

# Mama/Reciprocal Energy: Reciprocity as an Agent of Identity Formation in the Works of Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons

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Since immigrating to the United States in the early 1990s, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons has garnered praise as one of the most important artists to emerge from post-revolutionary Cuba. Campos-Pons' oeuvre bears witness to issues central to the experience of diaspora populations. On view for the first time, the exhibit "Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons: MAMA/RECIPROCAL ENERGY" at the Vanderbilt Fine Arts Gallery (October 12 – December 8, 2011) presents new works by Campos-Pons that attest to the ability of fragmented and seemingly dislocated elements of the artists' lived experiences to coalesce into a multifaceted identity. The dynamic quest for selfhood demonstrated by the works rejects absolutes; rather, it fosters an interconnected network where issues such as gender, exile, dislocation, race, religion, and cultural memory play out in a reciprocal manner. This paper first establishes Campos-Pons' early conceptual basis as an artist. What follows is an extensive exploration of the exhibit argued through a thematic dynamic that highlights the relationship of themes among and between the works. Finally, it suggests that while Campos-Pons' conceptual basis retains its earliest formative notions, the shifting narrative that emerges from the exhibit and corresponding stylistic changes confirm the inclusion of the artists' entire lived experiences in her artistic search for identity.

The Vanderbilt Fine Arts Gallery exhibition, *Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons: MAMA/RECIPROCAL ENERGY*, included drawings, a video installation, and collages in which the Afro-Cuban artist, who now lives in Boston, constructed a multifaceted identity through the dynamics and reciprocity of the elements in her artwork.<sup>1</sup> Campos-Pons' construction of her identity is neither singular, nor static; rather, it is a constantly evolving entity in which no particular element of her lived experiences can be excluded. Consequently, the dynamic quest for selfhood is as multifaceted as the issues that have continued to inform it. Rather than discussing individual works in isolation within the exhibition, I instead will argue a thematic dynamic that plays out among the works in a reciprocal manner in which gender, exile, dislocation, race, religion, fragmentation, and cultural memory are embodied among all the works, all of which except one includes a self portrait of the artist. That artist's inclusion of herself in most of the works suggests that these are self portraits, but ones in which she embodies the multifaceted, reciprocal aspects of her transatlantic life between Cuba and the United States, but also between these countries and Nigeria, the home

of her Diaspora slave ancestors.

The title of the exhibition, *Mama/Reciprocal Energy*, has a series of connotations for this artist born and educated in Cuba who immigrated to the United States in 1991. "Mama" is an immensely charged term that in Spanish and English allows a child to communicate with his or her mother and develop a familial bond. However, "Mama" in the United States, especially among African American communities, has also evolved into a derogatory slang term that degrades women. This oppositional relationship in the meaning of one word is characteristic of the multifaceted and reflexive nature that pervades the exhibition. Further consideration of the term's linguistic origin indicates a more important function in relation to the exhibit. In Spanish, "Mama" exists not only as a nickname; it translates as the "breast of a woman or udder of an animal."<sup>2</sup> Exercised in an intimate exchange with their kin, women reserve a privileged power to create and sustain life through nursing. The reflexive nature of the term "Mama," thus, reveals the gravity of interconnectedness that qualifies this exhibit and the many themes that inform it.

Campos-Pons established gender as a vital conceptual impulse in her artistic paradigm, beginning in her earliest works created while living and study-

<sup>1</sup> Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, "Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons: MAMA/RECIPROCAL ENERGY" (exhibition, Vanderbilt University Fine Arts Gallery, Nashville, TN, October 13 – December 8, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> "Definition: Mama", accessed November 28, 2011, <http://www.spanishdict.com/answers/133901/mama>

ing in Cuba. They were primarily concerned with issues of feminine oppression and the disparities evoked by traditional gender roles. She expressed frustration with male dominance over female sexuality in highly abstract works such as *Cinturon de Castidad (Chastity Belt)*.<sup>3</sup> Her feminist meditations persisted over time and infused her art with increasingly complex layers of meaning as she evolved. *Spoken Softly with Mama*<sup>4</sup> observes the salience of feminist concerns in this multimedia installation that Campos-Pons created shortly after moving to the U.S. Centered on her mother, the installation personified three generations of female relatives in an exploration of three main themes: “Afro-Cuban female domestic labor, memories and daydreams that surface while women work, and uprootedness.”<sup>5</sup> The Afro-Cuban women as domestic workers are evoked in the objects used in their daily work for others, including irons, ironing boards, and sheets. To memorialize her female relatives, “Campos-Pons exchanges the ordinary materials of the ironing board, 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.”<sup>6</sup> Over two decades after its creation, *Spoken Softly with Mama* was included in the exhibit *Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons: Journeys*<sup>7</sup> at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts. The concurrent display of *Spoken Softly with Mama* and the *Mama/Reciprocal Energy* exhibit mere minutes away from each other attest to the enduring importance of feminist commentary in Campos-Pons’ art.

