

TINA KIM GALLERY

Art in America

Puzzles and Promises

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Tania Pérez Córdova: *We focus on a woman facing sideways*, 2013–16, bronze, Swarovski crystal drop earring, and a woman wearing the other earring. COURTESY THE ARTIST

The materials list for Tania Pérez Córdova's *We Focus on a Woman Facing Sideways* (2013/17) reads as follows: "Bronze, Swarovski Crystal drop earring, and a woman wearing the other earring." The work is a simple bent rod, charting a transit in space. A single earring bereft of its mate, hangs from the rod like a lure. It's meant, perhaps, to catch a thought, and hold it for a while, before throwing it back into the ocean of possibility.

There are a few things to notice here. First, observe how Córdova activates the conventional framing language of the work. The title and materials list do not describe the piece in the usual sense, but rather help to constitute it—an old Conceptual art trick, here applied to novel poetic effect. Córdova conscripts us, her viewers, into a wholly imagined, yet psychologically charged, act of looking. (Idea for an art history seminar: try pairing the work with Barbara Kruger's *Untitled [Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face]*, 1981, in which that phrase is emblazoned over a photo reproduction of a Classical female head, another instance of pronouns arrestingly deployed.) *We Focus on a Woman Facing Sideways*, which was part of her breakthrough exhibition, "Smoke, Nearby," at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in 2017, has a particularly personal association for the artist, having been inspired by her grandmother's comment that the loss of one earring rendered its match virtually worthless. But Córdova has used the same legerdemain in other works as well.



Tania Pérez Córdova: *Even*, 2016, marble, personalized color contact lenses, and a person wearing color contact lenses from a different color than their natural eyes. COURTESY THE ARTIST

Even (2016) is a piece of beautifully figured marble, with a pair of tinted contact lenses resting on its upper surface. The initial impression is cartoonish—a sculpture with googly eyes. But the materials list, which includes “a person wearing color contact lenses in a different color than his/her natural eyes,” transforms the minimally anthropomorphized slab into someone’s alter ego. A more recent iteration of the theme, *Portrait of an Unknown Woman Passing By* (2019), consists of a shapely vase decorated with falling ginkgo leaves; the same pattern recurs in a printed dress worn by a woman who occasionally visits the exhibition. (Her image appears on the gallery’s checklist, another occupation of the exhibition’s textual apparatus.)

The “absent subject” is only one of Córdova’s oblique strategies. Over the past few years, she has created works incorporating “the glass of a window facing south”; cigarette ashes from a man who wants to quit smoking; and a friend’s SIM card, embedded in a porcelain block—a tombstone for incoming phone calls. Then there is her photograph showing an innocuous-looking lump of sandcast bronze, which is captioned: “A sculpture hidden within another sculpture.”

It’s a pity that Guy Debord already claimed the term “Situationist” back in the late 1950s, for that is the perfect way to describe Córdova’s methodology. Each of her works conjures a scenario, playfully dubious in its

ontology, but rich in narrative implication. The effect is perfectly calibrated to our phantasmagoric era, when images (of art and everything else) skip away from us, so many stones across the water.

Yet, crucially, Córdova's situations are firmly anchored in the real. When I interviewed her for this article, I explained that I was interested mainly in her approach to process and materials. She replied, "I wouldn't know what else to talk about." Córdova was born in Mexico City in 1979, and remains based there, though she studied at Goldsmiths at the University of London from 2002 to 2005. She also spends time in Italy, through family connections. This positions her within two unusually intact artisanal cultures. Despite the head-spinning philosophical conundrums she constructs, her collaboration with fabricators is the core of her practice.

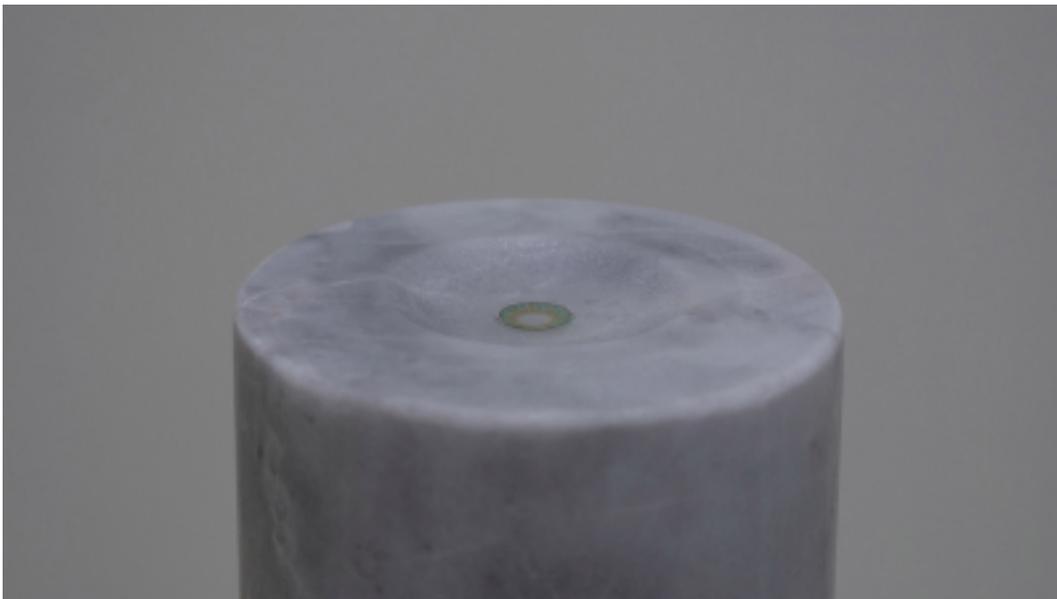


Tania Pérez Córdova: *They say it's like a rock*, 2015, glass from a window facing south and Nag Champa incense. COURTESY JOSÉ GARCÍA, MEXICO CITY

