# FOREWORD

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Educator, psychologist, cultural historian, curator, activist, mentor . . . Artist Amalia Mesa-Bains is a polymath whose integrative work across a range of fields has contributed to a broader appreciation of Chicana/o art and culture within mainstream museums, foundations, and universities as well as community-based centros and galerías. Her body of art—and her curatorial, scholarly, and advocacy work—is centered in the day-to-day world of home, work, and public life. This is also a world of diverse cultural expression, political struggle, communal spirituality, and social change. As an artist, Mesa-Bains draws from Mexican and Chicana/o history, cultural traditions, and community making, bringing them into dialogue at a formal level through the art she creates, producing new content but also revisiting and revising earlier works. Her perspective is transhistorical, rather than grounded in specific nation-building or nationalist projects that attempt to unify a "people" under a common identity or aesthetic, and as such her artwork proposes a more dynamic, flexible, and inclusive approach to representing the Mexican-descent peoples in the United States. The Mexican nation-state often defined itself in terms of mestizaje (the racial and cultural mixture of European and Indigenous peoples). While Mesa-Bains's mestizo heritage has always been integral to her work, she also considers the Indigenous, African, and European presence in Mexican culture.

In the 1970s, as an emerging artist and activist, Mesa-Bains turned to the traditional domestic art of the home altar and the ofrenda (fig. 1). She brought these forms of family and cultural memory into community-oriented public spaces, where they acquired new roles with respect to social engagement, community building, and collective memory through the arts. She sought to make visible the growing Mexican and Chicana/o presence in the United States by moving her work from the private space of the home to public spaces within the community. Throughout her career, Mesa-Bains has grounded her work in what she calls "domesticana," a Chicana feminist emphasis on

Figure 1. Amalia Mesa-Bains, *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Rio*, 1984/1991. Plywood, mirrors, fabric, framed photographs, found objects, dried flowers, and glitter, 96 × 72 × 48 inches. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC.

domesticity, spirituality, affirmation, and resistance. She finds exemplars in mythical, religious, historical, and present-day women that include Queen Calafia, the Virgen de Guadalupe, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Dolores Huerta, and the artist's own family and mentors. Mesa-Bains was among the first artists to champion Frida Kahlo in the United States. In the 1970s, Kahlo was as unknown to mainstream American audiences as other Mexican figures, both mythical and historical, going back to the pre-Colombian period.

Mesa-Bains's *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Rio* marked the artist's shift from home altars to a hybrid of the traditional home altar and contemporary installation art—what author Tomás Ybarra-Frausto calls an "altar-installation."[1] Created in 1984, the work has undergone several transformations, and a version from the early 1990s entered the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum in 1998. The original work was part of a Day of the Dead exhibition held at the Mexican Museum of San Francisco, which has celebrated the holiday since the museum's founding in the mid-1970s. The museum had recently relocated from the Mission District, a diverse Latina/o neighborhood, to the Fort Mason Center for Arts and Culture on the city's northern waterfront.[2] In this moment the institution and the artist were each expanding their approach to the arts.

The altar-installation was created to honor Dolores del Río, who had passed away earlier that year, and who had been a major film star during the "golden age" of Hollywood and Mexican cinemas. Born to Mexican aristocracy, a point used to promote her early silent roles in Hollywood, del Río occupied an international social position that was at best speculative for Mexican Americans and Chicana/os. But she also used her position to advocate for the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee, a community organization formed to support Mexican American youth who had been falsely accused and convicted of murder in the early 1940s.[3] Mesa-Bains felt a personal connection with del Río, having met the actor the year before her death, and del Río's successful career in the hemisphere's two major film industries made del Río a unique figure among Mesa-Bains's pantheon of empowered women. As a global celebrity. Dolores del Río's passing was mourned over international newswire services and, no doubt, in ofrendas in the homes of many of her fans.

