphor," 6.
[83] Narváez, "Subaltern Unity?" 872.
[84] Narváez, 870.
[85] Narváez, 874-5.
[86] This is in direct reference to Saidiya Hartman's *Venus in Two Acts,* where she develops her research method *critical fabulation.* This method uses fiction to fill in the gap of historical archives that have missed or willfully omitted details concerning Black-American life. See: Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no.2 (2008), 11.

House Gallery

The House Gallery in the Peabody features a singular blown glass installation and mixed-media photographs from an older body of work. The cobalt blue installation sits in the center of the space (fig. 9). It balances industrial and fantastical aesthetics, like an otherworldly distillation rig. The steel frames are not as distinct; a thick one cradles two spheres connected by a thicker glass tube. The frame provides structural integrity, and the lower sphere has three tentacle-like feet that raise it from the floor. An armlike tube outstretches with antennae-like fingers reaching out from the end. Basseches compares this installation to an object in Remedios Varo's *Creación de las Aves (Creation of the Birds)* (1957). In this oil painting, a half-human half-owl sits at a desk painting birds with a brush while refracting light through a triangular magnifying glass to animate the drawings (fig. 10). To the left of the being sits a structure held up by black rods with the same arm-like limb extending, each finger dispensing a different coloured pigment used to paint. Nancy Vosburg writes that birdlike creatures frequented Varo's paintings,[87] especially since Varo was interested in "surrealism, psychology, and the hermetic tradition, including magic, alchemy and astrology… her constant preoccupation with spiritual life, and her fear of invisible, destructive forces kept her forever on the alert to discovering new dimensions to the universe."[88] In the second section, I provide a more in-depth analysis of the importance of Campos-Pons's reference to Varo's Alchemist.

The House Gallery included two paintings and three polaroid grid works. *Dreaming of an Island* (2008) and *Blue Refuge* (2008) use polaroids as a grid, whereas *Thinking of It* (2008) is

[87] Nancy Vosburg, "Strange Yet 'Familiar': Cats and Birds in Remedios Varo's Artistic Universe," In *Figuring Animals: Essays on Animal Images in Art, Literature, Philosophy and Popular Culture,* ed. Mary Sanders Pollock & Catherine Rainwater (New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 81.
[88] Vosburg, "Strange Yet 'Familiar,'" 82.

a watercolour painting (fig. 11-13). Each of the three works incorporates blue washes of pigment, with more opaque strands of hair twisting across each panel and a photograph or drawing of the artist with her back to the viewer, posed contemplatively. These works deal with themes of diaspora, displacement and exile, which Campos-Pons frequently discusses as an integral influence on her identity and artistic vision. These works situate Campos-Pons as geographically distant from Cuba, again positioning this exhibition as activating these transient yet pertinent threads. One concept of particular interest here is Okwui Enwezor's notion of *double exile*, drawn from W.E.B Du Bois' conceptualization of *double consciousness.* According to Enwezor, double consciousness describes: "the hybrid structures of African American identity, its mixed heritage."[89] Enwezor complicates Du Bois' definition in arguing that double consciousness not only lends itself to the inbetween-ness but also feelings of being torn between cultures.[90] Further, he indicates that the in-between, or the third space, is abundant in the complex social and cultural experiences endured by enslaved people.[91] I posit that this third space is immaterial, as it provides space for the tensions and inconsistencies that reveal themselves in violently ruptured histories.

Double exile situates Campos-Pons' relationship to diaspora through two notable instances of exile. The first exile was the abduction of Campos-Pons's great-grandparents from Nigeria across the Middle Passage to Cuba. The second was Campos-Pons's move to Canada and the United States, which made her unable to travel to Cuba for over ten years.[92] Despite the geographic and temporal distance the double exiles Campos-Pons and her grandparents

[89]Okwui Enwezor, "The Diasporic Imagination: The Memory Works of María Magdalena Campos-Pons," in *Everything is Separated by Water* ed. Lisa D. Freiman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 66-67.
[90]Enwezor, "The Diasporic Imagination," 67.
[91]Enwezor, 69.
[92]Joshua Basseches, "Leaving Cuba For the North in Alchemy of the Soul: Maria Magdlalena Campos-Pons," in *Alchemy of the Soul: María Magdalena Campos-Pons,* (Salem: Peabody Essex Museum, 2016), 1. http://alchemy.pem.org/leaving_cuba/

experienced, the mixed media works and installations cultivate emotional and conceptual proximity to these seemingly distant histories.

The following section will use the preceding visual analysis to connect to the physical, corporeal and artistic manifestations of alchemy through this exhibition, which cultivates the exhibition as a site of potentiality. The flexibility of alchemy provides room to engage with and reflect upon histories riddled with violence attentively. It offers the possibility of transformation and transmutation, a way to distill painful and traumatic historical monoliths into accounts with far more nuance. Thus, labelling Campos-Pons as an alchemist is not a fantastical or trivial title but rather is integral to her role as someone who can revitalize and make palpable Cuban colonial-era histories.

Section Two: Alchemy of the Soul

Alchemy as a method

As mentioned in my introduction, while it is a theme, it is integral to consider alchemy as a method of inquiry when discussing the relationship between the exhibition and immateriality. Alchemy, in the simplest terms, entails the transformation of one thing into another. Exoteric and esoteric alchemies are the two main categorizations.[93] Exoteric primarily concerns the use of alchemy to create the Philosophers' Stone,[94] whereas esoteric is concerned with more accessible alchemic endeavours such as the transformation of base metals into precious metals.[95] Through alchemy's permeation into academic, religious and cultural schools of thought, the grammar of exoteric and esoteric alchemy became a way to communicate one's own beliefs.[96] Thus, alchemy does not only occur in the 'practical' sense (turning brass into gold) but also in the metaphorical sense, rendering it an applicable method of inquiry for *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits.*

Alchemy provides the histories tied to the exhibition with a level of opacity. Through *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits*, Campos-Pons does not allow the relaying or reproduction of violence to implicate people connected to colonial-era Cuban histories. Instead, access to these histories is limited, ungraspable, and convoluted. In his articulations of opacity, Glissant indicates issues of transparency. To be transparent or hypervisible becomes a trap.[97] This trap can result in forms of exploitation, where the individual caught in the trap of visibility has no right to privacy as they are constantly working within the scope of oppressive powers. To

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[93] E.J Holmyard, *Alchemy* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Dove, 1990), 16.
[94] The Philosophers Stone was an object alchemists pursued because of its potential for healing and resurection. It also had the power to make someone more virtuous, cleansing them of immorality and sin. See: Jehane Ragai, ""The Philosopher's Stone: Alchemy and Chemistry," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* no.12, (1992): 61.
[95] Holmyard, "Alchemy", 16.
[96] Holmyard, 16.
[97] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation,* trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010) 190-1.

counter this, Glissant urges us to resist this urge to know each other. He writes, "To feel in solidarity with him or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary to grasp him. It is not necessary to try to become the other… nor to make him my image."[98] Museums tend to capture works of art, specifically non-Western works of art. David Howes and Constance Classen underscore how Western aesthetic and categorization systems operate as a method of control within the institution.[99] They write: "By 'capturing' non-Western artifacts and subjecting them to Western aesthetic and classificatory systems, museums [assert] their power over them and, by extension, the power of the West over the peoples they represented."[100] *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits*, in some ways, subverts Western indexation by incorporating multisensory elements. Because of varied sensual perceptions, olfaction and gustatory processes are impossible to control completely. Thus, Campos-Pons does not render these histories graspable through the multisensory components. To evade the grasp, she extends opacity through the transformation of these histories into the smell of rum floating amongst glass monuments and diegetic and melodic sounds of distillation or a fibrous chunk of sugarcane dissolving onto your tongue and slipping down your throat. Immaterial histories concerning enslaved and indentured labourers and Cuba hinge on these instances, and these multisensory engagements—tasting and smelling in particular—allow for embodied and more attentive instances of reflection. Alchemy offers a level of opacity through its position as a method of inquiry; it does not subject these histories to transparency or scrutiny. Thus, alchemic inquiry grants us tiny portals to these immaterial histories, resurrecting them and allowing them to be felt but not captured.

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[98] Édouard Glissant, "Poetics of Relation," 193.
[99] David Howes and Constance Classen, "Mixed messages: Engaging the senses in art" in *Ways of Sensing: Understanding the Senses in Society,* (London: Routledge, 2013), 24-5.
[100] David Howes and Constance Classen, "Mixed messages," 24.

A layer of alchemy is present in Campos-Pons' relationship to the materials used in the exhibition. Alchemy manifests through the processes of turning sand into glass and sugar crystals into rum.[101] In an exhibition catalogue essay, Basseches quotes the artist where she states: "In my mind there is a conceptual parallel between the materiality of… sugar and glass: liquid to soil, solid to liquid; transparent, translucent, material, immaterial."[102] Basseches argues that these transformations endured by glass and sugar are "the most essential form of alchemic endeavour," which is the "transformation of pain into beauty."[103] Campos-Pons takes the histories of *maestro de azúcar*—masters of sugar—and distills them into delicate glass memorials. Glass maquettes absorb the brunt of the gaze, shielding sugar refinery labourers from additional violence.

