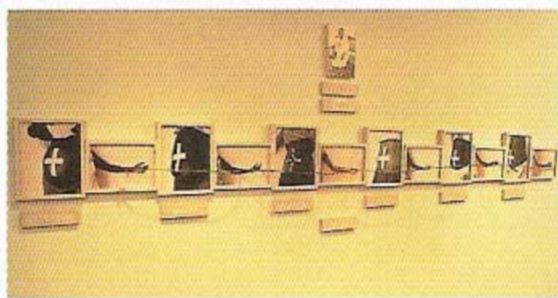
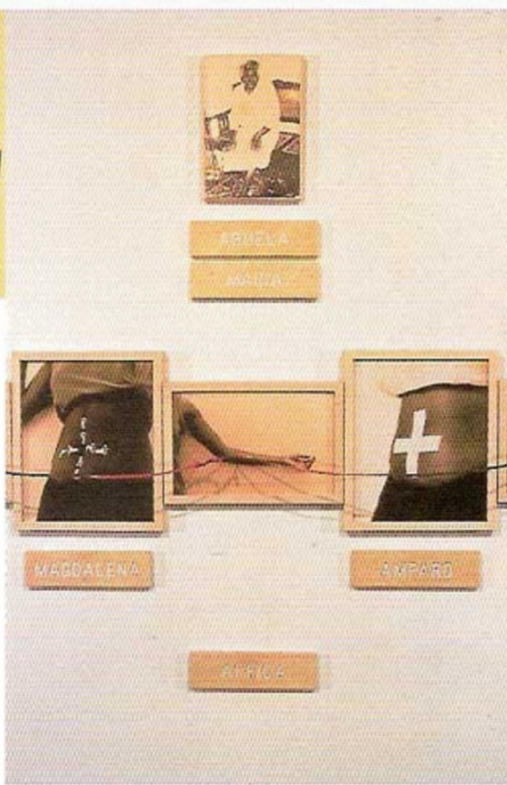


56. *Spoken Softly with Mama* (1998). Embroidered silk and organza, cotton, photographic transfers, cast glass, boards, six video tracks, stereo sound

