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Altar/Installations by Amalia Mesa-Bains in a Feminist Context

Carmen del Valle Hermo
CUNY Hunter College

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Altar/Installations by Amalia Mesa-Bains in a Feminist Context

by

Carmen del Valle Hermo

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Art History, Hunter College The City University of New York

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Thesis Sponsor:

April 15, 2019

Dr. Harper Montgomery

Date

Signature

April 4, 2019

Dr. Cynthia Hahn

Date

Signature of Second Reader
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Finally, I would like to thank the artist Teresita Fernandez, whose tireless work to raise the profile of Latinx artists led to my introduction to Amalia Mesa-Bains’s important work. To Amalia herself, I will cherish my time spent thinking about your work, and am grateful for your creativity, fortitude, and generosity.
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Introduction

This thesis will explore the path-breaking art installations and attendant writing of Amalia Mesa-Bains (born 1943, Santa Clara, California), who fused the home altar traditions of Mexican and Chicana women with contemporary considerations of identity politics and hybridity. It will also situate her practice within a trajectory of feminist art. Mesa-Bains is a cultural critic, historian of Chicanx culture, psychologist, curator, educator, and artist.¹ Her practice fluidly moves among these fields, which in turn inform her artistic output. Her work emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s, during an era of increased visibility for artists on the so-called margins of the art world—a period following the hegemony-destabilizing era of second wave feminist art, and its attendant conservative backlash, wherein “identity politics” art was first exhibited in a cohesive way in mainstream galleries and museums. Mesa-Bains’s Mexican-American heritage, artistic development in California, and creative membership in a feminist Chicanx community are reflected in the altar/installations she began making in 1975.

Between 1985 and 1995, Mesa-Bains utilized the vernacular tradition of religious home altars as an aesthetic and rhetorical strategy to convey a sense of her experience of lived hybridity. In her pieces she archives and displays a range of culturally-specific symbols, making them accessible for both Chicanx and other viewers. By these means, she engages the spiritual within the gallery space, and effects some important reversals: the private becomes public, and traditional forms are made new. Equally important among these varied actions is the striking presentation of a Chicana femininity or feminism, originating in domestic sites and traditional folk forms and here entering into large-scale installations for museum or gallery display.

¹ The terms “Chicana” and “Chicanx” are used intentionally thus far to denote female- and all-gender connotations; the specificity of language will be addressed later in this introduction.
Despite the importance of these pieces—altar/installations’ clear roots in women’s domestic traditions in Mexico and in Chicanx communities in the U.S., and their considerable conceptual overlap with feminist aesthetic and rhetorical strategies of the second and third waves—no in-depth feminist reading of Mesa-Bains’s work exists. In the hope of freeing her work from a narrow context of Chicanx art, to this day mired by the specter of “identity politics,” and restricted by institutional classification, my aim is to align Mesa-Bains’s practice with broader feminist art movements, and to trace the ways her practice extends and complicates feminist art’s legacy. In arguing for her visibility within feminist art research and display, I also hope for renewed attention to her role as a major figure in a narrative of contemporary art.

For most of her career, in an effect compounded by her own writing, Mesa-Bains has been considered only within narratives of Chicanx art. Chapter 1, “Chicanx Traditions, Refreshed and Refashioned: Creating and Naming the Altar/Installation,” will describe Mesa-Bains’s context within the Chicano movement and examine its complex relationship to gender, considering how art supported the movement while questioning the movement’s patriarchal underpinnings. In an important example of culturally-specific art criticism, Chicano scholar Tomás Ybarra-Frausto defined rasquachismo in 1986 as a Chicanx aesthetic of accumulation and heterogeneity, rooted in sensual experience, material resourcefulness, and Chicanx culture. In 1992, Mesa-Bains described the visual strategy of domesticana as the feminist version of Chicano rasquachismo. In this important text, she adjusts the visual legacy of Chicano patriarchy to encourage identification of feminine, or feminist, roles and goals therein. Both

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writers connected contemporary art with folk art traditions. Mesa-Bains’s writing and artworks posit subversive engagements with traditional forms and folkloric themes that go further than rasquachismo, through an affirmative femininity that is rooted in matrilineal tradition and devoted to questioning institutional hierarchies and histories. Exploring Mesa-Bains’s essay, “Domesticana: The Sensibility of Chicana Rasquachismo,” alongside the strategies and hallmarks of feminist art results in an appreciation of how her artworks and writing posit a dual critique of systems of patriarchy and oppression in a dominant white culture, while finding hard-won space for women in the context of the Chicano movement. Her essay outlines artworks that perform this critique, and persists as a radical act of self-authoring one’s narrative in the absence of engagement by the broader field of art criticism.

A close reading of the visual strategies and forms of her art work will comprise Chapter 2, “Honoring a Woman, Honoring an Experience,” in which I will consider Ofrenda for Dolores del Rio (1984/91, Fig. 1), the artist’s best-known work, which entered the Smithsonian Museum of American Art’s permanent collection in 1998, as a case study. This chapter will articulate how spiritual and accumulative visual strategies complicate the domestic sources of the altar/installations, intermingling contemporary critique with a respect for traditional forms. Mesa-Bains’s altar/installations are both “of” and “about” women’s confinement and relationship to domestic spaces.