In conversation with Lewis-Cappellari, Campos-Pons reflected upon the material and poetic resonances between glass and memory. She recalls: "I started using glass very early on in my work because it's like memory—fuzzy, transparent, you can see through it, but it's not completely clear, it's fragile, it breaks, but you can glue it back together; it still has integrity though some of it has changed."[104] Lewis-Cappellari responds by highlighting a similar coalescence between the production of glass and sugar, particularly how both need to be exposed to oxygen after they have been ground down and heated to blistering temperatures to resolidify.[105] Thus, on the material and theoretical level, alchemy becomes a way to refute the scopic hierarchies within art history that rely on seeing to discern truth. Instead, alchemy allows for an embodied experience of making and experiencing the exhibition, where the respective histories are felt, tasted and smelled.

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[101] María Magdalena Campos-Pons quoted by Basseches from an interview. Excerpts from this interview are only accessible through essays in the exhibition catalogue. See: Basseches, "Alchemy of the Soul Elixir for the Spirits," in *Alchemy of the Soul: María Magdalena Campos-Pons,* (Salem: Peabody Essex Museum, 2016), 1.http://alchemy.pem.org/alchemy_soul/
[102] Basseches, "Alchemy of the Soul," 1.
[103] Basseches, 1.
[104] Campos-Pons and Lewis-Cappellari, "On the Art of Alchemy and Unfolding Desires,", E-5
[105] Campos-Pons and Lewis-Cappellari, E-5.

Alchemy within the Body and Mind

Alchemical processes occur within the body through Campos-Pons's incorporation of multisensory elements. She states: "We are so privileged… that we have been given senses, the brain, and the machine that is the heart and this liver for alchemy. Our bodies themselves are a maker of alchemy."[106] Campos-Pons facilitates the possibility of alchemic happenings on the corporeal plane through *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits.* The sonic, olfactory and gustatory elements provide a reorientation or a transmutation of sugar and its by-products into something that does not reproduce the violence that is tacitly tied to its production.

Thus, the body becomes an integral piece of this theme of transformation. What the body may taste and smell goes through a process of change as it enters the body. The apparent process is digestion (which provides an apt metaphor for colonial consumption of history).[107] Smelling or tasting elements in the exhibition and transforming said sensuous experiences into autobiographical or cultural memory is a form of alchemy. The smell of rum and the taste of sugarcane are transformed into tiny portals, fostering instances of reflection.

Everyone who would have engaged with the exhibition would have varying experiences. It is not for me to say *exactly* how people might experience this bodily alchemy or if they will have access to any immaterial histories. I have argued for the importance of possibility up to this

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[106] Campos-Pons and Lewis-Cappellari, E-7.

[107] Parama Roy provides foundational insight into this metaphor. She writes: "Who eats and with whom, who starves, and what is rejected as food are fundamental to Colonial and postcolonial making - and unmaking. it is crucial to examine the nuances of the tropological language of alimentation especially as it is used to think through the complex entailments of a congeris of articulated concepts of colonial violence, desire, intimacy, assimilation, reproduction, transformation, subalternization, and justice. what this book seeks to underline, even as it recognizes that the palate cannot be considered except within a broader consideration of embodiment" (24-5). For further reading see: Parama Roy, "Alimentary Tracts: Appetites, Aversions, and the Postcolonial," (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010)," 41 and Parama Roy, "Reading Communities and Culinary Communities: The Gastropoetics of the South Asian Diaspora." *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 10, no. 2 (2002): 471–502.

point and how the multisensory aspects offer the potential to access immaterial histories. The exhibition's multisensory elements allow individuals to access these histories, especially those with ancestry or legacies, which connect them to indentured and enslaved labourers. This limited access is another manifestation of opacity. As mentioned in the introduction, histories belonging to Black people often ride this tension of erasure and hypervisibility. There is a lack of agency granted to Black histories, especially those coming out of the era of enslavement. Histories of indenture work differently, where they are subject to erasure through the hypervisibility of enslaved histories saturated with violence. Even through taste and smell, these immaterial histories cannot be exploited—instead, they can be contemplated and reflected upon. The multisensory engagement is another example of how immaterial status offers these histories a level of opacity; they are ungraspable and require a level of work to engage with them.

Varo's *Creation of Birds*

The blue-blown glass installation in the House Gallery pays homage to Remidios Varo's *Creación de las Aves (Creation of the Birds)* (1957). This oil painting shows a birdlike human sitting at a desk painting (fig. 10). To the left of the being sits a structure held up by black rods, almost identical to Campos-Pons's blue glass work. Varo's alchemist uses pigment from her apparatus to animate the birds on her page, granting them life to fly from her study into the world.

Birds frequent many of Varo's compositions. In her work, birds are a motif that communicate surrealist and psychological themes influenced by magic, alchemy, and astrology.[108] Varo's practice was concerned with spiritual life, specifically how its immaterial yet

[108] Vosburg,"Strange Yet 'Familiar,'" 82.

palpable effects on her life left her generally anxious.[109] Despite her focus on spirituality and its impact on her anxiety, Varo's exploration of alchemy was still affected by the pervasive misogyny of the time, which hindered even the most progressive and unconventional fields of thought. Misogyny afflicted the practice of alchemy, even though it allowed for discursive or radical ways of thinking. As written by Szulakowska: "The historical alchemical discourse had been based on concepts of the feminine realm as magical, alien, essentialist, wild, primal, material, unstable, lunatic, infantile and uncontrolled…Varo redirected this scenario for their own purpose, that of empowering womanhood."[110] Like the various complexities, Campos-Pons utilizes to engage with Cuban gastropoetics—beauty and pain, bitterness and sweetness—Varo's *Creación de las Aves* similarly reorients generalizations against feminine alchemic practices. Varo's alchemist cultivates a site of potential through her animative painting practice. With Campos-Pons' explicit reference to *Creación de las Aves,* she grounds her alchemic conceptualizations in an overtly feminist school of thought. Campos-Pons positions the various threads of alchemy traceable through this exhibition as subversive and intersectional. A clear inspiration for the cobalt-glass installation, Varo's alchemist—like Campos-Pons—uses a radical, careful and tender kind of alchemy to animate things previously assumed to be in stasis.

Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits provides a poetic layering of alchemy. The foundation is grounded in feminist avant-garde interventions (and Santería, which I will elaborate upon in the next section). This theoretical scaffolding allows for the material, human and physical kinds of alchemy that distill the violent histories tied to sugar production and its by-products into something more easily reflected upon. These alchemic processes do not water down or essentialize these histories; instead, they protect them and provide a way to attentively

[109] Vosburg, 82.
[110] Szulakowska, "Alchemy in Contemporary Art," 93.

engage with the silences and omissions that material archives are often riddled with. Alchemy provides a bridge to the immaterial, the possibility of transformation and the potential for histories concerning enslaved and indentured labourers to exist outside of exploitative and traumatic narratives.

By delving into the significance of Santería within *Agridulce* and its interconnection with the exhibition, we can uncover yet another layer of alchemy that complicates the exhibition's relationship to immaterial Cuban colonial-era histories.

Section Three: Elixir for the Spirits

Agridulce

Campos-Pons performed *Agridulce* on January 12, 2015. The performance activates portals connected to the immaterial, as the artist employs taste as an elixir and tool for resuscitation. *Agridulce* translates to bittersweet, a tension Campos-Pons uses to reflect upon Cuban colonial-era histories. I do not claim that this exhibition completely remedies the pain of these histories. However, this exhibition's curatorial and artistic decisions offer an alternative way to engage, transcending the conventional ocularcentrism present in museums. Those decisions do not subject the museum-goer nor immaterial histories to violence enacted through the gaze. Campos-Pons subjects herself to potential scrutiny but does so in order to protect histories of indenture and enslavement from further exploitation.

In *Agridulce,* the artist appears dressed as a nineteenth-century enslaved woman, wearing a floor-length dress with long sleeves (fig. 14). The dress is patterned with tendrils of foliage varying in tones of green, meant to evoke lush sugarcane fields. Campos-Pons' hair is tightly wrapped in a headscarf of the same pattern, with the ends of her dark locs poking through the top. What is most striking about the artist's appearance is that she has painted any visible skin white. The application of paint is inconsistent, and streaks of her skin poke through the spectral guise. Campos-Pons started in the upper-level atrium, and as she walked through the museum, she held a stalk of sugarcane in one hand and a knife in the other. She "walked among her audience, offering them fresh-cut cane," and as she extended small fibrous chunks to audience members, she'd say: "'Try it. It's sweet.'"[111]

[111] Zavala, "Blackness Distilled," 29.

According to Heather Shirey, the paint has a dual function. “First, in its similarity to *cascarilla*,[112] it references not only purification but ‘transformation and hybridity.’ Second, as it is applied, the paint allows her dark skin to show through, challenging the ‘temptation to read the artist’s figure [or her ethno-racial identities] as static.”[113] The body paint in *Agridulce* is common in Santería rituals and is a recurring motif through performance works by Campos-Pons. Through this performance, Zavala asserts that “the [exhibition] was more than a temporary installation originating at the [Peabody]... its full power, that is to say, its silences, was ultimately shaped by its location and by the performance.”[114] Similar to Neil Leonard’s manipulation of sonic compositions, Campos-Pons’ reference to Santería through *Agridulce* and other performances manipulates time. This temporal manipulation facilitated by the performance activates the immaterial, particularly in the way it flattens what we assume to be past, present and future. The recurrence of the spectral guise she dons creates a dialogue between various histories tied to each performance, creating a relational exchange through her embodied approach. Moreover, in her striking appearance and sugarcane offering, Campos-Pons demands immediate attention from her audience. This immediacy also encourages a connection to the immaterial, where she, in part, becomes a vessel for the transient histories tied to the museum. The connection to the immaterial is cultivated through the opportunity to taste sugarcane and Campos-Pons’ autobiographical and artistic connection to the performance.