No singular work in the Vanderbilt Fine Arts’ Gallery’s exhibit escapes the generative effects of gender. Meditations on biological and sociocultural constructions of the female sex manifest in a variety of ways – often in opposition to each other – and contribute to the artists’ understanding of what it means to be a woman. Both personal and collective, Campos-Pons’ feminist commentary attests to her own experiences. Though pronouncement of the issue varies in degree, gender remains a present factor even when evoked by its seeming absence. Whether valorizing the woman as life bearer or servant, or acknowledging her dependence on a man, gender persists as an

3 Figure 1. *Cinturion de Castidad (Chastity Belt)*, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, 1984.

4 Figure 2. *Spoken Softly with Mama*, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, 1998.

5 Lisa D. Freiman, *Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons: Everything is Separated by Water*, eds. Lisa D. Freiman and Okwui Enwezor (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 47.

6 *Ibid.*,” 47.

7 “Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons: Journeys” (exhibition, Frist Center for the Visual Arts, Nashville, TN, October 7, 2011 – January 8, 2012).

inexorable component that enables the communication of Campos-Pons’ intended message.

Upon entering the space of the Vanderbilt Fine Art’s Gallery, the viewer is immediately confronted by *Interiority or Hill-Sided Moon*,<sup>8</sup> a three channel video loop in which the artist superimposed images of flowers and galaxies upon each other. Small, bright buds blow in the breeze atop shots of swirling galaxies. The video has an audio recording of Campos-Pons’ voice that recites a poem in Spanish, while an enchanting guitar melody plays, complementing its dazzling interaction of celestial and terrestrial forms. Posted on a plaque below the screens, the English and Spanish translations of the poem assist the viewer to understand the meaning of the work:

Oh Moon! Wild heavenly body,  
Why do you row towards the west  
In that brimming glass of blue wine,  
With your stern so bettered and wounded?  
Oh Moon! With your futile wanderings  
You shatter into a million jeweled pieces:  
You are perhaps my gypsy heart  
That roams in the deep blue yonder, weeping  
poetry!<sup>9</sup>

The simultaneous presence of Spanish and English texts emphasizes Campos-Pons’ interest in the communicative magnitude of language. While celestial bodies dance across the screens, the artist speaks about the wandering moon. Yoruban spirituality, which I will elaborate upon shortly, indicates important thematic connections between the video installation and its accompanying poem. Yet even an uninformed viewer could gather from the text and video that a sense of searching informs this work. Further, the juxtaposition of heavenly and earthly objects asserts the dichotomy of oppositional concepts that condition the exhibition. Through the flowers, gender plays an important – albeit discrete – role. Traditionally gendered female, their delicate forms and ability to fertilize afford flowers understandable agency as reproductive symbols. A section of the video, however, contains tall green ferns in one screen, while delicate pink blossoms fill the adjacent one. This juxtaposition of phallic ferns in relation to the flowers sets up a dichotomy of male and female gender.

8 Figure 3. *Interiority or Hill-Sided Moon*, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, 2003.

9 “César Vallejo: 1892-1938,” The Poetry Foundation, accessed January 18, 2012, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/caesar-vallejo>. The poem is an extract from “Deshojación Sagrada” by César Vallejo from *Los Heraldos Negros* (1918). The title translates to “Sacred Defoliation” in English, and is among Vallejo’s earlier works, which attest to the poet’s emerging interest in his pre-Columbian heritage upon moving to the modern city of Lima.

Further, Campos-Pons' voice precludes the possibility of escaping the reality that a woman created this work; she forces the viewer to acknowledge her authority by asserting her presence.