Navigating that world of craftsmen has often been a challenge for her, partly because of the gender dynamics involved—she's sometimes the only woman present in the workshop, and also the one giving the orders—and partly because she typically begins without a clear intention: "I would not want to be the kind of artist who knows exactly she wants." Córdova aims to put herself in the way of happenstance. She explains this through an anecdote about John Ashbery, who said that his poems often originated in a stray phrase overheard in

public. Without knowing the context of the words, he'd write them down and later use them to trigger his own compositional process. Córdova enters the space of a craft or trade in just this spirit, opening herself to its creative possibilities, then waiting to be set off in some direction or other.

The ceramic object in *Portrait of an Unknown Woman Passing By* is one example. A particular casting mold caught her eye—a curvy vase in negative, like the well-known optical illusion involving two faces. “If I’d had to design the shape myself,” she says frankly, “I would have had a lot of difficulty. I rely on randomness.” When I spoke with Córdova in March, she was just beginning a project at an Italian glass atelier. She did not yet know where the collaboration might lead, but ideas were forming about breath, which gives life to blown glass as well as to human beings, but has taken on such terrible connotations in this past year of pandemic. It might take days or weeks for an artwork to coalesce around this initial notion.



Tania Pérez Córdova: *To wink, to cry*, 2020. COURTESY TINA KIM GALLERY, NEW YORK

This purposefully provisional approach is very different from the way most artists handle outsourced fabrication—which is to say, as a delivery system for plans already well in place. Córdova instead enters into the life and logic of the manufactory, riffing on its capabilities like a jazz musician stretching out a standard tune. Exemplary, in this regard, is her exploration of the casting process, which she loves for its accidental features—the spillover and flashing that are usually pared away from the finished product—and for its oscillation of positive and negative states of matter.

These dynamics were at the heart of her exhibition “Daylength of a room,” held at the Kunsthalle Basel in 2018. The project’s centerpiece was *Stuttering*, a group of everyday objects—an aluminum saucepan, a tin can, a length of copper pipe, a glass pitcher, silver cutlery—which Córdova had melted and recast into their original form. A helpful explanation was provided: “Imagine an ice cube, melted down, then poured back into the ice tray and refrozen. It finds itself a tiny bit smaller, containing a little less of itself, when remade into its own shape. Now imagine this process applied to other objects in the world.” The slight shrinkage and tormented

surfaces of the items gave them a somewhat forlorn air, like wool clothing accidentally put through a tumble dryer. Yet together, they read as an elegy: Córdova had invented a way to visualize the act of forgetting, to materialize loss.



Tania Pérez Córdova: Contour #2, 2020, bronze poured into sand, 83 by 25 1/2 by 79 inches. COURTESY TINA KIM GALLERY, NEW YORK

For an exhibition this past September, “Short Sight Box” at Tina Kim Gallery in New York, Córdova used casting to create a series that she calls “Contours,” made by pouring liquid bronze into rectilinear furrows in a bed of sand. When the metal cools, it is lifted out, revealing a gleaming outline, edged all over with solidified splatter. The rectilinear shapes inevitably recall the perimeters of paintings (a gentle joke about Jackson Pollock, maybe?), but also of windows and doors—more apertures into some alternate reality. At peak pandemic, the works took on an additional layer of meaning: visual echoes of all the looking-out we have all been doing lately, wary and watchful, sequestered in our homes.

Of course, the metal portals of the “Contours” do not actually go anywhere—except in imagination. If Córdova has just one abiding theme, this is it: the psychic overlay that we bring to the objects and spaces around us, rendering them the props and sets of our own private dramas. She catches that process of narrative scripting

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in the act; holds the evidence up to the light, considers it, moves on. During our conversation, Córdova described one of her habitual activities. She likes to trawl the informal street markets in Mexico City, looking at all the things for sale: jewelry, electronics, sneakers, whatever. Most of it is ersatz in one way or another. But for Córdova, the fakeness of what's on offer—the counterfeit branded merchandise, all the materials imitating other, more expensive materials—is what makes the experience so interesting. In this shifty commercial terrain, value itself seems up for grabs. It's a point of perpetual negotiation, resettled with each deal, no more, no less. Is that a little like the art she makes? Could be. "It's almost like a promise," she says. "OK, Let's see."

Full Article: <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/puzzles-and-promises-tania-perez-cordova-profile-1234588392/>