

ARTslant

Wednesday Web Artist of the Week: Sofía Córdova
Christian Petersen
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Sofía Córdova is a Puerto Rican multi-media artist and musician currently based in Oakland, California. Her work collides the sacred, mystical, and ancient with the disposable obsessions of our consumer age. These juxtapositions are not arbitrary, though; Córdova draws distinct lines between the ultra-traditional and the hyper-modern to tell a deeply engaging story mediated through the lens of a Puerto Rican artist living in the United States.

Córdova frequently reflects on her Caribbean heritage to explore both her own identity as well as the complexity of the experience of colonized and marginalized people. The clear cohesive threads running through her art do not diminish her ability to surprise, both in content and aesthetics. A good example of this is her appreciation of science fiction as a transgressive space for marginalized people, an interest that has informed much of her recent work. In her enticing digital imagery, there is much to enjoy on the surface but depth and substance are never compromised in Córdova's rigorous, exploratory practice.

Christian Petersen: Did you have a creative childhood?

Sofía Córdova: I always had a really rich internal life and was very observant—always watching adults and fixating on their words—so I think I developed a need for outlets for all this looking around, thinking and input. I spent a lot of time with my sister and mother or otherwise alone and so we always got up to the sort of things one can when one knows another through and through and no one else is watching. One summer we all got into Yanni's Live at the Acropolis and the three of us would dance around the pool—my sister and I would run in circles while my mother swayed towels to the beat. She'd shampoo our hair outside, making swirls of shampoo on our heads to the beat. We sang a lot and were always joking and playing imaginary games—

to get us to go to the grocery store she'd ask us in the car what "world" we were visiting and what kind of creatures lived there. This also created a sort of bubble where we could grow up, if briefly, less tied to the gendering/socializing children our age are typically subjected to within the culture of the island and under the globalizing shadow of the U.S. and its specific culture.

CP: What aspects of Puerto Rican culture have had the most lasting impact on your creativity?

SC: Thinking back to being little, the visual impact of los Vejigantes and the rhythm and lyricism of bomba y plena come to mind immediately as holding an almost primal spot of influence in my imagination. Same with Santos de Palo (carved saints), the painting El Velorio by Francisco Oller, the dungeon of the Castillo de San Cristobal in Old San Juan. Music, performance, art made out of necessity, communing with spirits, syncretic religions, places haunted by history—all of these are held in those examples and all of these are things that still plague my work.

These things also all take root in slave culture, blackness, and indigeneity on the island, and their relationship to our colonizers (Spain, U.S.). This dance with race is something I'm always considering in life and work especially as it is complicated by the roles of race I've had to learn and play (willingly or not) in the U.S.—the way race defines me differently to white people, black Americans (because of historical difference in our blacknesses) and to "latinos."

A note on the latter: too often we cling to "latinidad" ignoring how our desire to organize around our Spanish-speakingness is a colonial exercise in itself. In PR I grew up being told that everyone is a "mix of the three races" (my coloring for example is regularly called trigueña which denotes "a mix of three"). This takes root in the same colonial practices that gave us words like mestizo or "creole"—a denoting of contamination. While these terms have been reclaimed to take back power they're also weaponized to brush blackness and indigeneity under the rug of whiteness.

CP: When did you first realize that you could use computers creatively?

SC: I actually took a while to make that leap. While my work is born from the hyperdigital



Echoes of A Tumbling Throne (Odas Al Fin De Los Tiempos), Nivel 8: COOERPOH A COO-ERPOH, 2016-2017, Video still

present, I'm still the type of artist who likes to work materially first. I map everything out on paper before sitting in front of a computer now. I rely on computers a lot but the pleasure of making for me needs to be a balance between analogue and digital.

CP: What were your early impressions of the Internet?

SC: That it was like I'd found a secret portal, hidden in plain sight. My first internet experiences were of sitting next to a friend or cousin and jumping around chatrooms. On the surface we were looking for laughs but we were also being lured by the possibility of an odd or shocking encounter. This was also a time of early sexual understanding. While my body was a new puzzle for me IRL, other people's bodies were being communicated to me every time I was online revealing something about the role of language in sexual self-presentation.

CP: What did you think of America when you moved from Puerto Rico to attend college?

SC: I moved to the States at 15 to go to an experimental college (Simon's Rock College of Bard in rural Massachusetts) so I landed in a space station before entering what typically defines America (New York then California). Before that, because I went to middle school inside a U.S. Naval Base I had a partial—if mediated by the active circumstance of the colonizing occupation of my island—understanding of American culture before arriving. Beyond any understanding of America, what I gained was that I'd been let loose somewhere where nobody knew me. I felt completely free to prod and push at myself from the inside; those first years I was a different person every minute.