With *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Rio*, Mesa-Bains brought the actor into a Mexican cultural tradition that was being adapted for a broader museum-going audience in San Francisco. The altar-installation offered a new form that could hold a wide range of oppositions in dialogue: the religious and the secular, the traditional and the modern, the domestic and the museal, the minority and the majority, the Spanish-speaking and the English-speaking, and mass entertainment and gallery-based art. The ofrenda—an offering, gift, or contribution—of the altar-installation resides in the sustained simultaneity of these oppositions rather than their synthesis.

The traditional ofrenda creates a space within the home not only to commemorate the dead, but to allow their spirits to exist there. In situating this ritual in a museum, Mesa-Bains made a conceptual shift without leaving the home behind. Thus, *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Rio* references the ofrenda in making a place for the actor among the living. But Mesa-Bains replaced the traditional tiered structure of the ofrenda, usually arranged atop a table, with a minimalist evocation of a vanity, a domestic form she would develop in later altar-installations.[4] With this change, the annual ritual of the ofrenda became a daily ritual of maintaining the social self, which requires a distinct place in the home: a dressing table for women. From its aristocratic origins in the late seventeenth century, the vanity became common in the homes of the ascendant middle class of the industrial age, where it offered a creative space in which a woman could look into the mirror to "put on a face" and dress for public appearance. Mesa-Bains was drawn to the way in which the vanity functioned as a feminine archive with drawers and surfaces for personal objects, and many could be used for writing letters and diary entries. The word *archive* comes from the Greek *arkheion*, the domicile of an *archon* (in Spainish, *arcón*), a magistrate responsible for the official records deposited at the domicile. Mesa-Bains's archive also occupies a domestic space and documents a history, one she would theorize through the concept of domesticana.[5]

In *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Rio*, the dressing table is *very* low to the ground, and above it, where one would expect a mirror, is a dark gray panel (fig. 2). Mirrors run along the face of the table and reflect the dried flowers covering the floor in front of the table and the film cannisters, labeled with the titles of del Río's Mexican and Hollywood films, that are arranged on top of

Figure 2. Amalia Mesa-Bains, *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Río*, 1984/1991. Detail of film canisters arrayed in front of the ofrenda.

the flowers. On the dressing table's mirrored surface, alongside personal objects and items traditionally used in Day of the Dead festivities, Mesa-Bains centered a glamour photo of del Río. In around 1992, Mesa-Bains added a photograph of her mother, Marina González-Mesa, as a child, placing it beside the one of del Río (fig. 3).[6] González-Mesa and del Río were both immigrants who had fled the Mexican Revolution and settled in the United States. González-Mesa had seen del Río's Mexican films in Los Angeles in the 1940s, and she introduced her daughter to the films and their importance in her life. When Mesa-Bains

added her mother's photograph, she shifted the del Río image to the left. A slight overlapping of the two frames marks the artwork's revised lateral center, in effect bringing two worlds together through Mexican cinema and the ritual of the ofrenda. For Mesa-Bains, the altar-installation is "living": it is an active form of remembrance.

The altar space is framed by ornate eight-foot-tall pink satin drapes, suggesting access to a window or alcove. Such drapes are also used to add a touch of opulence to domestic spaces: living room, dining room, and bedroom. Finally, ornate drapes are a feature of classic theatrical spaces, presenting the stage or screen as a window into someone else's place and narrative. On either side of the ofrenda's drapes is a vertical series of four stills from del Rio's films, with Mexican roles on the left and Hollywood roles on the right. These film stills are at once part of the artwork and also indicative of the "public" world outside the formal draped boundaries of the ofrenda-vanity, which is figured as a private space, a liminal space, and also a borderland.