The relationship of Mesa-Bains’s practice to broader themes of the largely white second wave West Coast feminism of the 1970s will be explored in Chapter 3, “Mesa-Bains, Between Feminisms.” No connections have been made by the artist or other writers to the second wave feminists, who were especially active and visible in California, where Mesa-Bains lives and works to this day. These feminist artists and theorists emphasized personal narratives, herstories,
and “women’s work” materials and techniques, while critiquing cultural hegemonies in art and practice—these same issues are strong themes in Mesa-Bains’s altar/installations, and will be unpacked in detail. This argument, among other points, points to a link between domesticana and femmage forms, wherein traditional forms of women’s art making are presented in contemporary contexts. I will also examine how the feminist themes of her work persisted through the “identity politics” era of the early 1990s, sustained in part by an identification with critical Chicana feminist writing, and a prescient artistic labor that reflected intersectional politics.

Of particular concern for our purposes here, Amalia Mesa-Bains prioritized the celebration and sharing of her experiences and Chicanx culture in her artworks. Her art works operate with and through feminist strategies. This thesis will engage texts written by Tomás Ybarra-Frausto (a friend of the artist and frequent collaborator on Chicanx cultural projects), and Mesa-Bains herself, as well as with the significant scholarship produced by Jennifer A. González on the artist. All have cited feminism in relationship to the artwork to varying degrees, but, until now, no one has presented an extended analysis of feminism’s role in Mesa-Bains’s work, or articulated how it enhances our understanding of intersectional feminist art today.

The three most prominent voices on Mesa-Bains—González, Ybarra-Frausto, and Mesa-Bains herself—frequently contextualize her work in such a way that Chicanx politics are foregrounded, while feminist content recedes. This is notable in González’s Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art (2008) as well as her “Rhetoric of the Object: Material Memory and the Artwork of Amalia Mesa-Bains” (1993), and in Ybarra-Frausto’s writings in the Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation catalogue (1991), as well as the texts in which Mesa-Bains writes about altar/installation forms specifically, including her germinal “Domesticana: The Sensibility of Chicana Rasquache” (1996) and essay for the exhibition
In aligning Mesa-Bains’s practice in a trajectory of feminist art that is currently experiencing renewed academic and institutional appreciation, and popular cultural appeal, this thesis aims to introduce Mesa-Bains’s practice to a new context and encourage more flexible thinking around her work. Today, manifestations and methods of intersectional feminism clarify the historic struggles to allow artists to be appreciated for complex engagement of multiple identities. In a 2019 interview, Mesa-Bains articulated these very concerns. She spoke about the exclusion she faced in relation to largely white feminists:

Ethnic identity, and a driving force for social justice, was so strong for us [Chicanas], we couldn’t step out and say, ‘here’s the connection with these white women.’ Because their class issues, their race issues, all of that were really in conflict with the goals we had in the larger [Chicano] movement.

I would argue, however, that Mesa-Bains’s artwork and writing, particularly her influential “Domesticana” essay, which she considers her most important text, can supply language about Chicana political positions, within and outside of both feminist and Chicano movements, into a vocabulary for present day use. By arguing the relevance of feminist art themes within Mesa-Bains’s work, a renewed context promises greater visibility for an underrecognized artist and theorist; one whose intersectional feminist practice is powerful but which has been doubly

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4 Even prior to the election of President Donald J. Trump, feminism was experiencing a cultural embrace in the U.S. Feminist-identifying Pop stars (Beyoncé, Lady Gaga), media outlets (Broadly, Refinery29), popular authors (Roxane Gay, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie), television (The Handmaid’s Tale, Transparent), as well as conversations around pay equity in the cultural sphere, laid the groundwork for a groundswell following the start of the misogynist, white supremacist Trump administration. From there, public engagement with feminism has been further galvanized, as evidenced by massive global Women’s March actions. This has led to more media attention to gender parity in the art world in terms of market records, gallery representation, and museum representation; for instance, the Museum of Modern Art publicizing future re-installations where art by women will be central (2019).

5 Amalia Mesa-Bains, phone interview with author, March 5, 2019.
sidelined by its racial invisibility in feminist contexts, and gendered invisibility in Chicánx art contexts.

**Biography**

As Mesa-Bains’s chosen form is rooted in familial and cultural specificities, a brief biographical introduction allows us to ground her practice in the upbringing and experiences of a Chicana woman in California. (As will be discussed in later chapters, an acknowledgement and embrace of biographical sources in post-modernist artworks is a hallmark of the pathways and new allowances forged by second-wave feminist artists.)

Mesa-Bains was born in Santa Clara, California, in 1943, to parents who had emigrated from Mexico in 1917 to a city whose history parallels the story of the artist’s own family heritage. Santa Clara was initially inhabited by indigenous Ohlone people, then occupied and changed by Spanish expeditions, and ultimately wrenched from Mexico by the U.S. From its eighteenth century establishment to mid-twentieth-century context, agricultural laborers, gold rush hopefuls, and early industrial workers built Santa Clara and San Jose into what it is today—a sprawling city/suburbia. The cultures of European settlers and indigenous people mixed in the region, through intermarriage, impacted by the power dynamics of occupation and racial hierarchies of sex and consent. By the mid-twentieth century, the greater Santa Clara Valley was

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7 The area had been inhabited by Ohlone Native Americans for centuries before European expeditions passed through in 1770, following the 1769 establishment of the Alta California polity in New Spain. The Misión de Santa Clara de Asís was founded in 1777 by New Spain-born explorer (and eventual governor of New Mexico) Juan Bautista de Anza as an outpost for the Franciscan Order. It holds the distinction of being the first such mission named for a woman. Neighboring San Jose was founded in 1777 as the first pueblo not associated with either military or religious forces, instead comprising a farming community that served both ruling classes. From 1821–48, the region was part of newly-independent Mexico, until the U.S. territorial annexation of Northern Mexican states following the Mexican-American war. In 1850, California was incorporated into the United States.
known for its plentiful orchards and the Del Monte cannery plant, the U.S. War Department and IBM centers of design and manufacture, as well as the tech facilities of Stanford University and neighboring institutions.

