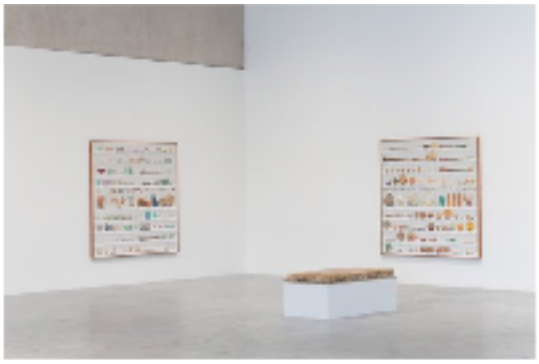
GALA PORRAS-KIM: CORRESPONDENCES TOWARDS THE LIVING OBJECT

Sep 27, 2022 • *Del O'Brien*

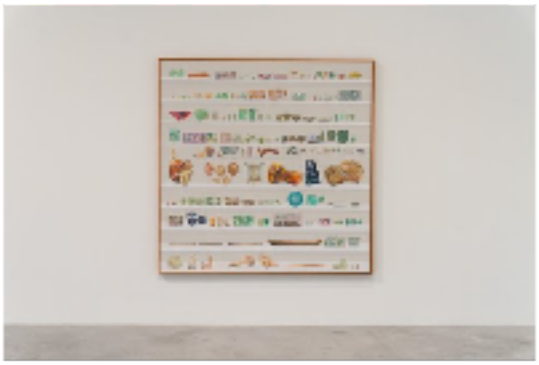
An exhibition of work by Gala Porras-Kim, *Correspondences towards the living object*, recently came down after a few months on view at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis. Of the stuff in this medium-sized show, I only remember the drawings well, because only the drawings were any good. Besides them, there were a few obelisks that didn't do much more than plain imposing, and some big, marbled surfaces (like giant versions of the pretty endsheets from antique books) that were trying to accomplish critical-conceptual work at a level far beyond what what was there could really handle. Everything in Porras-Kim's show was museum-chiding for the automatic reasons that a lot of art for a long time has been, but her adventuresomeness meant that there was at least a nice range to how the different works approached this. Far and away, though, it was the drawings that not only made their point the best, but that made themselves the best through making it. Unlike the other works in her show, these works were about, rather than simply for, Porras-Kim's institutional critique. They located behind this genre's typically dry moralism an irresolvably tragic dimension, and inscribed it in their total structure as artworks.



Gala Porras-Kim: Correspondences towards the living object, installation view, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, March 25–July 24, 2022. Photo: Dusty Kessler.

The half-dozen drawings, done with colored pencils and Flashe paint on paper, were all titled *[X] Offerings for the Rain at the Harvard Peabody Museum*, where X for each piece equaled the number of ethnographic artifacts depicted in it. Porras-Kim began the series while a fellow at the Harvard Radcliffe Institute. Between 2019 and 2020, she worked with the staff and collections of the Peabody (Harvard's ethnological museum) to develop a research-based art project, spending much of her time with a collection of Mayan sacrificial objects that made their way to Cambridge from the bottom of a sinkhole in the Yucatán a bit more than 100 years ago. Each *Offerings* drawing shows an array of these objects from an unflagging frontal view, sitting side-by-side on the antiseptic white shelves common to museum storage

that just by amassing them, and especially by exhibiting them, museums bereave the things that make up their collections of a certain vital authenticity. Nevertheless, these things glisten (suggest the drawings) with the residue of their past wholeness. It's apparently their nature to want to return, against odds, to a state of unconflicted self-evidence: a state where their warm hues and loose strokes don't look so strange against stark white shelves.



