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REBECA MÉNDEZ GUEST CURATES “SELECTS” EXHIBITION AT COOPER HEWITT

ON VIEW OCT. 5–JULY 10, 2019



SEPT. 18, 2018

As guest curator of the next exhibition in Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum’s acclaimed “Selects” series, artist and designer Rebeca Méndez investigates the interaction of humanity, nature, design and science. Drawn from the diverse collections of Cooper Hewitt, the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History and Smithsonian Libraries, “Rebeca Méndez Selects” is the 17th installation in the series in which designers, artists, architects and public figures are invited to guest curate an exhibition. It is on view Oct. 5 through July 10, 2019, in the Nancy and Edwin Marks Collection Gallery.

“Within the design world, Rebeca is an impassioned voice for environmental awareness through a multidisciplinary body of work rooted in her identity and elevated with her knowledge of science, history and visual culture,” said Caroline Baumann, director of Cooper Hewitt. “For this ambitious installation, Rebeca has assembled objects, from an extraordinary Resplendant Quetzal specimen to an autonomous flying microrobot about half the size of a paperclip, to illuminate design’s interplay with the natural world.”

“Rebeca Méndez Selects” spans five centuries and examines the spectrum of human interactions with birds, from observation and study to extraction and eradication. Among nearly 80 objects on view are 30 specimens representative of the birds that ruler Moctezuma II collected in his extensive private aviaries in Tenochtitlan, the city-state that served as the center of the Aztec empire in the 16th century. Following the capture of Tenochtitlan by Hernán Cortés and his soldiers, the aviary was burned. From the vantage of this calamitous moment of cultural contact, Méndez’s installation probes how

Europeans amassed material wealth at the expense of the environmental resources of the Americas. The exhibition's digital experience enables visitors to listen to birdcalls that would have resounded through the aviary, and to view historical codices.

Explorers' accounts ignited exotic visions of the Americas that for two centuries manifested as allegorical depictions of the region as a semi-nude indigenous woman adorned with feathers or accompanied by a bird, as in *America Figure ca. 1760*, manufactured by Meissen Porcelain Factory. Materials and resources extracted from the Americas, including birds mounted in lifelike poses, supplied *Kunstkammern* (cabinets of curiosities) like the one documented in *Dell'istoria natvrale di Ferrante Imperato Napolitano libri XXVIII*.

In contrast to the indiscriminate bird collectors of the past, ornithologists today are driven by conservation, education and research. A photograph of Smithsonian forensic ornithologist Roxie Collie Laybourne (1910–2003) among drawers of bird specimens evokes both the *Kunstkammer* and Laybourne's life-saving work consulting on airplane-design modifications in response to bird strikes.

The study of birds spurs innovative design experiments. The Smithsonian's first curator of birds Robert Ridgway (1850–1929) standardized the names of colors that ornithologists used to describe birds, work that is foundational to the color systems that designers and manufacturers employ today. Contemporary designers experiment with a range of techniques and materials to capture avian characteristics. Overlapping rows of hammered, flattened steel nails in a 1983 necklace designed by Tone Vigeland resemble feathers; the digitally printed textile *Auden*, 2009, designed by Rodarte and produced by Knoll Luxe shimmers like plumage.

In addition, Méndez's video "CircumSolar Migration I" focuses on the nesting and breeding season of the arctic tern, a species that travels from the Arctic to the Antarctic to complete the longest recorded migration of any creature on Earth. The work serves as a meditation on human movement and survival in an era of ecological disaster and social unrest.

"As humans, we cannot continue to think of ourselves as outside the planetary equation," Méndez said. "If we desire the survival of our own species, then we must change our ways and become more attuned with the natural world and other life-forms. Design can help us do this by creating narratives that help us understand the world and our place in it."

"Rebeca Méndez Selects" is made possible by the Marks Family Foundation Endowment Fund.

PUBLIC PROGRAMMING

Méndez will lead a master-class workshop Oct. 17, 1–4 p.m., in which she will present recent projects and introduce the CounterForce Lab, a research and fieldwork studio



based at UCLA's Design Media Arts and the School of the Arts and Architecture. Méndez will also join in conversation with Associate Curator of Latino Design Christina De León Jan. 31, 6:30–8 p.m, to discuss the process of researching and organizing the exhibition.

ABOUT REBECA MÉNDEZ

Rebeca Méndez was born in México City in 1962. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts (1984) and Master of Fine Arts (1996) from Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, California. In 1996 she founded Rebeca Méndez Design, a multidisciplinary design studio in Los Angeles. Her design research and practice is in brand strategy and design, architectural immersive spaces, experience design and book design. She is a recipient of the 2012 National Design Award for Communication Design and the Medal of AIGA. Her work has been exhibited extensively throughout the United States, Latin America and Europe. She is currently a professor in the department of Design Media Arts and Director of the CounterForce Lab at University of California, Los Angeles.

ABOUT COOPER HEWITT, SMITHSONIAN DESIGN MUSEUM

Cooper Hewitt is America's design museum. Inclusive, innovative and experimental, the museum's dynamic exhibitions, education programs, master's program, publications and online resources inspire, educate and empower people through design. An integral part of the Smithsonian Institution—the world's largest museum and research complex—Cooper Hewitt is located on New York City's Museum Mile in the historic, landmark Carnegie Mansion. Steward of one of the world's most diverse and comprehensive design collections—over 210,000 objects that range from an ancient Egyptian faience cup dating to about 1100 BCE to contemporary 3D-printed objects and digital code—Cooper Hewitt welcomes everyone to discover the importance of design and its power to change the world. Cooper Hewitt knits digital into experiences to enhance ideas, extend reach beyond museum walls, and enable greater access, personalization, experimentation and connection. In 2018, the London Design Biennale awarded a medal to Cooper Hewitt for its presentation "Face Values," an immersive installation that explores the pervasive but often hidden role of facial-detection technology in contemporary society.

Cooper Hewitt is located at 2 East 91st Street at Fifth Avenue in New York City. Hours are Sunday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., and Saturday, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. The Arthur Ross Terrace and Garden, accessible without an admissions ticket, opens at 8 a.m., Monday through Friday. The Tarallucci e Vino café is open Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., Saturday, 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., and Sunday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. The museum is closed on Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day. Public transit routes include the Lexington Avenue 4, 5 and 6 subways (86th or 96th Street stations), the Second Avenue Q subway (96th Street station), and the Fifth and Madison Avenue buses. Adult admission, \$16 in advance via tickets.cooperhewitt.org, \$18 at door; seniors, \$10 in advance via tickets.cooperhewitt.org, \$12 at door; students, \$7 in advance via tickets.cooperhewitt.org, \$9 at door. Cooper Hewitt members and children younger than age 18 are admitted free. Pay What You Wish every Saturday, 6 to 9 p.m. The museum is



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fully accessible.

For further information, call (212) 849-8400, visit Cooper Hewitt's website at www.cooperhewitt.org and follow the museum on www.twitter.com/cooperhewitt, www.facebook.com/cooperhewitt and www.instagram.com/cooperhewitt.

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