The axis of bittersweetness explored in *Agridulce* recalls an installation titled *Sugar/Bittersweet* (figure 15), originally exhibited at the Smith College Museum of Art in Northhampton, Massachusetts, in 2010. The installation featured twenty antique spears organized

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[112] Cascarilla is a powder created from ground eggshells. See: Carmen Hermo, “María Magdalena Campos-Pons: Behold,” in *María Magdalena Campos-Pons: Behold* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2023), 20.
[113] Heather Shirey, “Ancestry Art and Commodity,” in *Let Spirit Speak!: Cultural Journeys Through the African Diaspora* (Albany: SUNY Pres, 2012), 53.
[114]Zavala, “Blackness Distilled,” 31.

in a rectangle, each the same distance from one another. The spears were mounted on antique wooden stools varying in style and size. Sugar discs cast in resin adorned the handles of the spears. The discs differed in colour, from almost pure white to varying shades of brown. Through this, Campos-Pons represents the different states of sugar in the refining process, and these colours similarly provide a space to grapple with racial diversity in Cuba. This use of colour is similar to her approach with the blown glass pieces in *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir of the Spirits.* While the artist uses different combinations of discs and stools as a base for the spears, each is roughly the same height. The title, *Sugar/Bittersweet*, references the artist's complicated relationship with the history of sugar production in Cuba.

The bitterness in the work lies within the implicit relationship between sugar and violence. In a conversation between the artist and Sarah Lewis-Cappellari, Campos-Pons reminisces upon her relationship with sugarcane. She recalls:

> [My] memory of sugar is when I was a tiny little girl running through the sugar fields and the three-meter sugar grasses were like gigantic towers. There is a structural element of [*Sugar/Bittersweet*] that is important. It is built like a sugar field with something called *guardarraya*, a path, a line that separates these perfect grids of distribution of production, it is economy in the same way as slave ships, the brutality of the beauty of this image… I thought the beautiful grass is also a weapon against certain bodies.[115]

There is an unsettling, beautiful, heartbreaking coalescence between the explicitly painful history of sugar cane fields in South America and the Caribbean. Through *Agridulce,* Campos-Pons strikes this balance between pain, bitterness, beauty and sweetness that manifests in her implementation of sugar as a medium. The spectral presence of colonial-era Cuban histories imbues *Agridulce*, which then transmits to the audience. This intertwining of history and art is

[115] Campos-Pons and Lewis-Cappellari, “On the Art of Alchemy,” E-5.

also evident in Campos-Pons' exploration of Santería, a creolized religion combining West African beliefs and Catholicism, which has played a significant role in Cuban culture and history.

Santería

Priests and practitioners of Santería engage in various rituals that require embodied movements and gestures.[116] Aisha Beliso-De Jesús describes epistemologies uncovered through Santería as "site[s] to examine how racial diasporas are felt,"[117] because a practitioner or priest "encompasses a broad range of material-immaterial beings and can be thought of as active spiritual and religious subjectivities intimately tied to [their] bodily registers."[118] *Agridulce* positions Campos-Pons as a mediator between colonial-era histories and the audience, where she subjects herself to inhabit historical affects, and imbues them into sugarcane to offer to the audience.

These poetics of sweetness and bitterness work on so many levels, thus positioning sugarcane and sugar-based products as integral to attending to indentured and enslaved immaterial histories. To further complicate this tension, it is essential to consider how sugar and its by-products integrated into Afro-Cuban spiritual practices, such as Santería. Pérez asserts that within this Afro-Cuban religion, which is known by various names including regla ocha, Santería, or Lucumí, sugar plays a significant role in the meals offered to the *orishas*, spirits of West African origin.[119] Further, Perez notes practitioners of Santería value sugarcane and its by-products not only for their sweetness or connection to Africa but for their ability to serve as a medium to enhance and highlight the distinct traits attributed to the deities.[120] This is because

[116] Beliso-De Jesús, "Santería Copresence," 504.
[117] Beliso-De Jesús, 515.
[118] Beliso-De Jesús, 517.
[119] Pérez, "Crystallizing subjectivities," 175.
[120] Pérez, 175.

sugar is believed to have the power to amplify and reinforce the characteristics of the orishas, making it a crucial element in their offerings.[121]

Sugar and the exports derived from it became a way to connect to gods and goddesses associated with Santería, particularly in their potential to be saturated with affect. Further, Pérez discusses how different orishas have different preferences for offerings made to them, and "sweetening agents are meant to gladden the tongues of the orishas so that they will reply generously to petitions."[122] Santería practitioners began to incorporate sugar into their devotions more commonly after enslaved West Africans were forcibly located to Cuba. Because sugar was more accessible than honey (which was previously used by the Yorùbá), it was common in ceremonial practices.[123] Sugar was also "a main ingredient in the slave diet, providing labourers with an 'energy boost' to fuel them in the cane fields and boiling-houses, where they sometimes put in two eight-hour shifts a day."[124] Thus, Campos-Pons' incorporation of performance grounds these bittersweet poetics. Offering sugarcane to museumgoers sweetens their palate while connecting their alimentary tracts to a bittersweet history. Pérez asserts that "once [food is] infused with *ashé,*[125] it becomes an extension of the orisha's person, and eating it acts to redistribute the ashé and seal blessings into the human body [that would be] impossible to obtain without direct corporeal absorption."[126]

A poetics of relationality reveals itself in the production of the blown glass works when analyzed in the context of Santería. Grinding is a motif that recurs through practices, with practitioners often using a mortar to grind plant matter into a substance used for rituals.[127] The

[121] Pérez, 175.
[122] Pérez, 180.
[123] Pérez, 177.
[124] Pérez, 177.
[125] Ashé describes sacred energy. See: Aisha Beliso-De Jesús, "Santería Copresence and the Making of African Diaspora Bodies," *Cultural Anthropology* 29, no. 3 (2014): 510.
[126] Pérez, "Crystallizing subjectivities,"181.
[127] Beliso-De Jesús, "Santería Copresence," 511.

grinding of herbs is directly related to the process required to grind sugar. Beliso-De Jesús connects the grinding of sugar and herbs to "the grinding of bodies in slavery,"[128] in the literal sense where bodies along assembly lines and in sugarcane fields bump against each other as they work in close proximity. The metaphorical grinding constitutes the emotional and physical weariness of enslavement, where labourers' bodies deteriorate under the harsh conditions of the plantation. There is a relationality between the labourers, which is central to the practice of Santería, as well as relationality and community required for the production of the exhibition. The sheer size of the blown glass works indicates that Campos-Pons required a team to construct the installations. Like most exhibitions, Campos-Pons could not have completed it in isolation. As a part of my care and anti-colonial methodology, the notions of community and relationality are foundational to preserving histories concerning enslaved and indentured labourers. Locating a poetics of relation makes it possible to trace the gastropoetics imbued in this exhibition. The prevalence of Santería emphasizes this thread of relationality, which is intentional and integral to attending to Cuban gastropoetics.

The thread of relationality ties into Tao Leigh Goffe's theorization of *sugarwork*, which will be discussed in the following subsection. Goffe categorizes Campos-Pons' and multidisciplinary artist Andrea Chung's artwork within her definition of sugarwork, particularly in their use of sugar to contend with colonial histories. Both Chung and Campos-Pons are descendants of enslaved and indentured labourers, and sugarwork becomes a reorientation of a material that connects to the subjugation of their ancestors. Implementing *sugarwork* creates a poetics of intergenerational relationality, where the artworks produced by each artist activate the histories tied to their ancestry.

[128] Beliso-De Jesús, 511.

Sugar as a Sticky elixir

In his book *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar,* Ortiz frequently privileges the tobacco grower as an artisan[129] and the sugar labourer as expendable.[130] Despite Ortiz's clear vision of sugar production as artless and unskilled, he does assert it as essential to human life. He writes: "Sugar goes gluttonously down the gullet into the intestines, where it is converted to muscle-strengthening vigour… Sugar affords nourishment: carbohydrates… [and] has its medicinal side and is even a basic element of our psychological make-up, producing psychological disturbances by its deficiency or by its excess."[131] Similarly to Campos-Pons, Ortiz identifies this tension that sugar holds, which is essential for our cellular makeup but can potentially harm us if consumed excessively. Still, the fact that it is needed on a microbial level to survive contributes to its potential as a healing tool or as an elixir in the case of Campos-Pons.