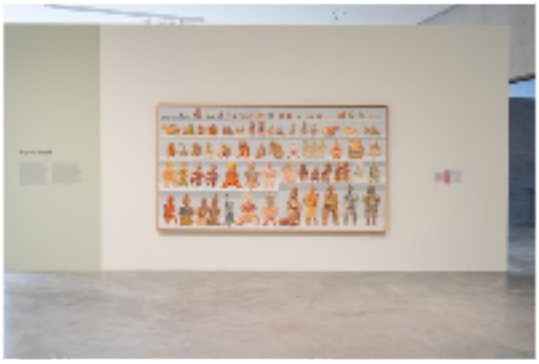
Gala Porras-Kim: Correspondences towards the living object, installation view, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, March 25–July 24, 2022. Photo: Dusty Kessler.

Like the variations on it, which have animated innumerable similar "museum-focused" and "research-based" artworks, this argument that museums do violence by creating lifeless abstractions out of the stuff they collect is banal, but it is also basically correct. It would be ludicrous to claim, of course, that the Peabody's relics (or any ancient treasures whatsoever) could be anywhere near as significant to modern museumgoers as they were to the Mayans who, with the fullness of belief, cast them down a sinkhole for their rain God. We miss something (perhaps close to everything) about an ancient or foreign artifact when we relish its form exclusively, as museums often compel us to do. Nor, however, could an artifact's extraformal meaning ever be reproduced for us with much completeness across the chasm of time. Any object, physical or otherwise, is constructed within and through the totality of a particular social system. The full spectrum of its significance, circumscribed by that system, is withheld to all but those whose experience of the world is likewise circumscribed. What's left to the preponderant rest of us are factual crumbs of the thing's lost liveliness and a physical presence that, captivating but opaque, is like a cipher with no key. Our modern capacity to relish form for its own sake is a uniquely potent but mournful skill, like the heightened four senses of a person who's lost their fifth. "An altar panel without prayer is dead," wrote Carl Einstein; "feeble natures attempt, in their suave aestheticism, to conjure from it some kind of vague religiosity."

Porras-Kim's art, like all modern art, lives and dies by how it manages its own attenuated "religiosity." This becomes for her a fixation. The artist seems to believe – or at least she feigns this belief for her practice – that the lost meanings of things distant from us are a part of those things' nature; that museums degrade or obscure these essential meanings; and that, as such, these meanings could be reconstituted in full through alternative interpretive, pedagogical, or aesthetic means. The modernist way into an object's meaning was through its physical presence; hers, which she considers fuller or more authentic, is through everything else about it. Or at least it would be if museums didn't

and whether or not the resulting artworks manage to transcend the specificities of her fetishism while maintaining its general imaginative character.

Each drawing's main device is the tension between its obsessively clean arrangement and the looseness through which the artifacts within this arrangement have been rendered. The white shelves are clinically white and shown in a precise single-point perspective, foreshortened immaculately such that each drawing vanishes towards its exact center. The shelves cast slight but noticeable shadows on the walls behind them. The objects on the shelves, however, cast no shadows; they are vibrant and inconsistently shaded, giving them an aspect less of flatness than of volumeless depth; they're impossibly upright, like they've all just been spooked; and Porras-Kim's hand, through quick unconcealed daubs and many strokes of chalky color, is apparent all over them. In a word, the pictorial illusion at which the shelves work so fastidiously ends abruptly at the edge of each artifact, of which there are hundreds in each drawing. Any attempt to relish the efficient *trompe-l'œil* of these scenes is incessantly frustrated by the dry intensity of their staffage, and vice versa. It's as though the drawings' two constituent parts cannot abide the existence of each other.

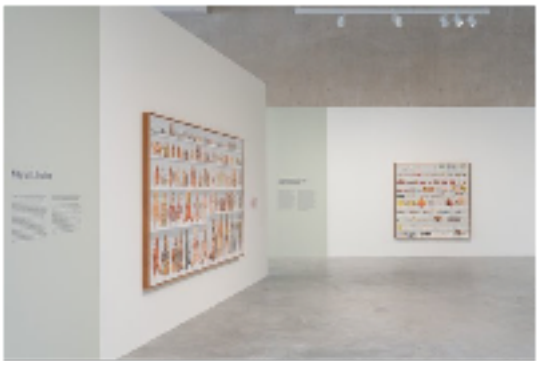


Gala Porras-Kim: Correspondences towards the living object, installation view, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, March 25–July 24, 2022. Photo: Dusty Kessler.