The del Río altar-installation shown in 1984 can be seen as the starting point for the appearance of Mesa-Bains's artwork within art museums and galleries, setting in motion an aesthetic and social dialogue across areas that have traditionally been seen as separate. This work, in all its variations, offers an experience rather than easy answers. To encounter Mesa-Bains's art is to be immersed in a space containing the remnants and markers of personal, social, cultural, and spiritual histories. These are arranged as objects within contexts that are mixed: the museum as domestic space, science lab, movie theater, ethnographic display.[7] But they also point toward a transformation, a blurring of the boundaries and the powers they claim in explaining a life, difference, and social value.

In *Transparent Migrations* (2001) (fig. 4), Mesa-Bains developed a powerful counterpart to *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Rio.* In place of the movie star, film culture, and the vanity, and their concern with public images, Mesa-Bains turned to the anonymous immigrant, migratory trails, and the armoire. Like the vanity, the armoire is related to the ritual of dressing and has distinct storage spaces, but its predecessor is a cabinet used to store armor and weapons. Here, instead of the politics of the imagined community, the material impact of colonialism and migrant labor are made visible. Mesa-Bains overlays the

Figure 3. Amalia Mesa-Bains, *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Rio*, 1984/1991. Detail of the lower shelf, with photographs of Dolores del Río and Marina González-Mesa, the artist's mother.

Figure 4. Amalia Mesa-Bains, *Transparent Migrations*, 2001. Mixed-media installation including mirrored armoire, sixteen glass leaves, assorted crystal miniatures, and shattered safety glass, 120 × 216 × 72 inches. Installation view, *Home—So Different, So Appealing*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2017.

landscape of the current-day militarized border with the "spiritual geographies" of a mythical origin in Aztlán.[8] The word *transparent* in the artwork's title has opposing meanings that derive from its etymological origin as something that is *seen through*: it is either invisible or easy to perceive. Thus, the title signals a paradox about migration: it reflects a shared need (for work and for workers) that results in discrimination, violence, and suffering among the most vulnerable. In *Transparent Migrations*, an armoire with mirrored doors is flanked by glass cacti sitting in a landscape of broken glass. Inside the armoire is a glass sculpture of the pre-Columbian city-state of Tenochtitlan, equating the archaeological past, the historical past, and the present day. The desert sands of human migration melt into glass, revealing the power relations and social contradictions hidden in domestic forms, cartography, and other attempts to control physical and cultural space.

In this book, author Tomás Ybarra-Frausto guides the reader across six decades, during which Mesa-Bains developed an artistic practice that was interwoven with her participation in the profound changes taking place in the United States, particularly in social and intellectual movements, activism, education, and the arts. It is no surprise that Mesa-Bains's work appeared in groundbreaking exhibitions and publications that pointed toward new possibilities for an inclusive art history. Among them were *Le démon des anges: 16 artistes "chicanos" al voltant de "Los Angeles*," which opened in 1989 at the Centre de Recherché pour le Développement Culturel in Nantes, France, and traveled through 1991; *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s*, held in 1990 at three venues in different New York neighborhoods (Studio Museum of Harlem, Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, and New Museum); and *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation*, which traveled for three years after opening at UCLA's Wight Art Gallery in 1990.

In weaving together art, biography, and cultural history, Ybarra-Frausto is not only an interlocutor but also a long-term friend and collaborator and an intellectual who is part of Mesa-Bains's generational cohort—those who came of age as participants in the Chicano movement. As a scholar, Ybarra-Frausto is exemplary in finding theoretical and allegorical power in everyday words and idiomatic phrases.[9] He is especially attuned to etymology and the evolution of spoken language. In his writings, he challenges the hegemony of English, using the Spanish-language words for everyday things and actions within the Chicana/o community and establishing such words-things-actions as the foundation for bringing the cultural memory of the Mexican-descent population into the US discourse on arts, culture, and social change. Finally, as an academic scholar with extensive experience as a thought leader in arts and culture exhibition and philanthropy worldwide, Ybarra-Frausto is equally attuned to Mesa-Bains's role as a change agent across different institutional and professional networks.