I will take the notion of sugar as an elixir further, using *sugarwork.* Goffe contends that sugarwork centers artworks that use sugar as a central medium and:

> conceptualize the concomitant cycles of labour, energy, and reproduction that fuelled the colonial-era production of sugar and its connection to the present… The confectionary resonance of sugarwork gives texture to the sugar production cycle—the planting, harvesting, and refining of sugarcane—in tandem with the actual digestion of sugar as fuel for the labour of black and Asian bonded workers. Beyond the extraction of labour, sugarwork, as I describe here, is a form of poetics. It is a repurposing by the descendants of enslavement and indenture, especially in the context of the contemporary moment.[132]

Goffe argues that through Campos-Pons' application of sugar, she "slow[s] the process of decay,"[133] or even degradation of colonial-era Caribbean histories. This exhibition's elixir lies in the stickiness, the rejection of erasure and the pursuit of remembrance. During her performance,

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[129] Ortiz, "Cuban Counterpoint," 40
[130] Ortiz, 30.
[131] Ortiz, 10.
[132] Goffe, "Sugarwork," 34-35.
[133] Goffe, 54

the sugarcane cut, harvested and distributed by Campos-Pons, reveals the pertinent connection to Goffe's theorization. Privileging sugar as a tool for remembrance, despite the pain linked to its production. Thus, this frame becomes a way "of preserving, or making [these histories] sticky… [which] slows the process of decay."[134] *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* similarly preserves immaterial histories in the crystalline structures of sugar.

Campos-Pons affirmed the framing of sugarcane as an elixir in the exhibition context. She says that "a small quantity is healing; it balances your body."[135] While I have argued the importance of taste as a tool to access immaterial histories, the healing component is integral. It ensures an attentive approach to the people and histories activated through *Alchemy of the Souls, Elixir for the Spirits.*

[134] Goffe, 54.
[135] Campos-Pons and Lewis-Cappellari, "On the Art of Alchemy," E-6.

Conclusion

In Campos-Pons' *Alchemy of the Soul,* memory perseveres and materializes. It inflates into glass, carries through the smells and sounds whirling through the space, and is imbued into sugarcane. Basseches writes: "Campos-Pons' artistic practice has focused on the power and fragility of memory. Is what you remember real or is it a fragmented recreation of experience distilled through later events and a mixture of hope, joy, longing and loss?"[136] This notion of fragility echoes through the delicate assembly of Campos-Pons' blown glass installations. Although the blown glass pieces evoke themes of delicacy, I argue here for the significance of memory's resilience and endurance and its crucial role in this exhibition. Memory is not entirely unreliable or frivolous in its engagement with history. Individual memory is necessary to construct the past, especially in the context of histories coming out of colonial-era Cuba. As quoted earlier, Campos-Pons describes our bodies as makers of alchemy,[137] extending this alchemic practice to our bodily functions. Bodily alchemy turns the sweetness of sugarcane into a personal memory, the smell of rum into a reflection on colonial-era Cuba, or the sounds of distillation into an utterance. The artist's alchemic prompts, plus the museumgoer's alchemic intervention, turn this exhibition into a place of becoming. Campos-Pons unifies seemingly disparate concepts and groups of people and constantly rides the line of supposed tension to create a site of possibility.

Although almost a decade has passed since the opening of *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* at the Peabody, it remains relevant to contemporary cultural discourse. In the last five years, there has been a boom in scholarship within gastropoetics, with various scholars looking to alimentary tracts affected through colonial systems to fill in the gaps of ruptured material

[136] Campos-Pons and Lewis-Cappellari, E-6.
[137] Campos-Pons and Lewis-Cappellari, E-7.

archives.[138] As argued by Goffe, the alimentary tract offers a "textured" understanding of the variance of imperial and colonial violence.[139]

As time passes, using the immaterial as a method of remembrance and historical excavation will become more strenuous and immaterial histories will deteriorate. Therefore, artworks and creative interventions such as *Alchemy of the Soul, and Elixir for the Spirits* make these once transitory histories concrete. The immaterial will be considered, although scholars and artists can rely on more than speculative and fabulative methods to engage with colonial-era histories. I have carved out this particular area of interest within gastropoetics by thinking through *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits.* Art historical scholarship still needs to gain the vocabulary to engage with artworks that incite multisensory experiences, and there still is much work to be done within the field of psychophysics to fortify links between the senses and memory.

While contemporary scholarship emerges to contend with the significance of immaterial histories for colonial-era histories, the following steps would be to further establish the link between cultural memory and taste and smell. Fortifying this link will open a conversation about interculturality, which becomes available through sensuous knowledge transfers. Additionally, the emergence of such scholarship centres on the importance of tasting and smelling as research methods, which will enrich art historical fields, as it often fails to consider the potential of these sensuous modes of interpretation. Although I could not experience the exhibition in person, texts that paid particular attention to the multisensory elements of Campos-Pons' work, like Zavala, Goffe and Lewis-Cappelari, ensured my engagement was rich. Thus, I hope that this thesis, and

[138] A simple search of the term 'gastropoetics' in any academic search engine will produce of plethora of results across fields. Scholars like Tao Leigh Goffe, Maya Parmar, Rachel Berger and Endia L. Hayes use gastropoetics as a way to interrogate histories on the margins of canoninzed discourse.
[139] Goffe, "Sugarwork," 33.

the scholarship I produce in the future work similarly in helping provide scholars, artists and researchers with the necessary tools to engage with multisensory artworks and exhibitions.

Despite the neglect of the olfactory and gustatory elements through the exhibition catalogue, Campos-Pons provided museum-goers in Salem with a rich multisensory experience, predating so much critical scholarship in gastropoetics and sensory studies. The title of this exhibition, *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits*, encapsulates everything needed to understand Campos-Pons' impact—using alchemy as a tool to reframe and distill histories ladened with violence into pieces of art that do not reproduce the same brutality. The alchemic interventions coupled with bittersweet elixirs allow the rich, complex, painful and beautiful poetics to be sat with. As I have stressed throughout this thesis, what is so important about this exhibition is its affordance of possibility. It is a way forward, honouring the past but ensuring there's a way upward, a space for becoming or where the world can unfold[140] despite the previously afforded stasis. In the land of blown glass monuments, sugar pine structures, and rum, dreams, spirits, visions and affects can be felt but not captured.

[140] Sara Ahmed, "A phenomonology of whiteness," *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007): 151.

Figures

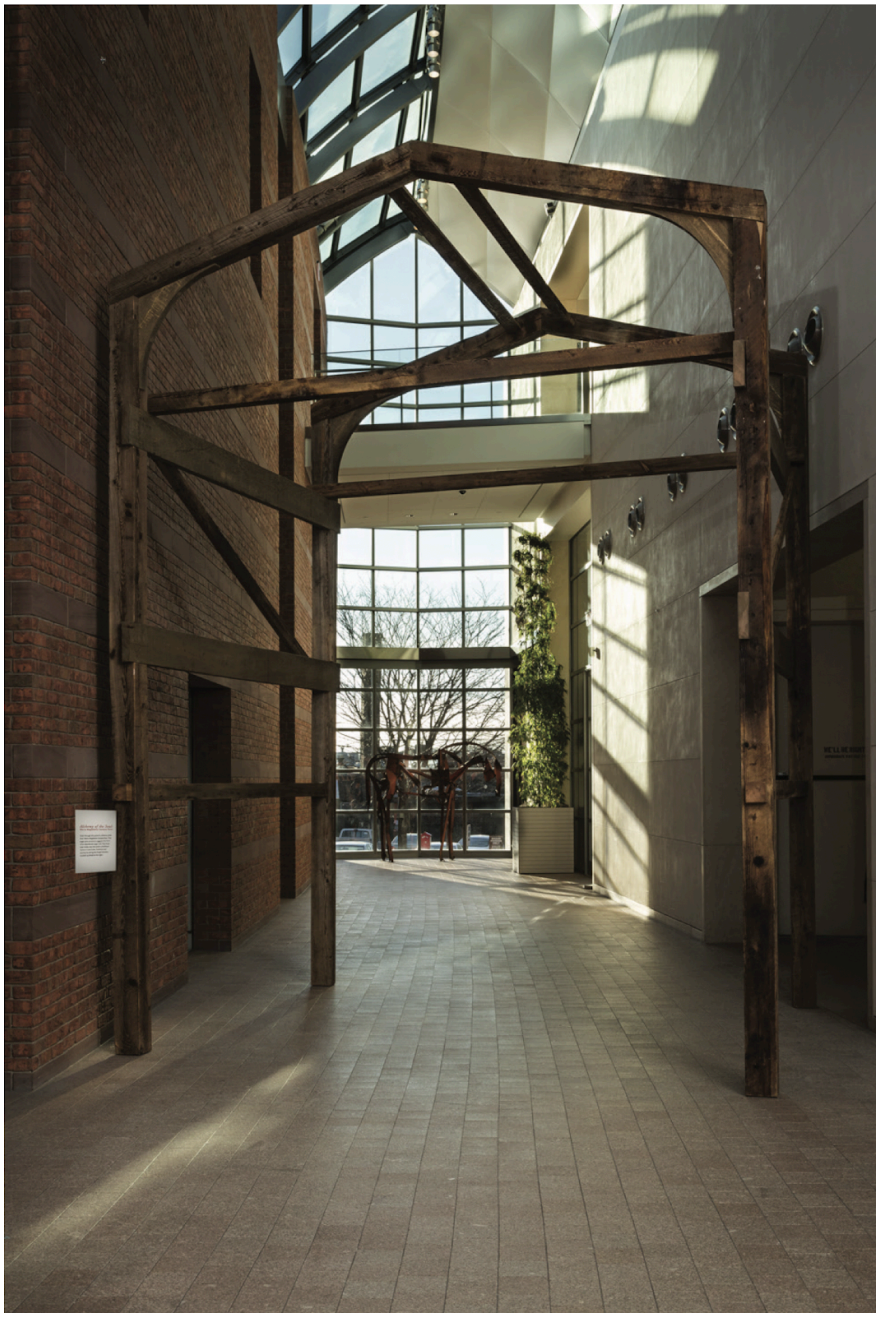

Figure 1. María Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits,* 2015, view of sugar pine structure at the entrance, first floor, Peabody Essex Museum. Photo by Kathy Tarantola.