Mesa-Bains was the first in her family to attend college, earning a BA in Painting from San Jose State University in 1966 and an MA in Interdisciplinary Education at San Francisco State University in 1971. She obtained a second MA and a PhD in Clinical Psychology from Berkeley’s Wright Institute in 1980 and 1983. Mesa-Bains made art while she pursued her degrees, and worked for twenty years as a multicultural specialist and bilingual teacher in the San Francisco United School District.⁸

Mesa-Bains’s education and early artistic career in the 1970s and 80s coincided with the Chicano and feminist movements in California and the U.S., in which questions of labor rights, gender politics, and visibility and representation were raised in ways that often intersected. Mesa-Bains was intimately familiar with these social conditions, having herself lived them. Her father’s family, led by her grandmother Mariana Escobedo Mesa, sustained themselves with nomadic agricultural work throughout the Southwestern United States, and Mesa-Bains worked in the Del Monte canning plant for a time.⁹ The artist herself has described her work within the economic framework of her family’s life as important to her intellectual formation: “memories of ranch life and the work of my larger extended family had been critical to my ethos of labor and endurance.”¹⁰

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¹⁰ Ibid.
The conditions of labor and production insistently present in her family life preceded her awareness of art in institutionalized contexts. Although the folk and domestic art forms later theorized as *rasquache* were well known to her, Mesa-Bains did not have regular access to museums and galleries growing up, relating that she was twenty when she visited a museum for the first time.\(^{11}\) She locates her aesthetic inspiration in her family’s domestic production, especially that of the women, though her uncles and great-uncles on her father’s side were inventors and people who “made things” as well.\(^{12}\) Her mother Marina handmade fine clothing for the family, her grandmother Mariana maintained a home altar, and fellow Catholic women decked the neighborhood church with “elaborate floral arrangements, candles, draperies, and an outdoor grotto, [providing the young Amalia with] a regular experience of ceremonial grandeur and beauty.”\(^{13}\)

It is thus no surprise that Mesa-Bains’s first artistic forays were grounded in community use and hyper-local creation. She first began making altars in the late 1960s and early 1970s for Día de Los Muertos and Cinco de Mayo celebrations in Santa Clara, and her altars were also displayed at community centers like Galería de la Raza in San Francisco and the Social Public Resource Center of Venice. Mesa-Bains made altars for approximately ten years before she began to “innovate them for museum settings.”\(^{14}\) These early altars, made from and for spiritual expression in the artist’s Mexican-American community, continued a long tradition of Chicana vernacular art-making for home and communal use. Following this more traditional use, Mesa-

\(^{11}\) Amalia Mesa-Bains, “The Real Multiculturalism: A Struggle for Authority and Power.” In *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift* (Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira Press, 2004), 105.


\(^{13}\) Meyer, 6.

Bains began “tinkering” with the home altar format while simultaneously engaging in academia: “I started innovating them because I needed them to be more of an intellectual process, I needed it to be more than it was at the time. So I began exploring… and that’s when I started writing about it, too.”

Activating the dimensions of spiritual meaning, labor, and display inherent to traditional altars in a contemporary art-world context both led to aesthetic strategies originating in the artist’s personal growth, and brought Chicanx traditions into the vaunted cultural sphere of museums. Although there are certainly domestic altars being made today as both extensions or reimaginings of traditional forms—and this practice is indeed “contemporary”—for the purposes of this discussion we will define “contemporary art” as the common shorthand for artworks intended for visibility and circulation within commercial gallery and museum or nonprofit art systems of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Mesa-Bains’s work falls squarely within this field, and indeed forcefully enters it in order to effect change.

In communication with the artist, I was able to ascertain that Chicanx communities have long been the intended audience for her work, even if, or even because, she positioned it within the larger context of predominantly white institutions like museums. In that location, if her work won acknowledgement of its power and value, it was able to challenge dominant narratives. Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa characterized this broad outreach as a messy one: “To touch more people, the personal realities and the social must be evoked—not through rhetoric but through blood and pus and sweat.” Mesa-Bains’s work is so effective because of its insistence on the social realities of art, realities that exist alongside and develop with its rhetoric and theory.

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15 Mesa-Bains, phone interview with author, March 5, 2019.
A Further Note on Language

Given the ever-changing language and contexts within which artworks are situated and experienced, further clarification of how I am using terms in this thesis is necessary. As Mesa-Bains’s career stretches from the late 1970s to today, sources quoted in this paper evince a variation and progression of terminology around identity; however, as this paper is grounded in art thinking and practices of 2018–19, it is thereby reflective of the current moment’s approach to language.

The term “intersectionality,” now perceived as a mandate for truly equitable feminist strategies, was not in popular use at the time of the work by Mesa-Bains explored in this paper. It is used here in the contemporary sense, to point to the various forms of social experience or oppressions that are interwoven, including race, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, religion, and disability. Its roots can be found in the speeches and activism of abolitionist and feminist Sojourner Truth (c. 1797–1883), and were later delineated further by the black lesbian-led Combahee River Collective, which pointed towards this conception when they set the terms for “simultaneous” oppressions in their April 1977 statement. In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw first used “intersectionality” when discussing feminism.

Already in this thesis the terms Chicano, Chicana, Chicanx, and Latinx have made appearances. “Chicanx” is used to indicate the peoples and culture of those born in the United States, of Mexican origin and tracing back one or many more generations. In a nod to intersectionality, I note here that “Chicanx” can form or inform the whole or part of one’s identity. In California in particular, familial lineage can encompass the indigenous, colonizer,
intermarried relationships of people whose geographies have historically been labeled indigenous, New Spain, Mexico, and U.S. territory.