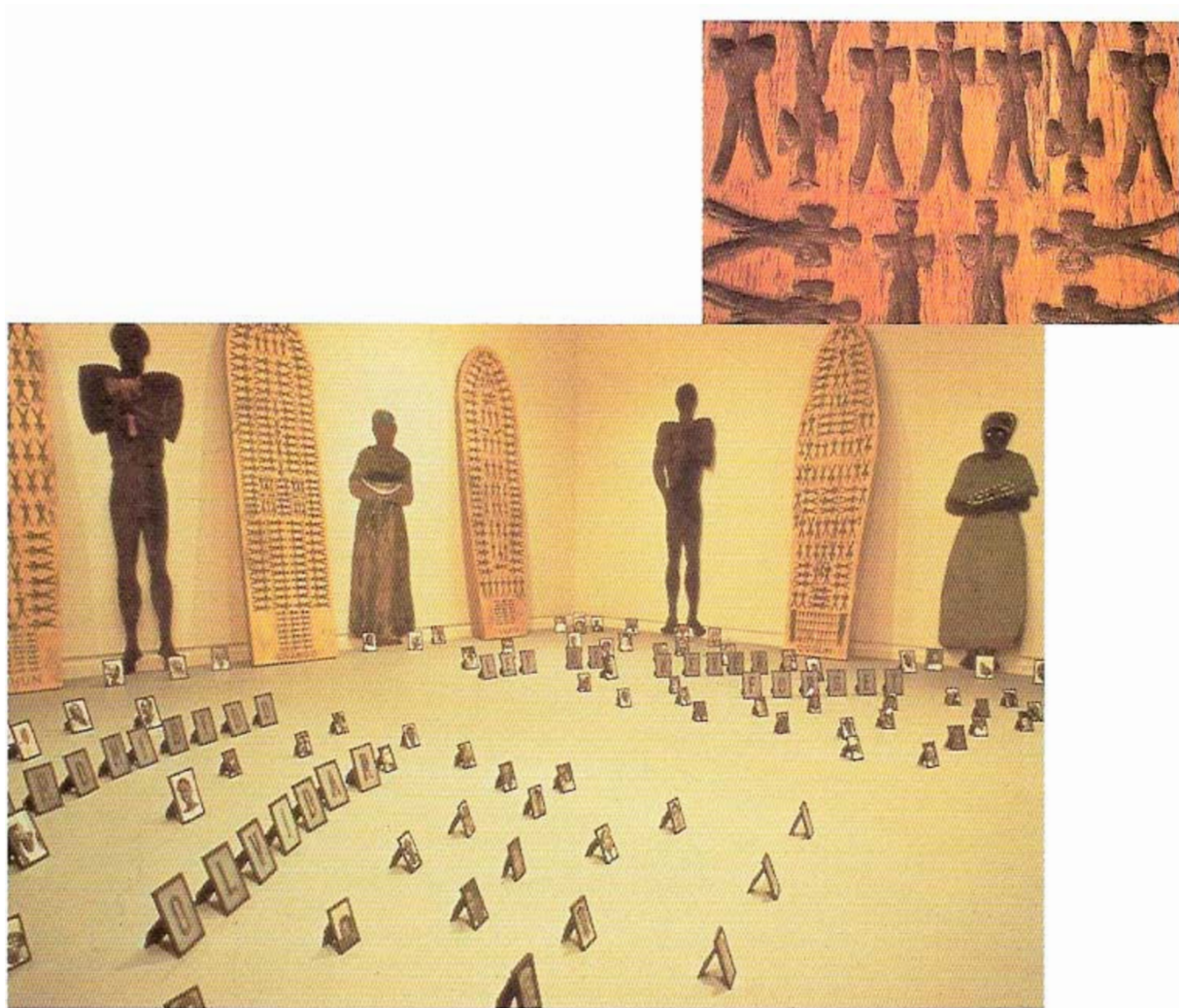


The work of María Magdalena Campos-Pons looks at questions of identity forged by politics, religion, history, gender, race, and family – all forces that have acted upon the artist as a black woman born in Cuba.

Umbilical Cord (1991) begins with a particular family lineage, which opens onto other, inevitably intertwined, themes. Framed photographic details of the bodies of women from Campos-Pons' family are arranged on the wall to form a truncated cross. Images of their outspread arms alternate with photographs of their bellies, each bearing crossed bandages (Magdalena's alone is painted with footprints leading out from her navel) that reiterate the arrangement. Along the horizontal arms, red wire strings together three generations of women: the faceless photographs, identified by engraved marble plates, stretch from her mother "Estervina" through Magdalena and her sisters, to her nieces. The more concise vertical axis is simply headed by a portrait of her grandmother "Maria" and anchored by the word "Africa." The open positions of their arms suggest embrace, but also transfusion and



57. *Umbilical Cord* (1991). Photographs, engraved marble, wire, soil, fabric, paint. Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists, Boston



58. *The Seven Powers Came by the Sea* (1992).
Wood, glass, acrylic, and soil on wood, metal frames.
Vancouver Art Gallery

sacrifice, such that the links in this version of the family tree imply lines both of turbulent life, surviving through matrilineal ties, and of bondage.