Figure 2. Campos-Pons looking at factory Sergio Gonzales (formerly Tinguaro, Limonar, Matanzas Cuba, August 2015. Photograph by Emily fry/PEM.

Figure 3. María Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Alchemy of the Soul Elixir for the Spirits,* 2015, burlap sacks, wooden pallets, wooden boxes, vinyl player, speakers, dimensions variable, commissioned by the Peabody Essex Museum. Photographs by Peter Vanderwarker.

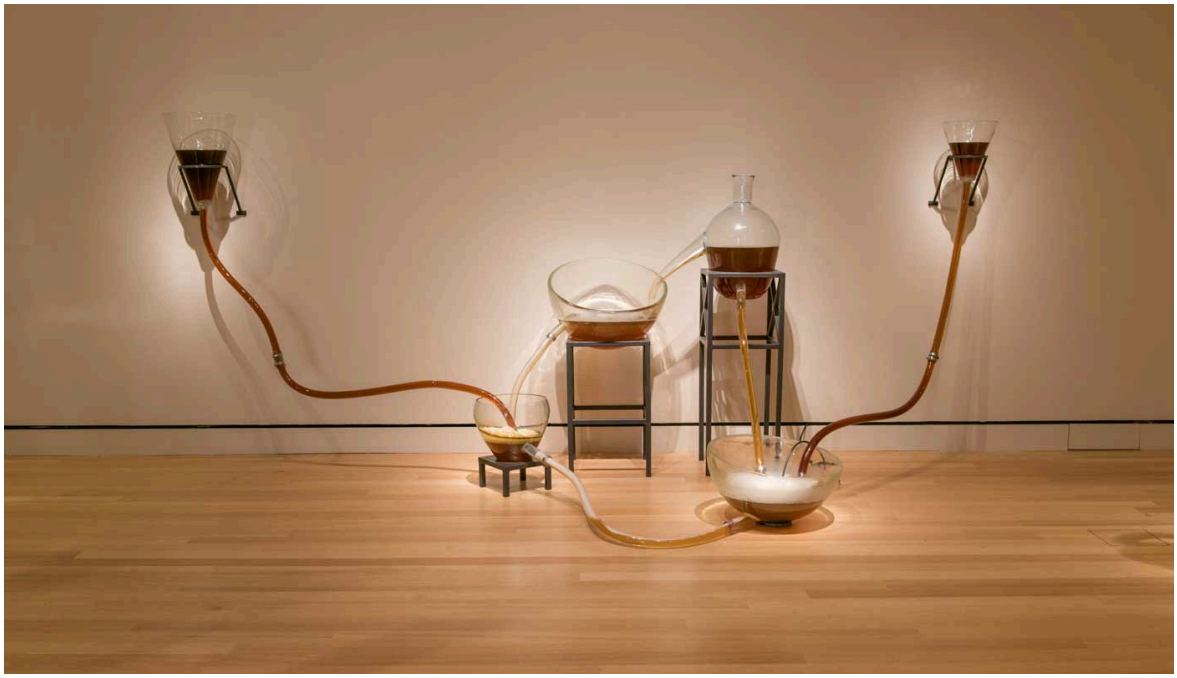

Figure 4. María Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Alchemy of the Soul Elixir for the Spirits,* 2015, blown glass, cast glass, steel, cast resin, silicone, acrylic, polyvinyl chloride rubbing, water, and rum essence, dimensions variable, commissioned by the Peabody Essex Museum. Photographs by Peter Vanderwarker.

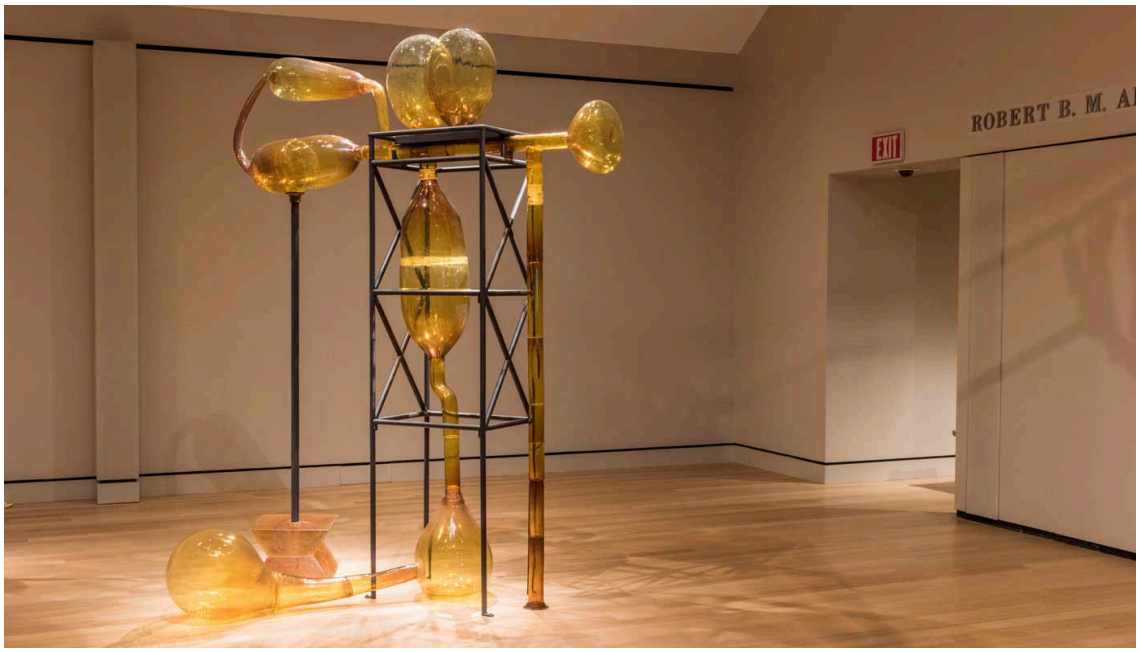

Figure 5. María Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Alchemy of the Soul Elixir for the Spirits,* 2015, amber blown glass, cast glass, steel, cast resin, silicone, acrylic and polyvinyl chloride rubbing, dimensions variable, commissioned by the Peabody Essex Museum. Photographs by Peter Vanderwarker.

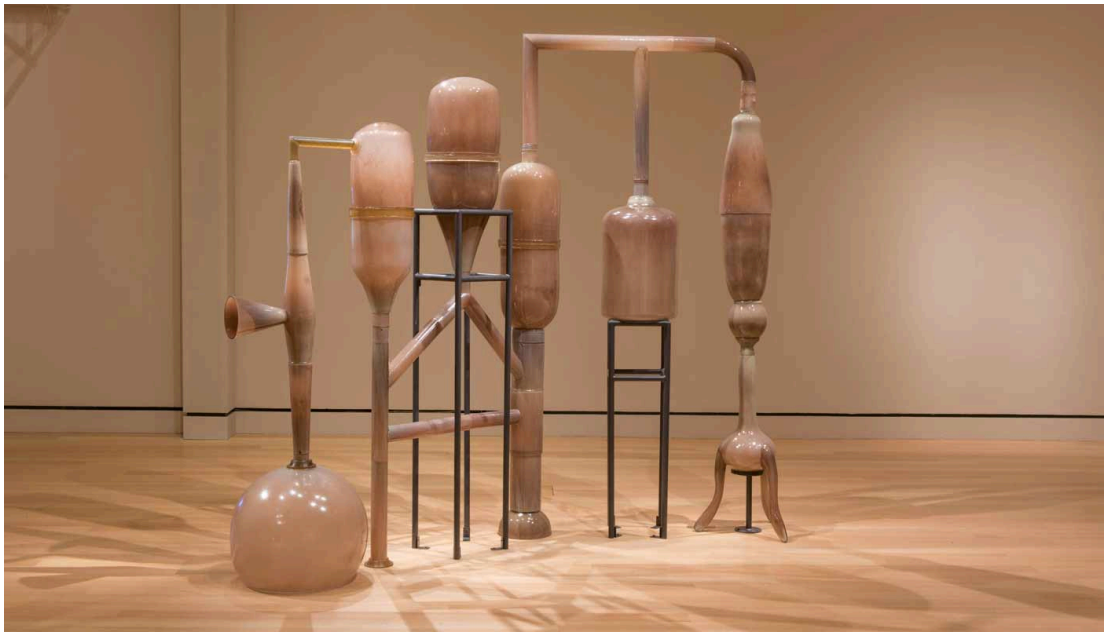

Figure 6. María Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Alchemy of the Soul Elixir for the Spirits,* 2015, brown blown glass, cast glass, steel, cast resin, silicone, acrylic and polyvinyl chloride rubbing, dimensions variable, commissioned by the Peabody Essex Museum. Photographs by Peter Vanderwarker.