As suggested in this video installation, meditations on gender manifest to a considerably marked degree in many of the drawings in the *Mama/Reciprocal Energy* exhibit. A massive work, *The One that Carried Fire*<sup>10</sup> unfolds over three horizontal registers, each contained within a glass frame. The warm palette – dominated by shades of red, pink, and orange – instantaneously implies femininity. Her self-portrait, located on the bottom right, bust-length and frontal, gazes up at the viewer, from which a nebulous mass of lines, shapes, and colors issue forth and occupy the upper two thirds of the work. These are anchored to her head by a tangled matrix of painted brown lines and applied hair that connect to the forms and abstract motifs located above. Floral elements abound in the upper registers and assume their most distinct and pronounced forms at the left of the middle register. Lines and color interact to construct a veritable garden of tropical flowers. Simultaneously exotic and erotic, these organisms have been manipulated to a heightened degree of sexuality to further emphasize their status as signifiers of fertility. Voluptuous, heart-like shapes burst forth from graceful stems, possibly alluding to a woman's breasts. A more direct link between the flora and female body is conveyed in the network of "v"-shaped lines that support the blossoms. In the uppermost register, the most pronounced of these references appears in the heart-like form that stems from a "V" made of two painted brown lines. Inverted triangles have long been used as symbolic representations of the female reproductive system. In fact, *Chastity Belt* based both its conceptual and aesthetic agenda on this emblem of the female pubic region. Little doubt remains, then, that these "V"-shaped lines in *The One that Carried Fire* can signify the womb, fallopian tubes, and uterus.

The painted brown lines and applied hair that bridge the artist's head to the larger painted space also have a generative connotation. Conditioned by her African heritage, Campos-Pons' hair persists as something intimately her own. Hair – both painted and applied – is a reoccurring motif that Campos-Pons utilizes to communicate various relationships between herself and something else, be it a person, place, or idea. She frequently employs these symbolic umbilical cords to indicate familial connections, more specifically nourishment and the natural bond between mother and child. Within the context of this

symbolic self-portrait, then, they serve as a link that connects Campos-Pons to the amorphous projection of herself located above.

Opposite the gallery from *The One that Carried Fire* hangs another testament to the importance of gender in identity formation. Nearly commensurate in scale, *Warrior Reservoir*<sup>11</sup> also unfolds across three frames. However, in accordance with the tendency of opposites to inform this exhibit, *The One that Carried Fire* and *Warrior Reservoir* contradict each other in their formal qualities. Whereas a horizontal orientation governs the former, strong verticals organize and punctuate the latter. In the former, the artist relegated herself in a truncated bust form in the bottom register; in the latter, a fully formed Campos-Pons presides over the composition from the pinnacle of the middle register. This self-portrait dominates the entire composition as the artist gazes outward with an intensely focused gaze. Though Campos-Pons' figure appears seamless, her head and shoulders are painted on an applied square of blue paper. Energized further by an applied headpiece, the locks of her hair project in several directions. Her attire connects her stylistically and conceptually to the rest of the composition, while maintaining the system of opposites. Her intentionally tailored blouse, marked by a vibrant pattern of vertical lines, contrasts with her loose, flowing skirt awash in shades of green. Regardless, gender-based commentary also pervades *Warrior Reservoir*. The confrontation between organic and phallic forms evokes male and female gender roles in this triptych. At the left, African totems and spears signify the warrior, a character traditionally gendered male. These phallic objects have been applied to the work; they are not organically absorbed like the lines and colors that make up the rest of the composition. However, the exaggeratedly phallic drawn figure at the far right of this frame echoes their color and appearance. A painted brown vertical motif links each of the three registers, progressing across the dislocations imposed by the separation of the frames. It connects with a large painted leaf in the middle frame, and inserts itself into the network of branches and leaves in the far right. Again, a network of "V"s systematizes the organization of the plants. The large fronds strike out in different directions; notably, one connects with the artist's skirt and suggests that the portrait and plant represent, once again, two extensions of one being. The few dark lines that suggest seams on the skirt actually appear to be continuations of the leaf's veins, the network that facilitates the plant's nourishment. While the foliage in *The*

10 Figure 4. *The One that Carried Fire*, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons and Arcadio Leonard Campos, 2011.

11 Figure 5. *Warrior Reservoir*, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons and Arcadio Leonard-Campos, 2011.



*One that Carried Fire* indicates manipulation to emulate solely female sexuality, this plant hints at a phallic quality that allows for the inclusion of the male in the reproductive process. The artist included multiple references to sperm as an agent of fecundation and expressed its authority bluntly in the drop of liquid that falls from the tip of the sharp brown vertical, as well as the sperm-like sprigs of foliage. Notably, these spermatid buds seem to originate from a different plant than the one connected to Campos-Pons' skirt.