CP: Do you feel your identity changed since you made that move?

SC: I wouldn't say "changed" so much as gained new dimensions. The moment I left home—and I didn't know this consciously at the time—I stopped being fully acknowledged as from there by my own people. *Ella se fue p'allá afuera*, "She went 'out there'": a common phrase used openly for Boricuas who leave home. This isn't to say it's a permanent denomination but it is one I'll carry until I fully move back.

On the other hand, even as it has been painful and like being reborn out of fire again and again, in some distorted way I'm grateful to have come to the U.S. because in its best moments, out in deep Queens or here in Oakland, it is truly made up of a cultural mashup unlike any other place. I have participated in communities with people from countries that I might not have ever met otherwise. It frustrates me to no end that those who deem themselves "real Americans" can't see that the best things about this country are those things born of the strange soup that gets cooked when people are smashed together here under often chaotic circumstances.

I had to leave home to pick apart my "mixed" heritage, to understand my blackness, my indigeneity, and that in me too is the blood of my oppressor. To have come to define that while navigating the complex and twisted system of race in the States wasn't simple but what lesson about self is simple?

CP: You moved from the East to the West Coast. Do you think there is a distinction in the approach to creativity between those places?

SC: It is so cliché, but there are some real differences. Obviously history has a lot to do with it—the East Coast is the earliest settled in the U.S. while the West is the last lending it a “still under construction” quality which spreads to contemporary culture (of course, duh, Native peoples and Mexicans were here before “American newness” came but y’know...).

Experimentation feels more welcome in the West, while the East Coast is studied and clinical. I do miss how guarded the East Coast can be too; California can so often present a false openness. California can also be all crystals and horoscopes but I’ve come to love that part of life here, especially in reminding myself that much of what we call “new age” in this white world is actually the remnants of ancient, colored ritual.

CP: You trained as a formal photographer. Why did you make the transition to more new media/multi media based art?

SC: I felt like the bounds of photography were constraining me at a time when I was trying to make early work about identity—specifically my colored femme identity as corrupted by the domestic space (ugh). I came to realize the medium had become literally too static, so I started playing with video, at first sequencing my images with some rudimentary sound pieces put together really haphazardly and later with the help of my partner (musician Matthew Gonzalez Kirkland). These experiments opened the possibilities in working with time itself. Around then too, I read Frank Kogan’s *Real Punks Don’t Wear Black* and Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* which simultaneously opened me up to music as a site for transgressive work and the creation of space and to the idea that digging into the pleasure and pain of my Caribbean subjectivity and journey was worthy.

CP: Tell us a little about your music project XUXA SANTAMARIA.

SC: XUXA SANTAMARIA is the current name of my continued collaboration with Matt, but the name originally belonged to an alter ego, ChuCha Santamaria. I created ChuCha to be a receptacle for the histories and players in the period of colonization of the Caribbean starting in 1492 and the arrival of Columbus through the great migrations out of the Caribbean and into the States in the 20th century. My interest in making that alter ego a performer, a singer, came from the idea of Caribbean migrants engaging in the ebb and flow of living between their respective islands and the States. While engaging in this painful and dislocating process, they were responsible for a cross pollination of rhythms and traditions that led to the creation of seminal musical genres: salsa, boogaloo, latin freestyle, early hip hop, and reggaeton. ChuCha went on to become an anonymous character in my current works and her name, slightly altered, now belongs to the collaborative musical efforts between Matt and me. Our work ranges from experimental to dance concept albums and scoring my video work.

CP: How has the current political climate affected your creative output?

SC: When the election happened I felt no surprise; if you have lived a single day as a person of color in America, this is how it always has been. Things feel extreme and messy and public, but not new. Since, I’ve spent my days considering what role, if any, art plays now. That’s been akin to depression wherein even getting to the work is a herculean task.



Stills from dawn chorus—LA PREKUELA (in progress)

I have become resolute to just keep going, to continue to be a filter for all of this shit and transcribe it into the work. I think equally important to continuing my work, one foot before the other, I have turned my attentions to organizing, actions, and community. I'm personally fascinated and invested in the Panthers' model. How do we take care of each other? How do we feed the minds and bodies of black and brown babies so that they can imagine and do better than what we have given them?

CP: It feels like there are more and more artists of color using new media as a primary form of expression. Do you agree?