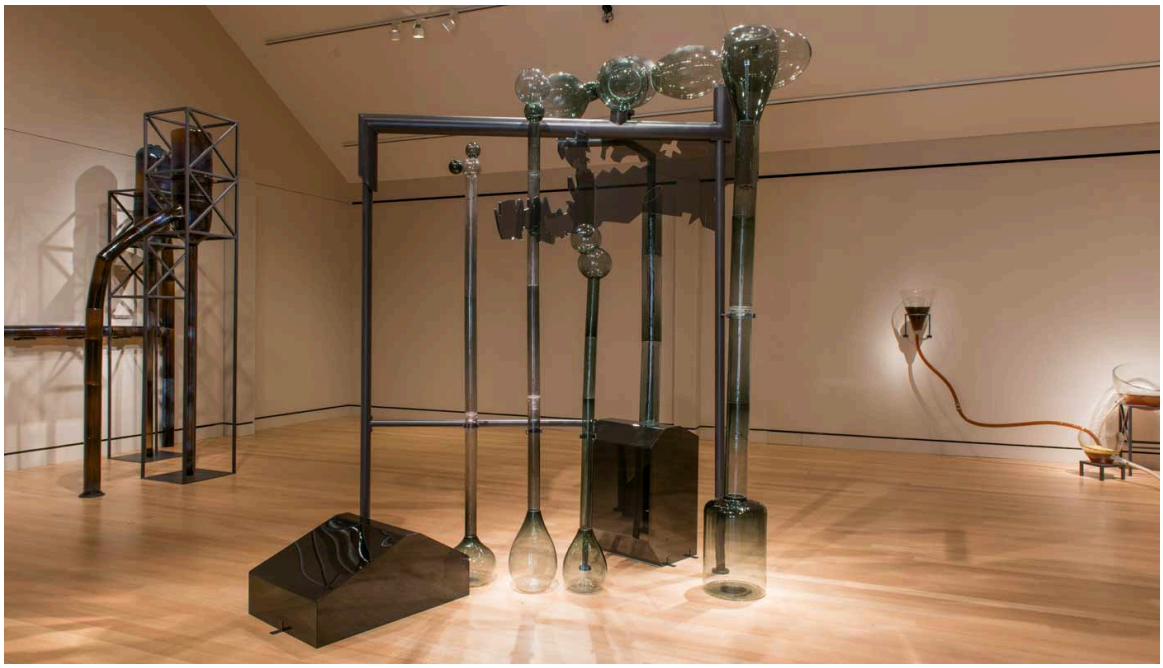

Figure 7. María Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Alchemy of the Soul Elixir for the Spirits,* 2015, green blown glass, cast glass, steel, cast resin, silicone, acrylic and polyvinyl chloride rubbing, dimensions variable, commissioned by the Peabody Essex Museum. Photographs by Peter Vanderwarker.

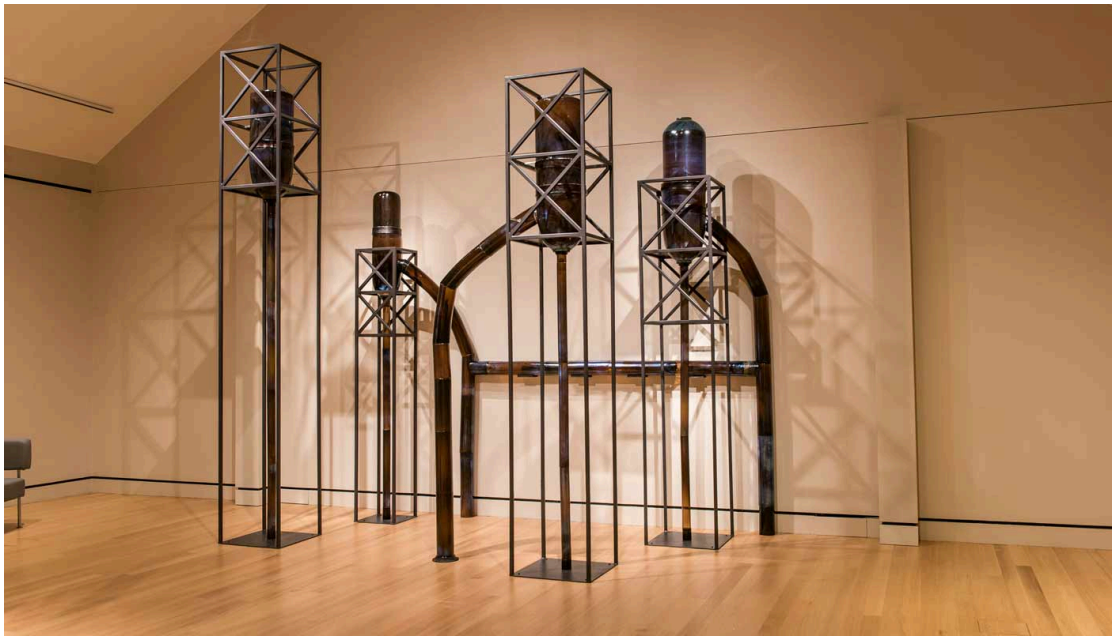

Figure 8. María Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Alchemy of the Soul Elixir for the Spirits,* 2015, purple blown glass, cast glass, steel, cast resin, silicone, acrylic and polyvinyl chloride rubbing, dimensions variable, commissioned by the Peabody Essex Museum. Photographs by Peter Vanderwarker.

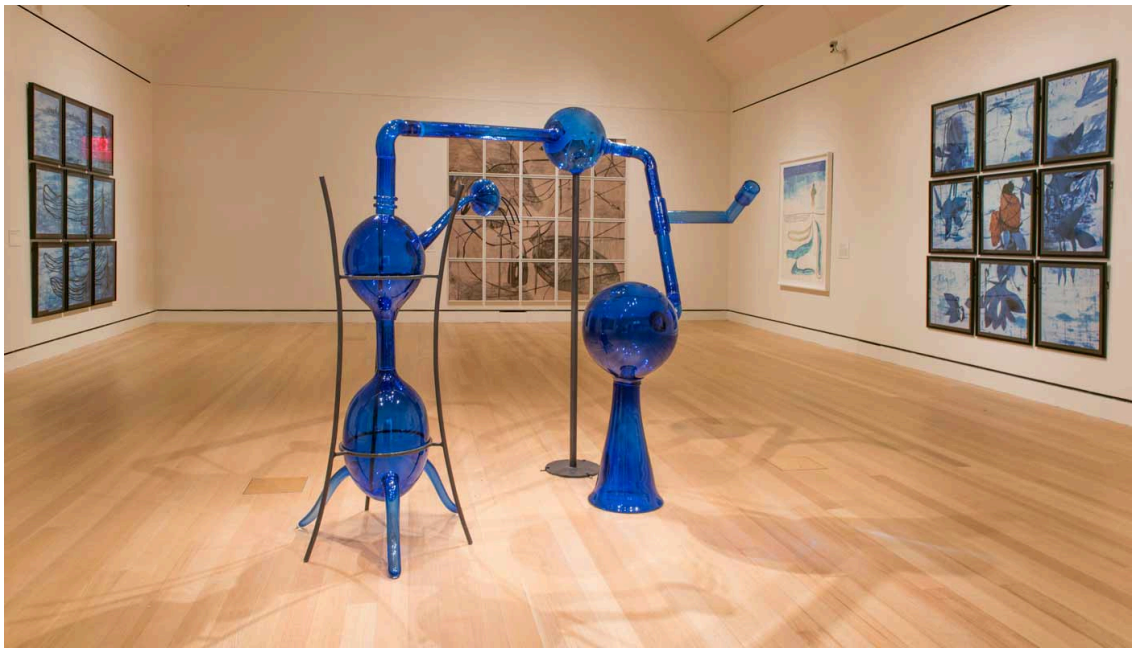

Figure 9. María Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Alchemy of the Soul Elixir for the Spirits,* 2015, blue blown glass, cast glass, steel, cast resin, silicone, acrylic and polyvinyl chloride rubbing, dimensions variable, commissioned by the Peabody Essex Museum. Photographs by Peter Vanderwarker.