Given the political nature of the work discussed in this thesis, “Chicanx” presents a more specific and racialized category than “Mexican-American.” The latter is often inflected with the hope or demand of assimilation, as journalist Rubén Salazar’s stated in 1970 in the *Los Angeles Times*: “A Chicano is a Mexican-American with a non-Anglo image of himself”—a statement in which he gendered the term male.\(^1\) The “x” in “Chicanx” is here used to indicate and advocate gender neutrality and inclusivity. While there are robust debates about the ways in which the gender-neutral “x” is a linguistic and phonetic affront to those who speak Spanish, it is used here to avoid a gender binary—an appropriate choice given that Mesa-Bains’s work circulated in the U.S., and that this thesis seeks a feminist context for her work. When “Chicano” or “Chicana” are used, they specifically refer to a gendered male or female connotations, rooted in self-identification; for instance, Mesa-Bains names herself as Chicana, and in this paper, “Chicano movement” describes the male-dominated activism of a certain period.

In current art circles, there is a growing and important distinction between “Latinx” and “Latin American,” (or, better yet, “Central American” or “South American,” to indicate geographical regions rather than the linguistic affinities that succeeded colonialism). “Latinx” again reinforces gender-neutral language, and describes those of origin or descent from Central or South American primarily in the U.S. It encompasses Chicanx people, but may also include other diasporas. The term “Hispanic,” which appeared frequently in criticism on Mesa-Bains’s

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work produced in the 1980s and 1990s, is no longer in use in art circles given its colonial connotations, its exclusion of Brazilian populations, and its erasure of both indigenous and African diasporic people. These terms are here defined to ground the historical moments in which Mesa-Bains’s work was made and exhibited, and in which I write now. It is not intended to reflect a decisive recommendation regarding future ways to write around Mesa-Bains’s practice.
Chapter 1. Chicanx Traditions, Refreshed and Refashioned: Creating and Naming the Altar/Installation

The Chicano Movement: Labor, Gender, and Art

In the altar/installation works made between 1975 and 1994, Amalia Mesa-Bains engaged not only with the symbols of Chicanx culture, as many Chicanx artists of the time did—incorporating flags, saints, foods, and cultural icons through found objects or appropriated imagery—she also combined these symbols with feminist strategies, extrapolating from her experiences with her grandmother’s and community’s altars in her adolescence, and her own early altar-making in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In this way, she imbues the altar or ofrenda form with her own subjectivities and experiences, subjectivities largely formulated within the culture and activism of the Chicano movement.

Mesa-Bains was involved in the Chicano movement before her involvement in the art world. According to a 2019 interview with the artist, she attended protests, supported strikes and student walkouts, centered her own teaching practice on Chicanx culture and history, and created altars for community spaces. She also participated in watershed cultural events like the San Jose State University 1963 debut of Luis Valdez’s play *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa.* The18 political movement that emerged from 1960s actions and alliances of farmworkers in California and Texas who were organizing for better conditions and compensation were essential to her family, and therefore formed an important part of Mesa-Bains’s daily consciousness and praxis. Though these political actions had been occurring since the 1930s, it was not until the United Farm Workers (under César Chávez and Dolores Huerta’s magnetic leadership) mobilized

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18 Mesa-Bains, phone interview with author, March 5, 2019.
marches and economic boycotts, and attracted the media attention, that it became impossible for
U.S. agencies to continue to respond with violence and mass deportations. Buoyed by political
successes and solidarity between rural and urban Chicanxs, the movement was highly visible and
influential in the 1960s and 70s.

Support for political action flourished in dispossessed urban Chicanx communities, as
well as in student settings, from high schoolers protesting racist teachers to university students
demanding Chicano Studies and making connections to the anti-war efforts and the American
Indian Movement. For many, the privilege and bias of emphasizing Spanish or Anglo ancestry
was replaced by an embrace of hybrid identity. Pre-conquest culture was uplifted and
mythologized as a parallel to contemporary struggles, and a deep well of ancestral power and
possibility was tapped—emblematized by notions of Aztlán, a Nahuatl word indicating ancestral
Aztec homeland. The idea of a mythical homeland was activated by groups like the Movimiento
Estudiantil Chicanx de Aztlán (Chicanx Student Movement of Aztlán, or M.E.Ch.A, founded in
1969 and active today),19 for whom the myth provided a hope for return, achieved by civil
disobedience against oppressive white U.S. culture.

The Chicano movement is vast, and this summary of political priorities is extremely
cursory. One thing it did not do was support women’s rights, or feminism. It was succinctly
summarized in the contextualizing introduction of Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation
(popularly known as “CARA”), a 1991 exhibition catalogue: “The Chicano Movement sought to
end oppression—discrimination, racism, and poverty—and Chicanas supported that goal

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19 As an indication of how terms and language are ever-changing, between the third and fourth drafts of this 2019
thesis, the student leaders of M.E.Ch.A. voted to drop the “Chicano” and “Aztlán” references in the group’s name.
Still under revision as of the date of this thesis, the group voiced concerns that the terms reflect the homophobic,
misogynist origins of the Chicano movement, while unduly emphasizing Aztec indigeneity when there are dozens of
indigenous groups in Mexico. Aaron E. Sanchez, “Why Student Group MEChA’s Proposed Name Change Has Set
Off a Fierce, Multi-Generational Debate,” Remezcla, April 4, 2019, https://remezcla.com/features/culture/mecha-
name-change-debates.
unequivocally; the movement did not, however, propose basic changes in male-female relations or the status of women.”20 The movement grew from labor rights in the 1960s to encompass civil rights and cultural empowerment in the 1970s and 1980s, with a visible presence in museum traveling shows in 1991 thanks to CARA. For the purposes of this paper, it is most helpful to further describe the Chicano movement’s failures to advocate for its women members. As Gloria Anzaldúa described in her own writings on border and Chicano culture, women were often automatically dismissed as cultural authorities because, “you’re [sic] nothing but a woman.”21 (It is worth stating here that even though women were marginalized, that did not stop them from exercising their power, as in the women-led 1930s strikes against low pay and dangerous conditions for garment workers that were so important to the movement).22