SC: It's because it feels like a newish frontier, one where the flag of white supremacy and patriarchy isn't yet firmly planted. I think, too, there is a certain conceptual inventiveness needed to make good work within it. Particularly because tech has become so good at mimicking the aesthetic language of it, successful new media works need something beyond technical proficiency. It is a natural space for our activities—the innate porousness of its interfaces so embodies intersectionality and fluidity.

Employing new media becomes about finding an alternative solution, a place of our own. In doing so it is also providing viable channels for art to exist that don't rely on the traditional model which can in itself be a radical act (though lord knows there is plenty to be said about the ills of rendering the self online as it relates to technocapitalism—branding ourselves to be consumed). I don't want to over-credit new media though; after all, it already has an art historical denomination.

CP: I read that you see sci-fi as a potentially transgressive space for marginalized people. What did you mean by that?

SC: Working within speculative models and with sci-fi came from understanding both beyond purely formal exercises in fiction. For those in the margins it has historically served as a site for alternative histories. It's a form of acknowledging that things as they are aren't working and never were and that there is no rehabilitating the systems we are trapped by (patriarchy, late-industrial capitalism, racism, anthropo-related environmental ruin and how these things are all

related).

By working with the language of what lies beyond our epoch, I am proposing that the only way out is to imagine every molecule of reality entirely differently. In my work, a narrative wherein our ravaging of the natural world (due to late industrial technocapitalism) leads to a slow death for our species (an attempt to exist in the sci-fi subgenre of "dying earth") and the oppressive hierarchies of class, gender, and race, lending those who remain the space to reimagine everything.

CP: I see a meditative, spiritual, and almost psychedelic aspect to some of your work. Do you agree?

SC: I'm wary of the work getting locked into very de rigueur practices that are interested in New Age-ness itself but, yes, in a carefully studied way those things are in the work. When dealing with issues around the end of "historical" time and the liberation born of it, which is the heart of the work, I had to inevitably deal with the mechanisms and pattern-reading that we as a species employ to make sense of terror, of uncertainty. While I work with clear concepts, I don't like my work to be sententious or devoid of rigorous poetics and strangeness. I want the work to be mysterious and not entirely clear to allow for various reads. For one, I trust my audience to either get it or simply bask in the baroque layering of visuals and sound. Secondly, I have to remain wary of making "good-for-you-broccoli-art" which too often is what we think of when we think of work that is concerned with politics, the personal, and the spiritual.

CP: Are altered states important to you?

SC: I wouldn't say "important," but they're certainly influential and a tool I turn to when I'm feeling tied down by the dullness of unexamined being. I first did psychedelics at Simon's Rock where a mix of very open and experimental academics coupled with a dry campus led to some very wannabe Leary moments.

I learned right away that for me it wasn't purely recreational but something else, an agreed-to trial-by-fire, a dissolution of ego, a real reset. After these initial interactions back East, my West Coast life has opened new dimensions of this. On my 25th birthday, for example, a dear friend gifted me an ayahuasca ceremony from which I derived tons and tons of the material that made up the texture of original ChuCha record, project, and videos.

One a personal level, I went deep on that trip, I saw my anxiety and whittled at it, I saw where I was from and realized that I'd forever be one with that place, molecularly, regardless of the anxiety I'd been feeling about my displacement. I saw myself die and cities and their leveling all happening above my body and I wasn't afraid. Recently, I took mushrooms in considering the "plot" of the latest Echoes...

CP: What projects do you have coming up?

SC: Right now, I'm doing a residency at the Mills College Museum and I'm working with the music and dance departments on a live performance. It will involve video projections describing my future world through hyper-digital landscapes wherein nature consumes everything—I just read Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* so a sort of pulsing, psychedelic ecology

is heavy on my mind. In addition, the piece will involve choreography and various performers, live instrumentation of a score ranging from covers of pop songs to stuff closer to musique concrète, with a degree of improvisation to allow for a mutable experience for the audience. In a sense, when I began this work 5 years ago, this was the thing I wanted to put on but I, a wannabe sci-fi author, had a lot of world building to do before I could put this together.

The piece will place the audience in the role of protagonist and through mild suggestion act almost like a guided meditation through this perilous world. I think of it like an IRL and collective VR. I'm also working on new videos. Most exciting to me right now is the three-part dawn chorus series, which is a prequel to this world where nature still hasn't been fully merged with the digital as it has in Echoes.... I'm also mid-dalliance with sculpture; I have begun working with taxidermy as a way of underlining mutation as a way out of our binary and biologically-driven thinking around bodies and identity by extension.