The subject of slavery, obliquely suggested in *Umbilical Cord*, is an important thread running through other installations by Campos-Pons. *The Seven Powers Came by the Sea* (1992) focuses on the slave trade as the link between contemporary Cuban spirituality and its African sources. Leaning against the wall are large rough figures of the seven principal deities of the Yoruba religion who became the central spirits (the "seven powers") of Santería, the syncretic spiritual tradition evolved and practised mainly by Cubans of African origin. These figures alternate with large wooden steles on which are carved schematic diagrams of the holds of slave ships, based on historical drawings. On the floor stands a host of small frames containing portraits of Afro-Cubans or individual letters that together spell out in Spanish and English, "Let us never forget." This legion of individuals, dwarfed by

the imposing spirits of history, is a touching reminder of the living legacy of the slave trade. A related installation, *Tra...* (1991), documents more recent experiences definitive of the status of blacks in Cuba, recounted through the memories of actual people. Featuring grids of portraits accompanied by marble plaques referring to the forced migrations and poor living conditions endured by the people portrayed, it also includes a wooden plank carved with words of action that have shaped their destinies: trap, transfer, transgression, transculturation, tragedy, etc.

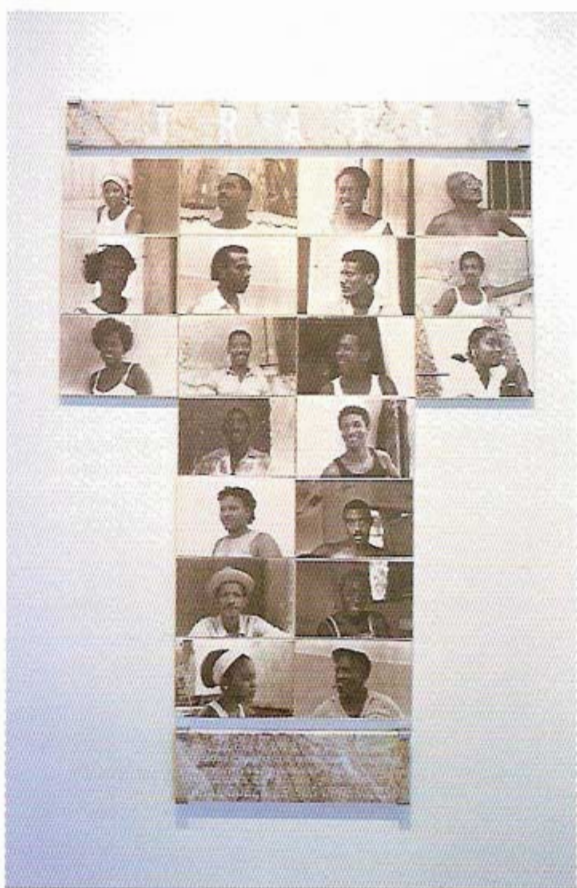
Campos-Pons' focus on her origins has evolved during her separation from her native culture. As a painter, she had contributed to a renaissance of Cuban visual art in the 1980s, but since leaving her homeland in 1990 for the United States, via Canada, she has tended to work with photog-

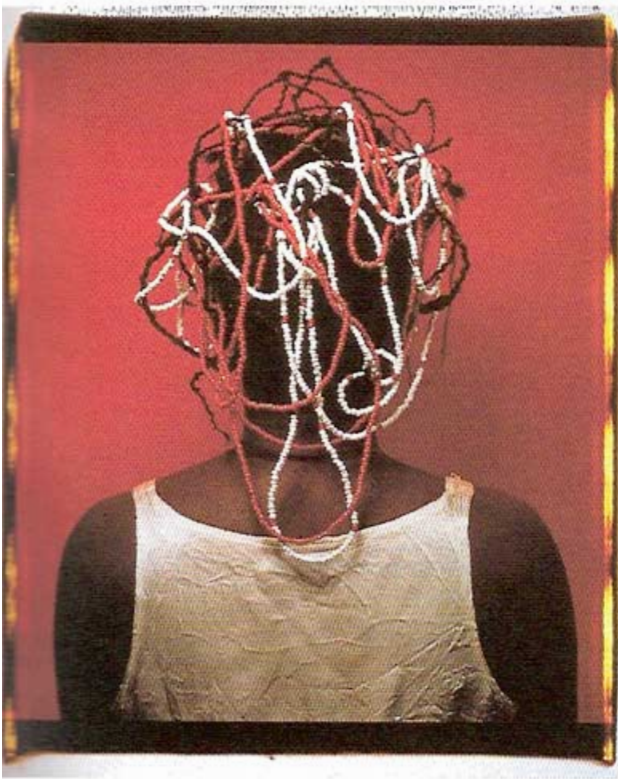
raphy and installation. Her work has moved increasingly towards performance, expanding to use media such as video to represent her own body as a subject. According to Coco Fusco, the artist's choice of subjects and means is related to her displacement: "Living abroad has brought into sharp relief her experiences as an uprooted black Cuban woman and has compelled her to consider the oral and performative traditions that constitute primary carriers of black identity in the diaspora. These influences complement Campos-Pons' renewed investigation of Santería ritual and symbology, through which she now struggles to find her new place by establishing connections with the past."¹