Women who sought identification within the Chicano movement were often met with a culturally-specific set of limiting gendered stereotypes. Writers like Sonia López found the embedded misogyny of the movement reflected in the ways that women were “generally relegated to traditional roles played by women in society,” as physical “carriers” and nurturers of culture, sustaining more male and public forms of activism by maintaining a home and fueling the movement’s actions (Fig. 2).23 In brief, women could conform to existing stereotypes of the adelita (loyal supporter) or malinche (cultural traitor) which fit into larger themes of nationalism

20 Richard Griswold del Castillo, Richard, Teresa McKenna, Yvonne Yarbo-Bejerano, and CARA National Advisory Committee, eds., Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation (Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery, University of California Press, 1991), 90. Chicanas who organized on their own behalf formed groups like the Mexican American Women’s Organization, the Comisión Femenil Mexicana, the Mexican American Business and Professional Women, the Hijas de Cuauhtémoc, the Concilio de Mujeres, and, in the arts, the Mujeres Artístas del Suroeste and the Mujeres Muralistas.
embedded in the Chicano cultural movement.\textsuperscript{24} Certain scholars, like Maylei Blackwell, have argued that Chicanas organizing outside of the dominant movement did so to support themselves, and not to undermine the overall goals or argue for separatism.\textsuperscript{25} As early as 1970, feminist subgroups appeared in national conferences on Chicano culture or activism; by the mid-1970s, the work of Chicana artists, poets, and writers held greater visibility in the movement. Despite these advances, Anzaldúa poetically summarized the limits within the social movement using clothing as metaphor: “\textit{La gorra, el rebozo, la mantilla} are symbols of my culture’s ‘protection’ of women. Culture (read males) professes to protect women. Actually it keeps women in rigidly defined roles.”\textsuperscript{26}

As the movement grew in numbers and drew attention throughout the 1960s and 70s, art became one of its tools. For some, Chicana art required a connection to the aims of the political movement. Art was often used to enunciate political aims for various publics (Figs. 3 and 4). San Francisco’s Galería de la Raza, or GLDR, (established 1970, still active today) was initially an outgrowth of a 1969 exhibition, \textit{New Symbols for La Nueva Raza}, which was organized by the militant group Mexican American Liberation Art Front (MALAF), comprised of Manuel Hernández-Trujillo, Malaquías Montoya, Esteban Villa, and René Yañez, who were involved in both mural painting and poster making (Figs. 5 and 6). This community-born and -sustained art center—which Mesa-Bains later referred to as her “home base for twenty-five years”\textsuperscript{27}—

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 127
\item \textsuperscript{25} For further reading, see her book \textit{Chicana Power! Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement} (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).
\item \textsuperscript{26} Anzaldúa, \textit{Borderlands}, 39. This loosely translates to “the hat, the shawl, the veil/blanket.”
\item \textsuperscript{27} Mesa-Bains, phone interview with author, March 5, 2019.
\end{itemize}
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showcases Chicanx artists, and in the early 1970s often organized shows for travel to places like Delano, so that farm workers could also experience them.28

An emphasis on activism and responsiveness helps define Chicanx art in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In 1969 the Casa Hispana de Bellas Artes in San Francisco organized a traveling group show to support the grape strike in Delano, then in its fourth year of organizing consumer boycotts, labor walk-outs, and marches. Mesa-Bains recalls this as the first time she started to consider “What is Chicano art?”29 As an individual who did not yet think of herself as a contemporary artist but rather a community artist, this was a very “open-ended question.”30 She submitted drawings of cactuses, “a symbol of endurance and tenacity” meant to visualize the sacrifice of the strikers.31 Mesa-Bains notes that the works were never returned to her: “I like to think somebody liked it and kept it.”32 This easy-going approach to lost artwork, and the implied oversight of the exhibition organizers, also points to how these early shows were created not for artistic visibility, but as a form of cultural community activism.

This was seen as a symbiotic potential for the movement, an idea voiced, for example, in the 1969 text “Spiritual Plan of Aztlán” developed in Denver by the Chicano Youth Conference. This text posits a reclamation of land and culture, rejecting both the Spanish conquest and United States occupation of what is today Mexico and the Southwestern U.S. It also specifically identified art as a crucial element of this decolonial and indigenous-centric plan: “We must insure that our writers, poets, musicians, and artists produce literature and art that is appealing to

28 Griffith, 14. Delano was the site of a major, five-year labor strike organized by the largely Filipino Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee and the Chicano National Farmworkers Association, which joined forces at the United Farm Workers. Marches, organizing, and nonviolent resistance, but especially a years-long consumer boycott of non-union grapes, led to a historic collective bargaining agreement. In bringing Galería de la Raza exhibitions there, a powerful message of support and unity was conveyed.
29 Mesa-Bains, phone interview with author, March 5, 2019.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
our people and relates to our revolutionary culture.”33 This understanding of the function of art resulted especially in numerous works on paper, disseminated as posters, which were activated during protests as visual rallying cries for the movement (Fig. 7).