The imposition of the harsh, phallic forms upon the female, organic forms reasonably suggests a renewal of the artist's frustration with the oppression of females by males. Conveyed through pieces like *Chastity Belt*, this dissonance remains unresolved. Nonetheless, Campos-Pons' fundamental intentions in creating identity depend on a paradoxical "rejection" of rejection; she acknowledges that no particular truth can be excluded from the quest for selfhood, despite her personal frustrations with female oppression. Therefore, the middle register has important implications for traditional gender roles, for it is in this frame that forms project from their respective points of origin. Demonstrative of the mutual dependency of male and female reproductive agency, the sexes symbolically meet in the middle within this space. The second word in the title – "*reservoir*" – underscores this unity, as a reservoir simultaneously has the capacity to receive, store, and produce. This metaphor for reproduction, then, embraces both the male and female and acknowledges their mutual dependency. Significantly, the artist stands in this middle register as the locus for the unification between male and female signifiers; she exists as the "reservoir" of creativity.

The difficulties of negotiating seemingly antithetical cultural identities have long been discussed in diaspora studies, most notably in W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). According to Du Bois, Africans displaced by slavery needed to "embrace the legacy of his mixed cultural heritage and tradition." Doing so facilitated a bridge between the "subjugated memory of African cultures" and their new circumstances in a culture that was – in its most benign form – incompatible with their cultural understanding of the world.<sup>12</sup> He, moreover, discussed the "double-consciousness" that exists in the black body's hybridity. Gustavo Pérez Firmat elaborates about the cultural disparities for post-Revolutionary Cuban exiles, reflecting that, "As exiles, Cuban-American artists are possessed of

<sup>12</sup> Okwui Enwezor, *Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons: Everything is Separated by Water*, eds. Lisa D. Freiman. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 67.

multiple identities as insiders and outsiders on either side of the hyphen...their concern with their exile experience, ongoing acculturation, and hyphenated identities has been expressed in their work in diverse ways."<sup>13</sup>

Campos-Pons' African ancestors were enslaved and brought from Nigeria to Cuba as laborers in the sugar industry. After engaging in the project of overcoming cultural disparities, the legacy of her ancestors constructed the Afro-Cuban environment in which the artist grew up. Exposed to her African heritage within the context of Cuba, she did not actively consider the individual components that constituted her contemporary environment until she experienced her own exile. Immigrating to the U.S. in the early 1990s, Campos-Pons' left her homeland, knowing that she would likely be separated from her family for life. The trauma of her own exilic experience prompted her to meditate further on the initial exile of her ancestors. As Campos-Pons recalls:

When we talked about Africa, we [in Cuba] didn't talk about the continent. Africa was in my backyard. My father talked about my great-grandpa, who came from Nigeria, in such a way that we don't even talk about Nigeria. Nigeria was in my backyard. We didn't have any idea of going back to Africa. We didn't need it. Africa was there [in my family]. I didn't know how to explain that, but the center of my ancestors wasn't focused on displacement the way that it is in the United States. Whatever we needed to dig for from our past was there... I didn't have to dig deep to find my past.<sup>14</sup>

The umbrella of exile encompasses a number of intertwined themes that Campos-Pons positioned at the core of her creative intentions and that she continues to express with great conviction in a variety of ways.

In the *Mama/Reciprocal Energy* exhibit, exile assumes different forms, yet they all seem to be qualified by some sort of fragmentation. *Interiority or Hill-Sided Moon* plays out across three distinct screens that are separated by space, as well as the respective black frames of each; further, the artist abstains from synchronizing the film. Campos-Pons also evokes the memory of the Middle Passage in the poem she recites over the installation. She questions why the moon, with its "stern so battered and wounded," rows westward in a "brimming glass of blue

<sup>13</sup> Lynette M. Bosch, Isabel Alvarez Borland and Jorge K.E. Garcia, *Identity, Memory and Diaspora: Voices of Cuban-American Artists, Writers and Philosophers*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Freiman, 27.

wine.” This parallels the movement of a slave ship departing African shores, powered by the bodies of her wounded ancestors. The moon “shatters into a million jeweled pieces,” as the poem continues, suggesting the dispersal of enslaved peoples upon reaching new lands. *Interiority or Hill-Sided Moon*, introduces – through audio and the accompanying text – Campos-Pons’ tendency to rely on water as a salient mechanism of exile.

The mere presence of three different frames dislocates both *The One that Carried Fire* and *Warrior Reservoir*. Within these triptych-like formats, the viewer must acknowledge additional discontinuities produced by assemblages of paper. Even the smallest works in the exhibit unfold across multiple pieces of paper. The network of fragmented entities necessitates commentary on the notion of interstitial space. As Campos-Pons’ explains:

I place myself in a Third Space: a space between territory, between what is home, between languages, between media, between performance versus ritual, between three and two-dimensional, between all these layers and what happens there ‘in between’. As a black Cuban female living outside of Cuba, I have something to say that is particular and personal about this “in-between” space.<sup>15</sup>

The physical dislocations in *Mama/Reciprocal Energy* invoke this third space, necessitated by the condition of double exile and dispersal.