Mesa-Bains and Ybarra-Frausto developed their activism in two ways: first, in their leadership in and contributions to creating a *vernacular* critical discourse for "Chicana/o art" through art, exhibition, public dialogue, and writing; and second, in their direct engagement with the institutions through which art defines a community, a society, or a world. In both,

they articulated gendered, regional, and class variations through a practice of naming that reflected the internal complexity of a community. As first-generation college graduates and then PhDs, Mesa-Bains and Ybarra-Frausto brought their Chicana/o cultural, linguistic, and working-class backgrounds into the academy, not as a problem to be solved, but as a resource for a better scholarly understanding of the arts and the Americas. In academic settings in the 1970s, to be *critical* in the arts and humanities meant to engage in western philosophical and theoretical concepts, methods, and debates. The goal was to leave behind everyday language, especially the speech of regional, diasporic, or marginalized communities, and thereby reach for a higher truth about humans (or perhaps just the middle class). Instead, Mesa-Bains and Ybarra-Frausto spoke and wrote about home as the site of language, culture, knowledge, and the greater good. From their perspective, home is not the opposite of the public sphere, the political arena, or the marketplace; home is where these social institutions originated and where they can be changed.

It is a special honor for me to present this book, and I briefly to set aside the formality of last names and refer to the artist and the author as simply Amalia and Tomás. This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the launching of the A Ver: Revisioning Art History series. In its essence and genealogy, the series really began earlier, with Amalia and Tomás and their activism in scholarship, community-building, and the arts. To be clear, the A Ver series was not their idea. It is one I developed over the years as I sat on the floor in the arts section of bookstores, thumbing through artist monographs. I loved these books, but I never came across one dedicated to a Latina/o artist, even though I knew many established Cuban American, Mexican American, Puerto Rican, and other Latina/o artists whose work was just as moving as the art that filled the major art museums that I visited, museums in which the work of these Latina/o artists was absent. The A Ver series was not Amalia and Tomás's idea; instead, *I* was their idea—one scholar among the many who have been mentored by them.

As a professor, Tomás served as the chair of my dissertation committee, and, as a foundation associate director, Tomás provided a seed grant for this series, allowing me to develop the project and secure funding from a wide range of foundations

and private donors. But his impact goes well beyond formal education and professional support. He is a role model for the much more difficult process of making a life and not just a living. To be in Tomás's presence is to feel anchored in the world precisely because he is humble, soulful, and questioning. But he also conveys a sense of a breathing, living past through which we can think about our present. As an artist and curator, Amalia taught me how to prepare my first slide presentation on Chicana/o art. She talked me through the fine points of securing slides, interviewing artists, and organizing a general argument, and offered support while I prepared to dig into a formal analysis of each artwork. She brought multiple perspectives to the process, providing me with a reality check on how to bring Chicana/o art into art history and contemporary museum practice. After months of long phone calls with Amalia, I packed three carousels with 240 slides, flew to New York City, and presented the work of thirty Chicano and Chicana artists to the curatorial team of the 1993 Whitney Biennial, one of the watershed exhibitions of contemporary American art.

There's much more to say about these moments with Amalia and Tomás, but here I hope to convey what is most essential. They created a space—an ecosystem—for bringing Chicana/o art into the art world while remaining connected to the particulars that make art meaningful. Their critical work has always had an applied dimension. It was never enough to think or publish the good thought from an ivory tower, although that too was a goal. As activists, one had to engage social institutions, work in the community, bring research into public exhibition, and leave a paper trail of scholarly publications. As I was invited to curate exhibitions, Amalia insisted that no matter how rasquache the exhibition venue, or how small its budget, I had to insist on a publication that included my original research and analysis, even if that publication was just a brochure or program note—and even if I had to waive my stipend. When an exhibition ends, she argued, it leaves no trace other than in publications, and future generations need to be able to argue with us about what happened and what it meant. And then she laughed and laughed, as she and Tomás continue to do as they fight the good fight. From these essential things, we can all learn.