Art’s use as a tool for Chicanx activism was entwined with the reality that art by cultural practitioners other-than-white was never seen in mainstream art contexts. Asserting one’s cultural traditions was a political stance more than it was an aesthetic statement. In 2002, Mesa-Bains reflected on her perception of artists’ relationship to the movement:

Our philosophy was that art serves the community and we were not artists, we were cultural workers. And our notion was that the art system, as it existed, was an elite system that was an extension of the racist domination of a society that really disregarded us… So the philosophy at the beginning was an anti-elite community-based system whose purpose was to educate and serve the community… You made art, like other artists, but it had a different purpose.34

The fact that they were disregarded by mainstream institutions not only created the conditions for alternative spaces and exhibition models, such as the Delano show, but formed the basis of this “philosophy” for creation. This philosophy aligned art with “work” and characterized it as a labor, rather than the elitist endeavor promoted by most museums. In supporting labor rights causes, the driving concern of the Chicano movement, from the position of an art worker was that artists could marshal creativity in service of a larger cause, bringing individual vision to communal goals. One of those goals was an appreciation of Chicanx culture, in the face of mainstream dismissal. As Mesa-Bains reflected recently, “Going into the Chicano movement was like signing up for the military [laughing]; everyone had roles. My job was to springboard the return back to that cultural tradition, within contemporary art.”35

33 As quoted in CARA, p 84.  
34 Griffith, 15.  
35 Mesa-Bains, phone interview with author, March 5, 2019.
Mesa-Bains had several women artists as peers whose work also grew from this Chicano movement. Ester Hernandez, a graphic artist closely associated with the movement and best known for her iconic 1982 *Sun Mad* screen print (Fig. 8), was one of them. For her, Chicanx art and culture were mutually influential. As she says,

> Chicano art has its roots in the history of the Chicano community. Dolores Huerta, Vice-President of the United Farm Workers, states that it was Chicano artists who made visible the lives of the Chicano community—from rural life to urban centers. The social and political events of the early Chicano movement in the 1960s and 70s gave artists their first Chicano-related subject matter and audience.\(^{36}\)

Hernandez posits that the social movement provided the attendant cultural or art movement with immediately resonant content. Mesa-Bains considers Hernandez an influence on her work, as someone who helped articulate a position for Chicana artists. Though during this time white feminist thinkers and artists were also arguing against unpaid domestic labor and for the right to fulfilling work as two benchmarks of equity, they aimed their artistic critiques at the patriarchal art world. Chicana artists could not identify with those concerns and strategies. Artists like Hernandez, whose work spoke to labor and environmental abuses while centering female experience, were “so critical in understanding the values that drove us… and they [the values] had *nothing* to do with the art world. White feminism really crossed on early into the art world. Our movement was not aimed at the art world, it was aimed at social justice and cultural value… an alternative to an institutional structure that had no place for us.”\(^{37}\)

Art as a form of cultural justice served Chicanx communities directly until the late 1980s, when artists began “crossing over” into mainstream art institutions.\(^{38}\)

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\(^{36}\) This quotation appears in the *CARA* catalogue, credited as coming from Hernandez’s unpublished 1989 artist’s statement.

\(^{37}\) Mesa-Bains, phone interview with author, March 5, 2019.

\(^{38}\) Ibid.
Though Chicanx art proliferated in Chicanx communities and beyond, it was not until 1990 that the blockbuster, ten-venue traveling exhibition, *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation*, historicized and expanded its audiences.\(^{39}\) The collective curatorial framework of this show was reflective of the goals of the movement. Instead of a single curator, a collective of Chicanx intellectuals and thought leaders from across the U.S. collaborated with Chicanx communities in the locations of all of its ten venues. (The catalogue for this exhibition will be discussed later in this chapter.) Mesa-Bains contributed an essay for the exhibition catalogue, oversaw outreach alongside other artists, and served as the Northern California Regional Committee Chair for the exhibition’s organization. The Advisory Committee’s Founding Statement was unequivocal in its alliance of art and politics:

> Chicano art is the modern, ongoing expression of the long-term cultural, economic, and political struggle of the Mexicano people within the United States. It is an affirmation of the complex identity and vitality of the Chicano People. Chicano art arises from and is shaped by our experiences in the Americas.\(^{40}\)

By bringing Chicanx art into non-Chicanx spaces, CARA would visually distill the revolutionary spirit of the Chicano movement. Mesa-Bains’s update of traditional home altar forms fit within the context of the movement as a continuation and elevation of traditional cultural practice.

### Understanding and Uplifting Home Altar Traditions

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\(^{39}\) The exhibition, which ran from September 9 1990 through August 1 1993, traveled to: Wight Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles (also the institution that organized the show); The Denver Art Museum; The Albuquerque Art Museum; San Francisco Museum of Art; Fresno Art Museum; Tucson Museum of Art; National Museum of American Art; El Paso Museum of Art; The Bronx Museum of the Arts; and San Antonio Museum of Art. It was certainly not the first to present and study Chicanx art; in fact, Jacinto Quirarte dedicates an entire chapter in the catalogue to exhibitionary predecessors from 1965 to 1991. It was the first major survey exhibition that was driven by Chicanx people but destined for a mainstream and non-Chicanx museum-going public. Other notable exhibitions include LACMA’s 1974 show of Los Four, the 1977 traveling show of Latinx artists *Ancient Roots/New Visions*, and the controversial *Hispanic Art in the United States* show (1987-90) organized by curators who were not specialists in the field.