When I am not here. Estoy allá ("I am there," 1996) is a series of large Polaroid photographs depicting the artist painted with the colours and signs of Santería spirits, and performing acts or holding objects that refer to African symbology or to rites of passage. She had also portrayed herself performing multi-layered rituals referring to various forms of transition, using many of the symbols that recur in other pieces, in the video *Rito de Iniciación/Baño de Sagrado* (Initiation Rite / Sacred Bath, 1993). A 1996 statement situates *When I am not here* as part of a process of self-definition involving a balance between familiar traditions and new surroundings:

"'When I am not here. Estoy allá' is a project about the spaces that are constructed between dualities: Cuban vs. American, to live in America physically and practically and at the same time in Cuba spiritually and mentally.... In this project I want to reflect on the components of the African tradition (that somehow was and still is part of my life), and at the same time those traditions pertaining to the new country that I now inhabit. Where do I belong, and what belongs to me? I want to analyze the formal spaces between photography and painting (when I place my body and my skin as a painting surface), between two dimensional and three dimensional, between rite and performance. The person that I am and the others that I was, or wish I were."²

59. *Tra...* (1991), detail. Photo transfer on canvas, acrylic paint on canvas, wood, engraved marble, glass





Given the double diaspora – Cuban and African – experienced by Campos-Pons, it is no surprise that acts of remembering figure centrally in her works. Actually, their very structure often has something of the character of memory. A current series of installations, collectively entitled *History of People Who Were Not Heroes*, continues to convey shared experiences, in this case contemporary histories that refer back to the history of the artist's own family. The first of these, *A Town Portrait* (1994), evokes the remains of the village in which Campos-Pons was raised, on the sugar plantation on which her great-grandfather had toiled as a slave. While reviving the history of this place, it also conveys the incomplete nature of recollection itself. It features partial architectonic structures – door, wall, tower, fountain – made of metal, glass, and clay bricks inscribed with sketchy accounts of the town recalled by its inhabitants. Three black-and-white video tracks – hands stringing flowers into a necklace, hands cupping nourishing water, and images of family and village projected onto an empty rocking chair – appear as memory fragments, united by a childhood lullaby sung by the artist.