Having experienced a double exile, Campos-Pons cannot confirm her identity by absolutes. Her heritage cannot be defined as singularly Cuban, African, or American. She rejects these absolutes in order to appropriate elements that encompass all of her past – ancestral or personal – and construct a nonexclusive identity. The liminal “third space” provides an arena where the artist negotiates these influences, and it finds moorings in her art and in the intellectual sphere.

*Always Near*<sup>16</sup> typifies the continuum of the exilic experience and the third space. Horizontally divided by gentle washes of blue, this watercolor is nostalgic, hazy, and serene. In the middleground, four oblong shapes made of concentric ovals overlap like links in a chain to suggest the island of Cuba. Foregoing scientific perspective, Campos-Pons relies on the abrupt encounter of light and dark blue to indicate distance. Obfuscated by the darker

15 Quoted in Flora Gonzalez Mandri, *Guarding Cultural Memory: Afro-Cuban Women in Literature and the Arts*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 181-182.

16 Figure 6. *Always Near*, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, 2009-2011.

hue, a male African figure crouches in the upper left corner. Representing her Yoruban heritage in Nigeria, this figure could very well symbolize her great grandfather.

The importance of this figure cannot be understated, for he serves as the crux on which this exilic relationship functions. In the exhibit, this picture alone lacks a portrait of the artist. While she may not be seen in *Interiority or Hill-Sided Moon*, her voice establishes her presence as the video loop runs, and renews her presence each time it has completed a cycle and begins again. In *Always Near*, on the other hand, she exists as an absence, and forces the viewer to occupy the same place that she does. She has given her past the material form of an allegorical map in this picture. The water below the island represents the barrier between her and Cuba; the precipitous color change indicates the Middle Passage and her ancestral heritage. From outside the picture plane, she looks back on the two ruptures that define her past.

However, typical of Campos-Pons, this work does not merely serve the purpose of nostalgic recollection. Rather, the waters operate in a reflexive manner, and establish the third space – the United States – outside the picture. It is not only unique because there is no rendering of the artist but because it is the only work included in *Mama/Reciprocal Energy* executed entirely on one piece of paper within its frame. Perhaps her intentional exclusion from this work explains Campos-Pons’ choice to rely on intellectual fragmentation to indicate exile rather than over formal dislocations. This drawing symbolically maps not only the physical dislocations imposed by exile but the intellectual, nonlinear dialogue between the past and the present.

Opposite *Always Near* hangs another work that braves the dangerous waters of exile and dislocation. The interaction between opposites once again evokes the salience of reciprocity. While the horizontal washes of blue in *Always Near* orient its arrangement, *Jumping on It*<sup>17</sup> is dictated by verticals. The watercolor unravels across four vertically oriented sheets of paper. The distinct edges of each sheet meet and form a visible cross-like pattern. Upon first glance, the contours in *Jumping on It* almost resemble a broken hourglass, the narrowest point situated where the four pages meet. Within the painted blue oval, this point of convergence indicates the fulcrum on which the entire picture operates.

Campos-Pons again utilizes water to represent the transformative capabilities of exile. A broken hourglass, however, serves as an effective metaphor to explicate the

17 Figure 7. *Jumping on It*, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, 2009.

process that occurs through this exile. Imagine an hour-glass with one whole and one broken chamber. When the whole chamber rests on the table and the broken one above, the status quo remains undisturbed. Yet if you turn it upside down, the grains – against their will – have no alternative but to slide through the neck; the broken chamber fails to collect the grains and they disperse in multiple directions.

This parallels the diaspora experienced by Campos-Pons and millions of other displaced Africans and Cubans, including her ancestors. As the poem in *Interiority or Hill-Sided Moon* suggests, these populations shatter into a million pieces as they arrive in a new, western land. In *Jumping on It*, the painted blue oval signifies the waters that facilitate exile. Viewed from behind, an inverted, nude figure of Campos-Pons appears as her head breaches this precarious water. On the other side of the experience, indicated by her body jumping into the water, her hair explodes in different directions, perhaps to forewarn the coming dissipation of diaspora populations. The painted brown lines and applied hair connect her to both sides of the experience, and demonstrate the artist's tendency to rely on the motif as a visual link between figures or concepts. Despite exile, her hair acts as the lifeblood that connects her past to her present. The reflective quality of water, however, mimics the reflexive nature of memory. Though she can't go back, Campos-Pons can look back to the chamber from where she burst forth: Cuba. Through reflection, she can recognize the distinct components that inform her identity prior to exile.