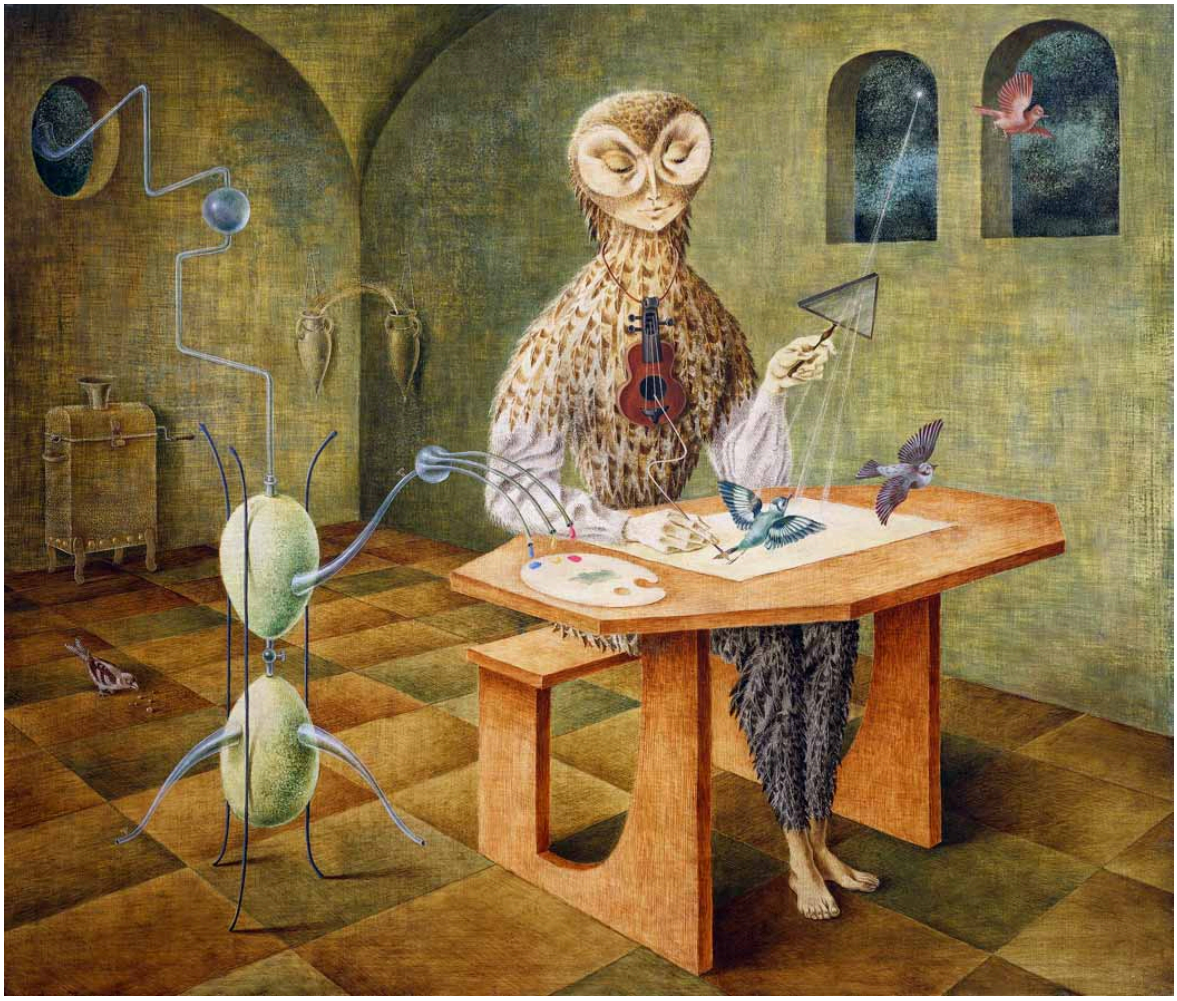

Figure 10. Remedios Varo, *Creación de las Aves Creation of the Birds),* 157, oil on masonite, 21 ¾ x 25 ¼ in. Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City, Mexico. De Agostini Picture Library/ G. Dagli Orti/Bridgeman Images.

Figure 11. María Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Dreaming of an Island*, 2008, 9 dye diffusion on transfer (Polaroid) prints, 24 x 20 in. each, von Christierson Collection. Courtesy of the von Christierson Collection.

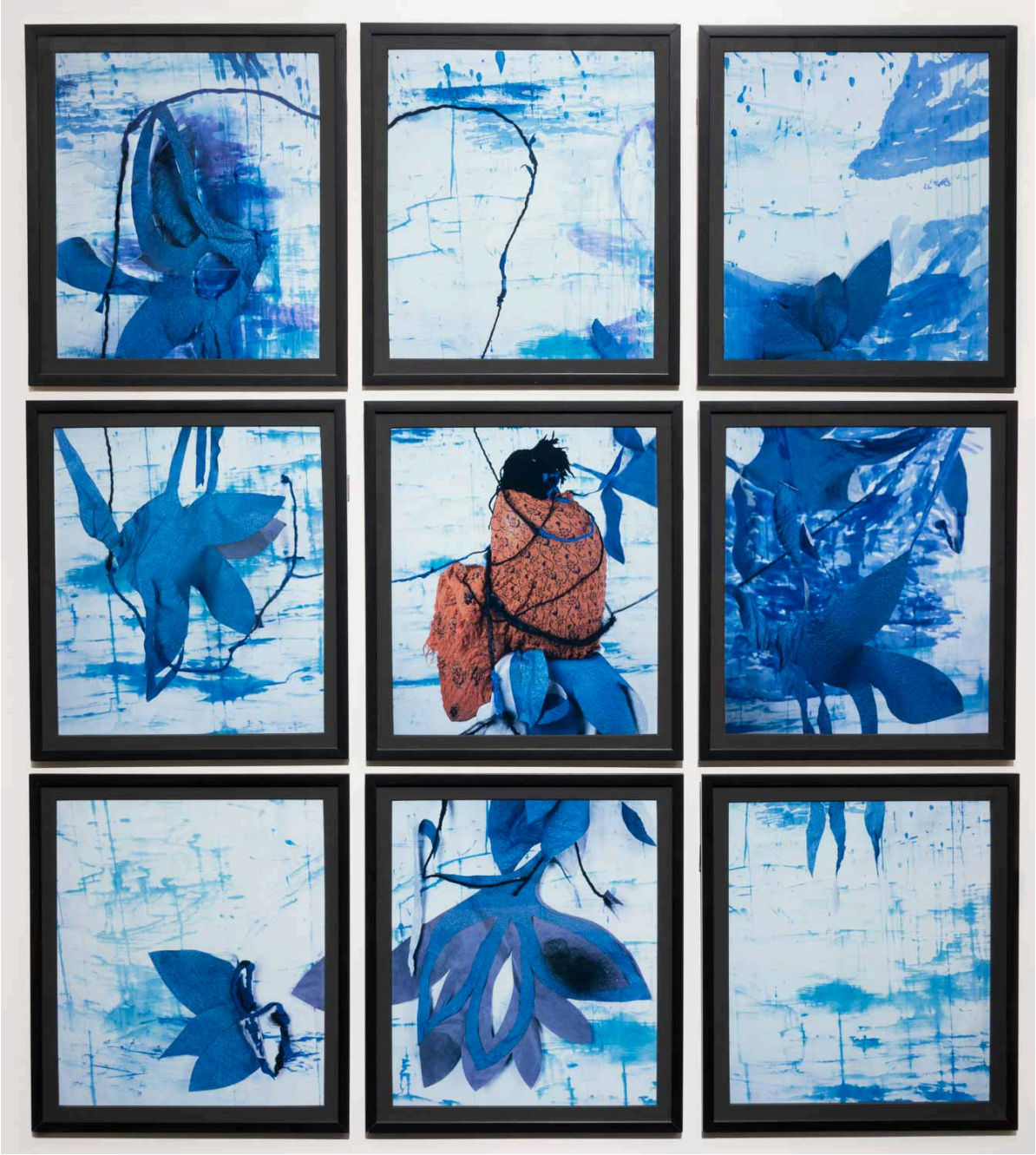

Figure 12. María Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Blue Refuge,* 2008, 9 dye diffusion transfer (Polaroid) prints, 24 x 20 in. each, deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Museum Purchase with funds provided by members of the deCordova Collections and Exhibitions Committee and the Frederick P Walkey Fund, a gift of the Stephen and Sybil Stone Foundation, 2009. Photo by Kathy Tarantola, PEM.

