

Beyond What the Eye Can See: Sofia Cordova's Sound and Vision**Rachel Walther****February 10, 2014**

Meet ChuCha Santamaria: dancing siren, disco singer, and larger-than-life alter ego of CCA alumna Sofía Córdova (MFA 2010). Born and raised in Puerto Rico, Córdova has developed an artistic practice spanning sculpture and photography, installation, and video, but it is her music and performances as ChuCha Santamaria that have attracted the most attention.

In 2011, she and her husband, the musician and artist Matthew Kirkland, released their debut album *ChuCha Santamaria Y Usted*. (It was the central piece in an installation/performance cycle.) Reviewers were dazzled. "Fantastic, vital . . . imminently catchy," wrote *East Bay Express* critic Ellen Cushing. "Singer/wordsmith Sofía Córdova sings in inglés, español, y Vocoder, carefully unfolding her melodies with stately restraint," enthused *PopMatters* reviewer Josh Langhoff.

Disco Siren

"ChuCha Santamaria isn't me," says Córdova, "but rather an alter ego, because I want her to be universal." While ChuCha's persona draws on decades of American depictions of Latin cultures, the music touches on ideas about belonging, migration, and the Caribbean diaspora.

For the upcoming album and the performance she's currently working on, Córdova transforms ChuCha into a traveling oracle and vagabond. The character gives her a platform to comment on the shifting landscape of culture after an unidentified catastrophic event, all the while seducing her listeners with sugarcane-sweet rhythms.

In the video sections of the performance, ChuCha appears as a shadowy figure behind the screen. The first chapter is colorful, campy, and satirical -- a nod to Latin performers such as Carmen Miranda and XuXa.

The second chapter is darker, with ChuCha receding into shadow. "People like Carmen Miranda occupy this position of burlesquing 'the other,'" says Córdova. "There's a sad humor in it, which is an important tool when talking about terrible things."

The Biology of a Performer

For such a committed performer, Córdova's college journey began at an unexpected starting point: as a biology undergrad. In 2001 she enrolled at Bard College at Simon's Rock in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, otherwise known as the Early College. "It's for kids who are frustrated with high school and want to start college early. I studied marine biology, and began taking photographs as part of my research."

It was the photography that hooked her. And after living for a few years in New York, studying in the photography program at St. John's University in Queens and the International Center of

Photography, Córdoba decided it was time for a change.

Time to head West. "I was attracted to CCA's Graduate Program in Fine Arts because it was so interdisciplinary. It seemed more attuned to the real art world for a photographer to be in critiques with sculptors and painters. And the competition in New York can at times be damaging to a young artist's practice. The saturation can be such that you have to change a lot about your work."

Experimenting at CCA

Córdoba began her MFA studying photography, but after her first year, she says, "I hit a wall and felt really stuck. Photography felt -- literally -- too static to develop the ideas I was working through."

In her second year she began to collaborate with her husband in creating more dynamic works -- sequenced photographs and small videos set to music -- that better articulated her interest in themes such as identity and the pain of not belonging.

Two faculty members made a particular mark on her artistic evolution. "I shot my first videos in a course led by Larry Sultan. If it weren't for his encouragement, I might not have felt like I could accomplish the work I've done. I'm forever grateful that I got to work with Larry the last year he taught.

"I am also indebted to visiting artist Julio Cesar Morales, one of the first people to recognize the ChuCha work as a coherent whole. Perhaps because he deals with similar issues in his own work, he understood where I was coming from in a way that the mostly white art world doesn't always access on the first read."

Even after finding her feet as ChuCha, Córdoba has found it challenging to locate appropriate venues, partly because the work combines installation with performance and other logistical elements; all that category-crossing can sometimes be difficult for museum and gallery curators to accommodate.

Córdoba and Kirkland have found success at alternative mixed-use spaces, museums such as SFMOMA, and music venues like the South by Southwest festival in Austin, where they performed in 2012.

A Renewed Focus

Finding a way to support her own artistic practice, post-CCA, took a few years. "After graduation," she says, "I was making a living out of four different jobs."

But one of them was an internship at the photography gallery Pier 24. When the director heard that photographer Richard Misrach was seeking a studio assistant, he recommended Córdoba for the position. She's now working for Misrach full time.

"I was really lucky. I'd always admired Richard's work, and after a talk he gave at CCA, I fell in love with his process, as well. I knew that working for him would be an ideal job, as he is such a

considerate art maker, and someone I could learn a lot from."

Alongside her development of ChuCha's voice, Córdova has returned to photography in a series of works entitled Infinite Encyclopedia. It's "an intentionally futile attempt to record everything," she says, "even things as 'useless' as the backs of people's heads, as a sort of anti-portraiture."

Collecting this photographic data and examining the patterns that emerge lends itself to what she describes as a kind of universal knowledge. "Encyclopedias are generally the province of aristocratic white men. This project is being written by a woman of color in hopes that it offers a challenge to what we consider concrete and perfect knowledge."