Situated on the wall between *Jumping on It* and *Always Near, The One that Carried Fire* also gives pictorial form to Campos-Pons' lived experiences. Of these three works, it most closely resembles a topographical map. In the bottom right corner, a crimson mass outlined in brown emerges from behind her head. While its rounded contours more readily suggest the continent of Africa than the linear island of Cuba, Campos-Pons equated herself with her place of origin. The exclusion of her body in favor of a truncated portrait bust indicates that part of her remains unseen, and exists outside this frame of reference. This absence signifies her African heritage. Her hair extends upward through empty space and across the dislocation of the frames. Driven by her energy, the lines expand to propose the continent of North America. Employing symbolic umbilical cords once more, her hair acts as an arterial network that links different fragments of her identity; here, it connects her past to her present. Though dispersal invites reasonable concern, the fiery exuberance that contributes the large mass above her also indicates the potential for

personal growth.

The traumatic experience of relocation that instigated Campos-Pons' deliberations about her Afro-Cuban heritage also led to considerations of her race. Being a black Cuban woman living outside of Cuba gave the artist an informed sense of what that meant for her personally and for other displaced persons trying to navigate their identity in America. Marrying her Caucasian American husband just prior to leaving Cuba made her insertion into a predominantly white American cultural model as one half of a biracial couple even more insecure. However, Campos-Pons abstains from grounding the expression of her racial identity in political commentary. As she explains, she believes her skin has all the colors of the racial spectrum. The visual expression of her admirable attitude speaks to the larger difficulties of defining race after exile. The color of her skin fluctuates from one self-portrait to another and undergoes further variation within each. The dynamic shifts of her skin tone result from intentional variations and the medium of watercolor. This exercise in rendering the self speaks to the collective nature of mixed racial heritage.

*Mama/Reciprocal Energy* also cultivates the unique spirituality that is essential to understanding Campos-Pons' identity. Within this nexus of opposites, the artist gives the intangible realm of the spiritual world material form. The forcible insertion of Africans into plantation life – denying them all physical possessions – remains among the most basic realities of the institution of slavery. Those who survived the hardships of the Middle Passage did so only with the things that lived on in their minds: memories, traditions, and spirituality. The necessity of identity, reconciliation, and acknowledgement of a mixed heritage seems more urgent in this light. In Cuba, Yoruban religion eventually mixed with the Catholicism forced upon slaves by their masters and produced the hybrid religion of Santéria. Traditionally rooted in Nigeria, Yoruban religious tradition remained an everyday reality for displaced slaves and their descendants in Cuba.

From an early age, Campos-Pons' exposure to Santéria included witnessing rituals that had been passed down by her ancestors. Music, one of the central elements of Yoruban ritual, dominates the entire exhibition as it plays from the *Interiority or Hill-Sided Moon* installation, bestowing a spiritual quality upon the exhibition space. The hair applied to many of the pictures in the exhibit corresponds to the tradition of young girls cutting their hair as part of a cleansing ritual that prepares them to receive deities. Traditional Yoruban beliefs recognize two interconnected realms that organize the world: the spiritual and



the material. The creator of the universe, Olorun, bestows energy upon all living things and presides over all of the gods. Over four hundred deities (Orisas) comprise the Yoruban pantheon, each qualified by a specific ideological and natural signification.<sup>18</sup>

Speaking about a self-portrait photograph in 1989, Campos-Pons articulated her connection with the Yoruba traditions, noting, “When a child is born in Cuba in the Yoruba tradition the family is told what deities are protecting the child, so I am offering my self in reverence and homage to the goddesses that look after me. It’s a sort of self-portrait as well as a comment on Cuba and its dualities.”<sup>19</sup> Two decades later, she still pays homage to her personal deities – the sisters Yemaya and Oshun – and imparts other Orisas to communicate meaning.

*Interiority or Hill-Sided Moon* symbolically calls forth the creator of the universe. Olorun is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere on earth; though he infuses all terrestrial things with their energy, he resides in the sky. His implied omnipresence as understood by the Yoruban tradition reconciles the disparity between the small, fragile flowers and the massive celestial bodies that play across the video. In accordance with this matrix of oppositional qualities, Olorun exists at the center and on the periphery of every living thing. This omnipresence explains the intimate connection that Yoruban devotees have with the natural world. Campos-Pons learned about the preciousness of nature’s gifts from her father at a young age and remembers that he would never pick a leaf without first paying homage to an appropriate deity. The intimate connection between the natural and spiritual realms explains the mingling of celestial and terrestrial imagery in the film of *Interiority or Hill-Sided Moon*. The artist’s inclination toward organic forms throughout the exhibition results from this respect for – and intimate connection with – nature.