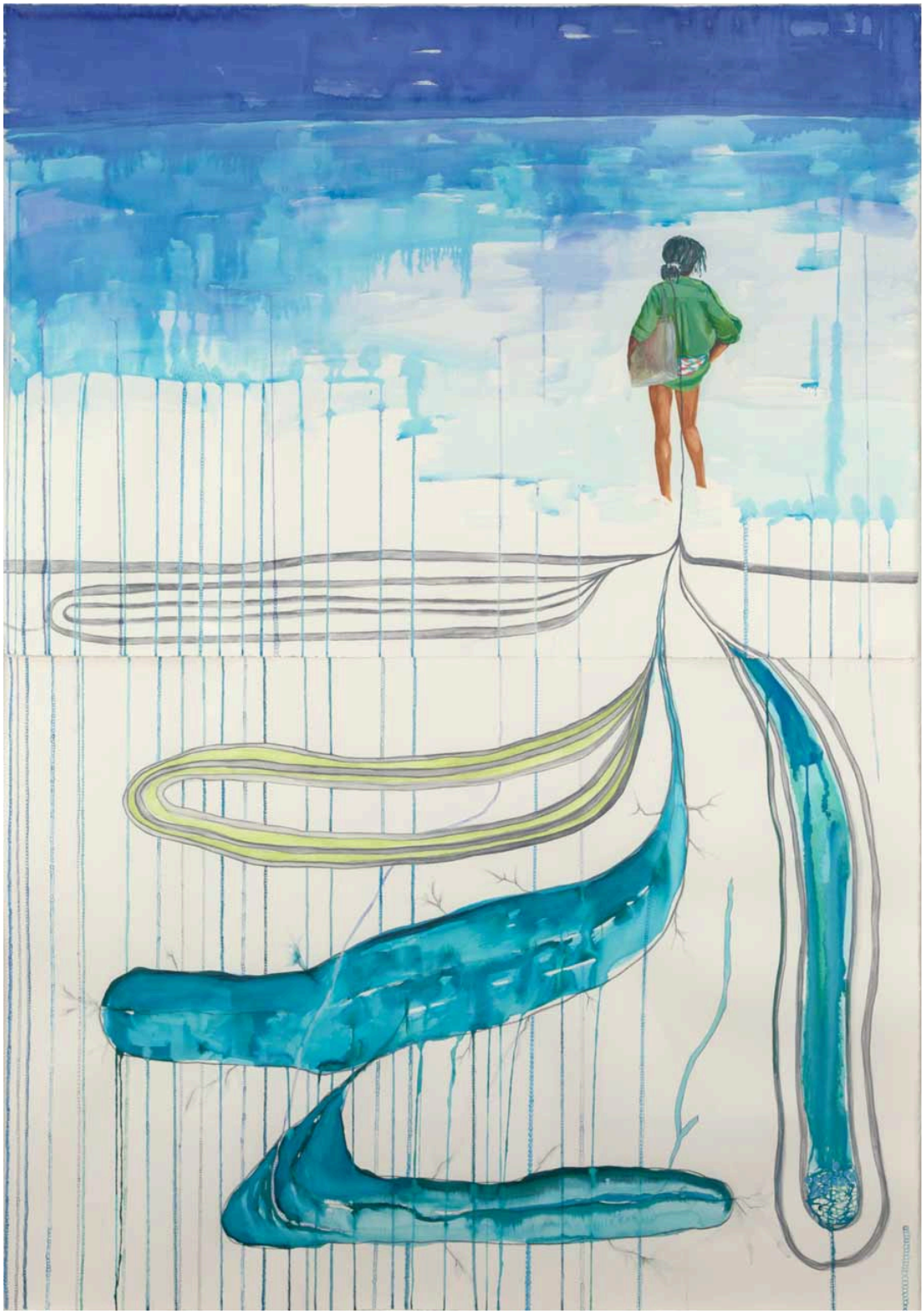

Figure 13. María Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Thinking of It,* 2008, watercolour, gouache, ink, and pencil on paper, 73 x 51 ⅝ in., Shelley and Donald Rubin Private Collection. Courtesy of the Shelly and Donald Rubin Foundation.

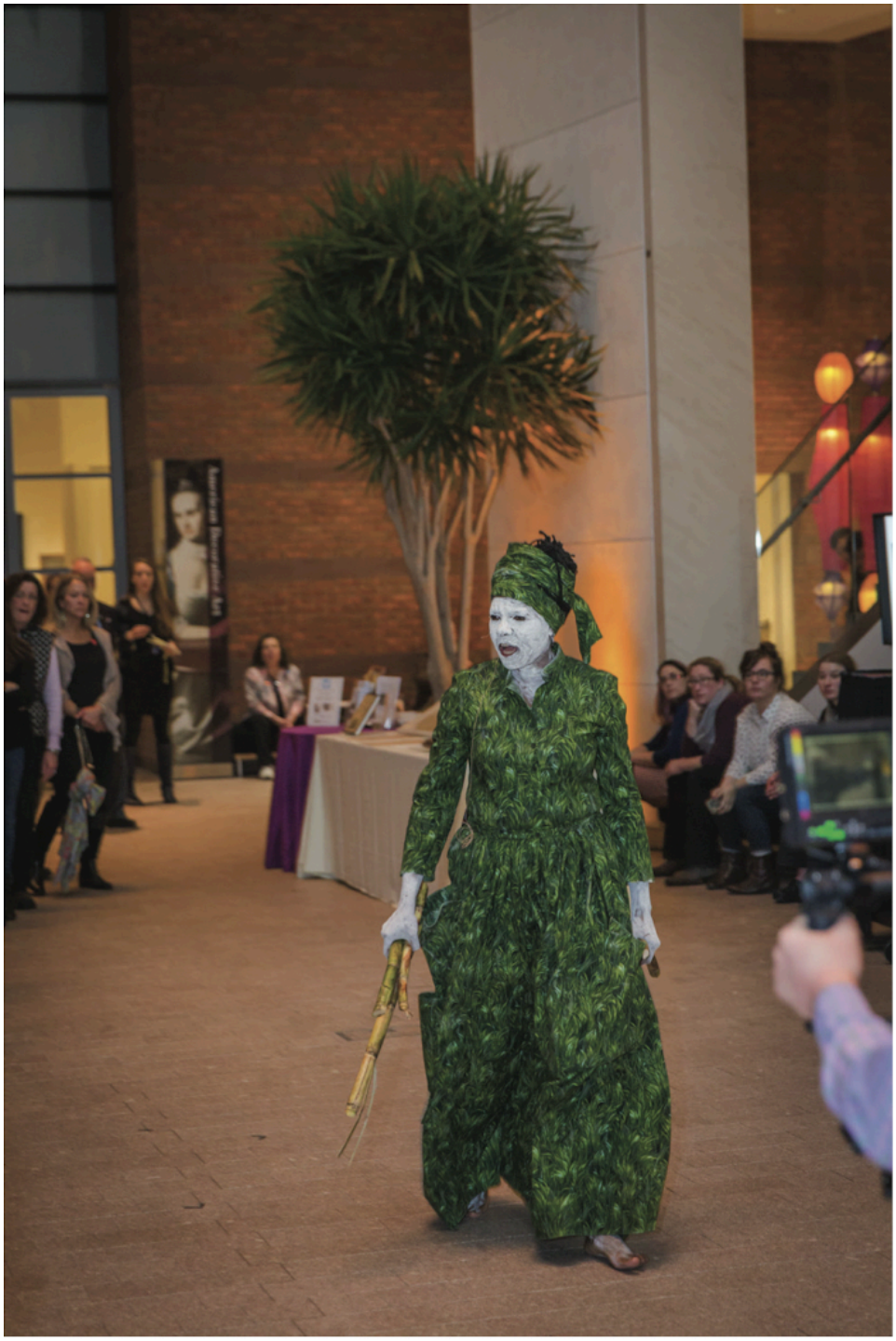

Figure 14. María Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Agridulce* performance at the Peabody Essex Museum, January 21, 2016. Photo by John Andrews.

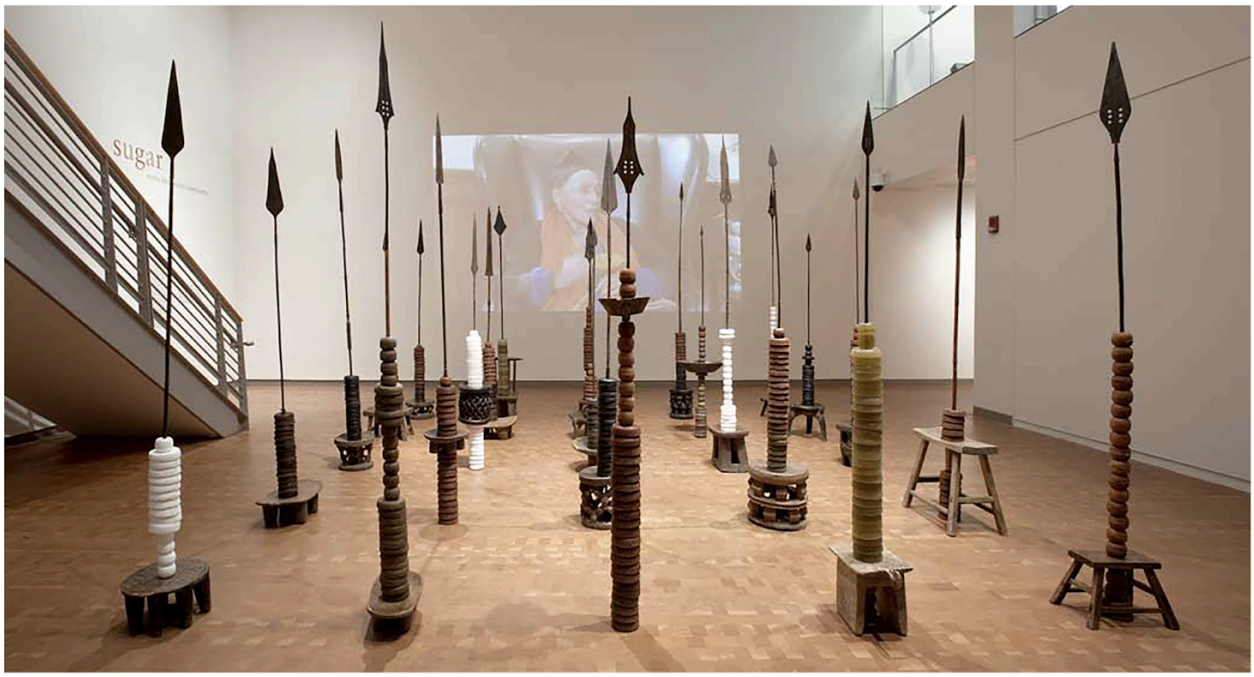

Figure 15. *Sugar/Bittersweet,* 2010, Mixed-media installation (wood, glass, raw sugar, metal, video, stereo sound), dimensions variable, Photo by Kelvin Ma/Tufts University.

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