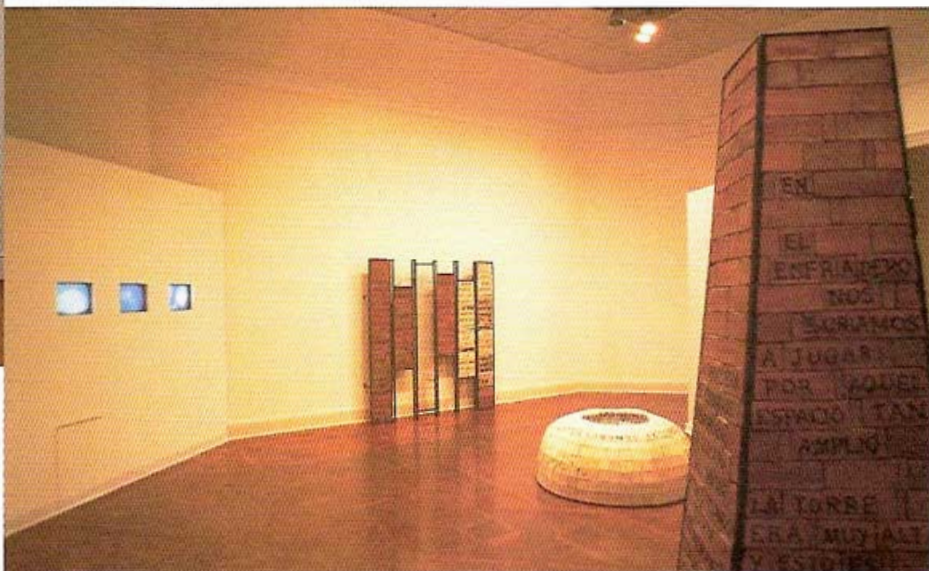
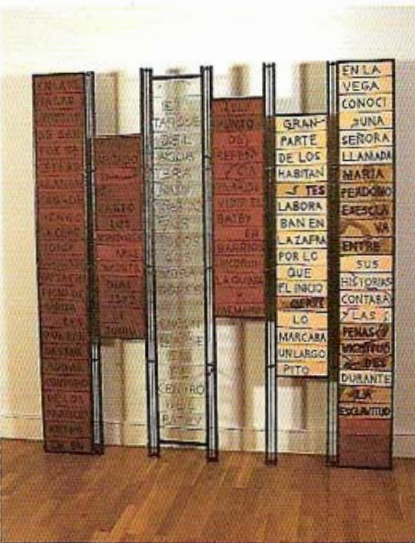
In Campos-Pons' work the connections between various parts are not made explicit; instead, the assorted elements appear as dispersed and persistent images carrying the weight of identity and history. *The Herbalist's Tools* (1994) is a portrait suggested through gathered parts. A tribute to her father, who was a herbalist, it retrieves fragmented memories from her forays with him to collect plants. These recollections are embodied in indigenous Cuban wood and in specimens, photographs, and painted images of herbs. *Spoken Softly with Mama* (1998), also from *History of People Who Were Not Heroes*, is another such portrait, this time honouring the women of Campos-Pons' family who worked as domestics in others' homes, realized through symbols of their labours. Sally Berger describes the loaded elements of the installation:

"Campos-Pons exchanges the ordinary materials of the ironing boards, irons, and sheets that they labored over, for fine wood,

glass, and translucent fabric to signify the transcendence of their endeavors and the innate fragility of human relationships. She recreates adolescent games and fantasies, alludes to mythological personae, and incorporates family photographs into scenes of three video narratives that symbolically illustrate her own passage

Notes

1. Coco Fusco, "Magdalena Campos-Pons at Intar," *Art In America* (Feb 1994), p. 107.
2. María Magdalena Campos-Pons, "When I am not here. Estoy allá" (1996), unpublished statement translated from the Spanish, n.p.
3. Sally Berger, "María Magdalena Campos-Pons: Spoken Softly with Mama," exhibition leaflet (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998).
4. Campos-Pons cited in press release, Museum of Modern Art, New York, February 1998.



61. *A Town Portrait* (1994).
Fused glass, copper,
clay, steel, three video tracks

into womanhood. These scenes are then projected onto the objects in the space so that they become embodiments of her family and its history. The elements of the installation cohere into a magnificent altar in visual and poetic praise of the women's fortitude that nourished family and friends following the end of slavery."³

The symbolic everyday objects in these installations are repositories for memories developed through the actions of daily life. As Campos-Pons has said of *Spoken Softly with Mama*: "A space can bear the imprint of its inhabitants even in their absence. An object can personify an individual even more than his or her portrait. This is the concept behind the selection of objects—furniture for the installation; a portrait of a family narrated through the voices of objects that constitute their environment."⁴

The way in which these objects give form to memory has in common with the photographs of *When I am not here* a performative element through which we can realize that in Campos-Pons' work the act of making images represents a performance of abiding and remembering. G.K.