The goddess of the sea, Yemaya, embodies love and fertility. In the exhibition, *Mama/Reciprocal Energy*, she is evoked in each work that represents water. *Always Near* locates her in the sea and relies on her powers of fertility to empower the water as an agent of fertility; the same can be understood in *Jumping on It*. Though these works attest to the difficulties of exile, the reflexive ability of the water when equated with Yemaya provides hope for bringing new life and a future forward into the third space where Campos-Pons now resides. Yemaya’s association

with love strengthens of Campos-Pons’ intimate connection with – and respect for – the past that motivates her to pay homage to her ancestors through her art.

*The One that Carried Fire* invokes Shango, the Yoruban god of thunder and lightning, whose shield of purifying ire has a cleansing power. The destructive power of Shango’s thunderbolt, however, has a dangerous side, as tradition recalls his tendency to set fire to the houses of those who offend him.<sup>20</sup> His consort, Oya, is the goddess of fire, wind, and thunderbolt. Recalling the exilic contemplations that inform this work encourages the protective authority that Campos-Pons asserts by presenting herself in the work as an embodiment of these fire deities, for it is from her that the fire, flowers, and lines issue forth.

Ogun, the god of iron and war, occupies another important position in the Yoruban pantheon. Exalted for producing the tools necessary for agricultural cultivation, devotees revered Ogun as a “great blacksmith and fearless hero.”<sup>21</sup> Sustaining one’s existence relied on devotion to this god, symbolically referenced in *Warrior Reservoir*. The applied totems acquire further saliency as symbols of Ogun, and accentuate Campos-Pons’ acknowledgment of mutual dependency on males. Furthermore, the invocation of this deity references slavery and her ancestral past through agricultural connotations. Their quality as applied objects affirms the dichotomous tension between the artificial and organic. Equated with slavery, the artificial encroaches on the organic, and consequently on the collective identity of displaced Africans.

Little question remains that multiplicities of meaning characterize Campos-Pons’ artistic concerns. A variety of issues motivate her quest for identity, including her proclaimed interest “in rituals and traditions, how to place them into the contemporary setting. African tradition is my everyday life experience. I don’t have to search for my roots... I believe it’s possible to live in America and at the same time, in Cuba spiritually and mentally.”<sup>22</sup> A recent exchange with Campos-Pons confirms this interest and encourages an individual consideration of the drawing from which the exhibition gets its name: *Mama/Reciprocal Energy*<sup>23</sup>. Admittedly, this work could have been disaggregated and considered within the above thematic structure. However, the presence of the aforementioned themes and the unique qualities of *Mama/Reciprocal Energy* confer a privileged position on the drawing. It will serve as the basis for an exploration of collaboration, and subsequently

18 Nicole Mullen, “Religions Beliefs and the Creation Myth,” in *Yoruban Art & Culture*, ed. Ira Jacknis and Liberty Marie Winn (Berkeley: Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, 2004), 21.

19 Enwezor, 82.

20 Mullen, 23.

21 Ibid. 24

22 Freiman, 14.

23 Figure 9. *Mama/Reciprocal Energy*, Maria

Magdalena Campos-Pons and Arcadio Leonard-Campos, 2011.

activate the entire network of reciprocal elements in the exhibit.

*Mama/Reciprocal Energy* was a late curatorial addition to the exhibit that borrows its name.<sup>24</sup> The smallest in the exhibit, the collaborative circumstances of its creation imbue the work with particularly important meanings. The result of a collaboration between Campos-Pons and her son, Arcadio, *Mama/Reciprocal Energy* attests to the culmination of all the motifs and experiences that have motivated Campos-Pons' artistic endeavors and that are manifest in this exhibition as a whole. Further, the work, like the exhibition itself, suggests important implications for her sustained negotiation of identity.

Arcadio frequently joined his mother in her studio, where he would draw while she worked. A self-critical perfectionist, Arcadio left many of his drawings unfinished, and threw out others. His mother, however, saved many of them over the years. As she explained, "*Mama/Reciprocal Energy* started with Arcadio drawing the animal head," which she admired for its "tenderness and a fierce determination... intense stare and the same time great simplicity of the head," as well as "hieratic position of the profile." On another paper, Arcadio started a "condense and precise rendering" of a "small flowering planet." Campos-Pons understood this as "the head of a female figure, a protective energy linked to both present and ancestral existences" that "radiates energy and connects both the visible and invisible realms at once." She qualifies this interaction as indicative of their creative process: Arcadio drew disembodied parts that she connected. The exchange between mother and son facilitates the familial legacy of collaboration. Much like her mother did, Campos-Pons continues to tell Arcadio "stories of the past," and together, as she explained, they create a "story for the future." Mutually beneficial to mother and son, Campos-Pons views this reciprocation as something that "nurtures and sustains us. . . . He challenged my assumptions and my dexterity."<sup>25</sup>