\(^{40}\) *CARA*, 82.
Mesa-Bains galvanized the non-dominant spiritual underpinnings, the variable and culturally specific forms, and the distinctly female creativity behind home altars as the conceptual basis for her altar/installations. Ranging from simple crosses in kitchen corners, to elaborate accumulations filling entire rooms and requiring holiday-appropriate updates, Mexican and Chicanx home altars are rooted in pre-Columbian offerings for seasonal, land-based worship.41 Historian Ramón A. Gutiérrez describes home altars as “the products of spiritual conquest” of Mexico’s indigenous traditions, begun in 1519 by Hernán Cortés and reinforced through oppressive legislation that outlawed native beliefs in favor of Catholic doctrine and rituals. Catholic church attendance was enforced by ruling entities, and Catholic sites for worship were demonstrations of power: the opulence and reverence reserved for the Eucharist and its enclosing tabernacle imbued the church altar with import, and hierarchical images of Christ or Mary headed the centralized focus of worship.42 As described by Gutiérrez, the sacred objects and architecture of the church “tie one to the communion of saints… and to the history of a church triumphant,” whereas the items and foundations of home altars “construct family histories that visually record one’s relations to a lineage and clan,”43 creating a specified site for worship drawing from pre-Catholic genealogies and deep respect for the land.


42 Gutiérrez, 43.

43 Ibid., 39.
As a result, church officials were divided as to whether home altars, marked by this hybrid spirituality, could be used for approved Catholic worship, or whether they remained the “preserve of the old heretical religions.” In the nineteenth century, as secularization advanced, even the church-built altars in public niches (which required passersby to genuflect) were moved inside, to be cared for by individuals and families. The advent of personalized, private control meant that home altars “gained their significance primarily in juxtaposition, and quite often in opposition, to the altars found in Catholic churches.”

It is notable, too, that patriarchal systems of both society and the Catholic church typically confined women to their roles as mothers, then grandmothers, caring for children, cleaning and cooking—thereby relegating them to interior spaces rather than spaces of public life. In these limited spaces, it was women who were the ones who came to mix personal, Catholic, and indigenous traditions and beliefs to create a visual mestizaje that did not require approval and escaped the surveillance by the patriarchal church. Altars situated in the domestic, and primarily feminine, sphere of the Mexican or Chicanoa community are thus products of a history of cultural hybridity, in which agency for the dispossessed is reclaimed through personal and spiritual creation.

Domestic altars incorporate hybrid cultural forms, borrow and adapt church hierarchies of symbolism and meaning, and showcase shifts in temporal dimensions, while allowing for individual spiritual expression. The altar-maker selects photographs, trinkets, mementos, household objects, and foods to share the sacred space with statues and prints depicting Christ,

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45 Ibid., 96.
46 Gutiérrez 43, 49. Gutiérrez describes altar installations as unique forms, fused between cultures: “on these altars one sees hybridity, the blending of cultures, traditions, and beliefs produced when two peoples met in conflict and, in the centuries that followed, accommodated themselves to each other.”
Mary, or the saints, imbuing Catholicism with a sense of individuated personhood. Religious materials originally created through formal doctrine can be juxtaposed or reinterpreted through a lens of personal subjectivity based in family relationships. Such altars bricolage the personal with the authoritative in a unique aesthetic strategy. Likewise, linear narratives are eschewed for a more accumulative meaning, in which “sedimentary levels of history and experience represented by the particular emplacement of objects… are powerfully emotive. Here objects, space, and time combine to conjure the holy.”  

The schematized arrangements and displays are updated with flowers and offerings during Christmas and Día de los Muertos (itself a syncretized holiday of ancestor worship), and, crucially, activated by prayer. As family history is often embedded in these altars, Gutiérrez argues that home altar prayers allow people to “place themselves and their family in that grander cosmic scheme of memory and history,” in a gesture of empowerment.  

Given the emphasis on uplifting Mexican cultural traditions, centering indigenous narratives and practices, and the reinforcement of traditional gender roles within the context of the Chicano movement, home altars provided conceptually resonant aesthetic inspiration for Chicanx artists, including and especially Mesa-Bains. The perpetuation of cultural forms through use in popular festivities, like the Día de los Muertos, experienced a resurgence following the Chicano movement.  

These conceptual accumulations are at the core of Mesa-Bains’s altar/installation works of the 1980s and 90s, and reflect her investment in women-led spaces and visual forms associated with the home. Mesa-Bains turned to domestic altar traditions as sources for her first major series made for display in galleries, inspired by her mentor in the San Francisco Unified
School District Teacher Corps team, the artist Yolanda Garfias-Woo. Mesa-Bains, whose parents left Mexico at a young age, considers Garfias-Woo the “bridge” to her Mexican roots; as Mesa-Bains explains, Garfias-Woo “taught me how to do everything, because she knew how to do everything.”\(^{49}\) Garfias-Woo used Día de los Muertos forms of honoring ancestors as a way to unpack the traumas and personal losses of disadvantaged, primarily African-American students at John McLaren School.\(^{50}\) She possessed a deep knowledge of pre-conquest Mexican history and culture, and encouraged Mesa-Bains to make an ephemeral altar for the 1975 Día de los Muertos celebrations. This *ofrenda* was dedicated to Frida Kahlo, who at that point had not yet received her first retrospective exhibition\(^{51}\) and was only appreciated by serious aficionados of Mexican art and feminist artists.\(^{52}\)

The form of the altar challenged precepts of what constituted contemporary art. In 1975, Garfias-Woo’s own private home altars were publicly and institutionally codified when the De Young Museum in San Francisco invited her to create a traditional Oaxacan altar and display her personal collection on the occasion of the Día de los Muertos. It was a challenging experience. Garfias-Woo sensed the exhibition staff’s dismissal of the form as art, as they rejected her

\(^{49}\) Mesa-Bains, phone interview with author, March 5, 2019. This included the altar making, Oaxacan textile weaving, papel picado, paper flowers, pan de muertos.

\(^{50}\) Durón, “How to Altar the World.”