The looking that we habitually do at pictures is discomfited by this. Discomfiture, of course, is a common technique of advanced art. Here, however, it's not caused by novel formal arrangements that demand a new mode of perceiving, but instead by the shoehorning together of distinct pictorial styles, each of which is resistant to the very idea that it might somehow resolve into the other. The drawings' difficulty, then, exists entirely on their surface. Grappling with the visual challenge they pose in exclusively visual terms could only ever entrench this challenge's irresolvability; the result would inevitably be aesthetic frustration. Where the works find depth, then, is in the correspondence between their form as pictures and their deployment as functional objects within Porras-Kim's broader critical project. To make any sense of the drawings, the latter must be understood as an intentional component of the whole artwork – even as part of its overall form – rather than as a concomitant of the drawings or something extraneous to them. This imbues the *Offerings* with a dual character. They are at once instruments of a social practice and illusionistic worlds unto themselves, though each role is distorted in uncomfortable service to the other. Our perception of this tension within the drawings recalls the plight of the objects they depict: suspended

The failure of Porras-Kim's more thoroughly conceptual projects (sending letters to institutions on behalf of the artifacts in their collections, "feeding" bread to mummies at the British Museum, etc.) is due to their lack of any mechanisms for disassociating their own internal logic as artworks from the fuller social logic of their various institutional subjects. The former, in the process of each work's execution, simply dissipates into the latter. When, like a guppy against great whites, the artist's mysticism confronts in apparent earnest the big bureaucratic facts of a museum, her artworks start to seem like actual rather than ironic fetishes, which is to say that they seem credulous and very impotent. I imagine that Porras-Kim would admit this and say that her art is simply supposed to make people think. That would still leave the question of why these projects are works of art, rather than briefs or research papers, entirely unanswered. The thinking we do through art cannot be continuous with the world as we know it. Artworks, especially artworks that flirt so intensely with all that's outside them, must possess in themselves some element that effects a break between their own and other realities.

In a way, the device by which the *Offerings* drawings accomplish this break – the medium of painting, which by appearance they participate in more than that of drawing – was a bit cautiously chosen, though certainly it's effective. There is a tradition, of course, of the specific formal demands of this medium becoming a refuge for the soul of art. The notion, inherited from this tradition, that depictions of the world beget new worlds unto themselves is deployed knowingly by Porras-Kim: the closed-off nature of two-dimensional representations is called upon to duplicate the removedness of the objects which museums collect. On one level, then, the way the *Offerings* coyly and consciously assert their status as paintings is more important for the meaning they generate than any particularities of their appearance. In them, painting's historical hermeticism is deployed bitterly against its own conceit. This suffuses the *Offerings* with a sort of ontological unease. All this occurs almost entirely outside of the representations themselves, having instead to do with the basic conceptual fact of their existence. What distinguishes the *Offerings* from the works mentioned above, however, is that this conceptual fact is, in the drawings, lent a form to which it is not reducible, and which is not reducible to it. It's in this two-way irreducibility that the drawings transform their social critique into a generalized sensation of loss and disjointedness which is properly artistic.



Gala Porras-Kim: Correspondences towards the living object, installation view, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, March 25–July 24, 2022. Photo: Dusty Kessler.

described are deeply cynical and dead-ended. Her drawings are activated by an alienation from their own status as artworks. This limits their potential, as it does that of many other contemporary works which subject themselves to the same alienation. Another art, however, one more confident in the idea of itself, might find a way to use similar techniques exultantly, rather than in admission of defeat.

Del O'Brien

Del O'Brien is an art critic based in St. Louis, MO.

CÆSURA
editor@caesuramag.org