*Mama/Reciprocal Energy* testifies to the enduring legacy of Campos-Pons' past. She still identified and qualified the themes that have always formed her aesthetic and conceptual production. In Arcadio's disembodied forms, she found religion, feminine agency, nature, energy, allusions to her ancestral past, and the spiritual realms – both tangible and intangible. Both physically and emotionally, her son lives as an extension of herself. By creating artistic extensions of her symbolic paradigm on

<sup>24</sup> Joseph Mella, e-mail to the author, December 7, 2011.

<sup>25</sup> Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, e-mail message to the author, December 7, 2011.

his own, he confirmed her success in the long process of negotiating identity and attempting to express it visually. Triumphant over the potential tragedy of atrophied selfhood, Campos-Pons has established herself as a product of her past, and acted as an agent informing the future of herself and others. Telling Arcadio stories of the past assists him in his identity formation and furthers not only her cultural legacy but also that of her ancestors and, on a broader level, exile populations.

This drawing contains allusions to all of the themes present in the exhibit. The "small flowering planet" recalls an iconographic symbol Campos-Pons frequently employed in her earlier years. It resembles the pomegranate that has a prominent position in *Spoken Softly with Mama*, a collaborative project with her mother. The pomegranate – also represented in *The One that Carried Fire* – acts as an agent of fertility. Washes of blue in *Mama/Reciprocal Energy* also allude to exile, spirituality, love, and fertility as evoked by Yemaya. The hybrid creature at right with an animal head and human body expresses meditations on the racial spectrum and evokes meditations on gender through the painted red nails. A seemingly mythic beast, the visual form indicates the explicit relationship of mother and son. While informed by each other, each artist maintains their individual power as a creator. This creature indicates the reconciliation of hybrid identity that Campos-Pons has long aimed to establish.

The collaboration between Campos-Pons and her son activates the reciprocal nature of the entire exhibit. In the same way that she and Arcadio communicate in a mutually beneficial manner, the underlying issues of gender, exile, race, fragmentation, spirituality, and cultural memory engage in a communicative dialogue facilitated by their relation parallel with, or opposite from each other. The thematic expression in any one work finds a corresponding expression in the other works; whether it acts as a confirmation or a counterpoint, the nuances interact. The collaborative effort indicates a triumph of identity for a mother through the expression of her son, and vice versa.

Arcadio is not just a conduit for expressing his mother's identity. In fact, he collaborated with his mother to create *The One that Carried Fire* and *Warrior Reservoir*. Campos-Pons noted that her son challenges her "assumptions and dexterity." The process has, therefore, been turned back onto Campos-Pons, much in the way she turned her reflections back on her ancestral past. While Arcadio's distinct style does not manifest obviously in either of the large-scale collaborations, he operates within her conceptual agenda. Conversely, his mother's hand gives way to what she admires as the "linear quality of his



line.”

This exhibit, *Mama/Reciprocal Energy*, summarizes all the themes that have existed in Campos-Pons’ oeuvre, including gender, exile, dislocation, race, religion, and personal and cultural memory. The magnitude of these motifs relies upon the ways in which they interact among the works of art and mutually reinforce each other. The dynamic conversation of issues that inform these works is evidence of Campos-Pons’ continuing exploration of identity through her art. These works are far more nuanced and less confrontational than her earlier works, perhaps as a result of collaboration with her teenage son and her musician husband, as well as her past twenty years spent in the United States.

### Figures



Figure 1. *Cinturon de Castidad (Chastity Belt)*, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, 1984.



Figure 2. *Spoken Softly with Mama*, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, 1998.



Figure 3. *Interiority or Hill-Sided Moon*, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, 2003.



Figure 4. *The One that Carried Fire*, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons and Arcadio Leonard-Campos, 2011.



Figure 6. *When I am Not Here/Estoy Allá: Identity Could be a Tragedy*, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, 1996.



Figure 5. *Warrior Reservoir*, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons and Arcadio Leonard-Campos, 2011.



Figure 7. *Always Near*, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, 2009-2011.



Figure 8. *Jumping on It*, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, 2009.



Figure 9. *Mama/Reciprocal Energy*, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons and Arcadio Leonard-Campos, 2011.

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