\(^{52}\) In 1978, Mesa-Bains participated in an exhibition at the Galería de la Raza in San Francisco that marked a dual change in local imagining of the Día de los Muertos, as well as the art world’s understanding of Frida Kahlo. *Homenaje a Frida Kahlo (Altar to Frida Kahlo)* was co-organized by Mesa-Bains with fellow exhibiting artists Rupert García, Carmen Lomas Garza, Ralph Maradiaga, Maria Pinedo, and René Yañez. Mesa-Bains recalls this experience: “We took what was traditionally a familial and personal practice and we turned it into a community, public practice. We mixed our families in with historical figures who had died. We used that as a way to historicize our past.” In fact, the Galería was instrumental in popularizing Día de los Muertos, with Yañez and Maradiaga initiating public celebrations at the gallery in 1972. Casa Hispana de Bellas Artes held the first one, in 1971. Cary Cordova, *The Heart of the Mission: Latino Art and Politics in San Francisco* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 209, 216.
request to assemble the altar herself, instead arranging her objects into an altar that was “very symmetrical, very western, very European,” before she was able to reconfigure it appropriately. This story and exhibition confirm that this type of altar creation was not considered equal to “contemporary art,” but rather a vernacular form of collecting, or folk art. As a result, Chicanx cultural critics and art historians sought to re-evaluate altars and name them as art in subsequent decades. Mesa-Bains’s work with the altar format shifted in the late 1970s, when she began “tinkering” with it, creating altars while considering contemporary art contexts.

Despite its institutionalization by the 1980s, installation art itself had emerged from a desire to “redefine the role and function of the work of art,” in the words of Jennifer González. This newly forged mode of making saw artists exploring space formally, or as a social construct. The institutions that displayed Mesa-Bains’s altar/installations, according to González, “decenter the eye, or the ‘I,’ of the spectator who is no longer located in the transcendental role of solitary contemplation vis-a-vis the work of art, but is rather positioned as a culturally situated subject who both constitutes, and is constituted by, the work of art.” Mesa-Bains displayed her works in museums in the 1980s and 1990s, where audiences were assumed to be white. The artist considered this context and used it while recapitulating Chicanx art forms in contemporary art spaces.

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53 Cordova, 218. The artist goes on to describe the popular appeal of this altar presentation, and how local media gave it ample coverage— in contrast to the De Young’s typical exhibitions.
55 Ibid., 9.
Altar/Installations Emerging From Rasquache

Amalia Mesa-Bains conceptualized an essential framework for altar/installations in 1992, following terms and ideas proposed in 1986 by scholar Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, and both authors remain touchstones for understanding the art form today. Frausto’s theories of Chicanx art were revolutionary in their cultural specificity, as they were among the first to define its complexities. Since the 1980s, Mesa-Bains and Ybarra-Frausto have frequently collaborated in arguing that Chicanx “cultural reclamation” was a “bridge back to our families, our grandparents… that would make sense within our paradigm of social practice in the arts.” They argued that bolstering their own communities from within would enhance and challenge dominant white perceptions and narratives of art. Their writing further embodied this ideal.

Ybarra-Frausto’s essay, “Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility” was published in the 1991 catalogue for the CARA exhibition, re-contextualizing his earlier writing on the subject. The linguistic source of his terminology is rasquache, the Spanish word usually used to indicate a cheap, lower-class attitude of “good enough.” In Ybarra-Frausto’s writing, however, the term is engaged as a positive aspect, celebrating the underdog social status of its maker rather than passing judgment on its racial or class connotations. Ybarra-Frausto defines rasquachismo as a Chicanx aesthetic of accumulation and heterogeneity, one that is “unfettered and unrestrained” from the “realm of taste,” where “ornamentation and elaboration prevail and are joined with a delight in texture and sensuous surfaces… rooted in resourcefulness and adaptability, yet ever

57 Mesa-Bains, phone interview with author, March 5, 2019.
58 Ibid.
mindful of aesthetics.”⁵⁹ These textures include Chicanx cultural references as diverse as Mexican flags, Catholic accoutrements, and vibrant low rider auto body paint.

For Frausto, *rasquache* is both a vernacular or folk-art form and a visual strategy for contemporary artists, and its both-ness is an essential element, having “evolved as a bicultural sensibility… on both sides of the border.”⁶⁰ This concept is echoed in Mesa-Bains’s writing and work, as explored below. It also echoes broader art movements of the time, despite its Chicanx cultural specificity. Assemblage art was well established in California in the late 1960s, especially in the works of African-American artists John Outterbridge, Noah Purifoy, and Betye Saar, among others. *Rasquache*’s social context is similar to that of these artists, who infused their object-based work with political positioning. Both Chicanx and Black artists lived experiences of material scarcity, social marginalization, and confinement to urban ghettos, and both groups developed assemblage in defiance of critically-valued expressions of white artists.

In comparison, concurrent with these trends in marginalized art communities, the dominant form in white art worlds was the Minimalist and Post-Minimalist movement. In California, phenomenologically-inclined artists established the dominant Light and Space movement. *Rasquachismo* could not be more different from these expressions. It is rooted in everyday life, utilizing ephemeral detritus and its potential for emotional resonance in conjoined objects (“assemblage”) or multi-part installations. These artworks held an emotional component, often speaking directly to the barrios or neighborhoods from which material was sourced. *Rasquache* represents the lives and textures of Chicanx communities in a bold form of visual resistance to dominant and white sensibilities and values. This explains why Ybarra-Frausto’s

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⁵⁹ Ybarra-Frausto, “Rasquache,” 158.
⁶⁰ Ibid., 156.
“Rasquache” essay features so prominently in the CARA catalogue, where “resistance and affirmation” were paired, key terms.

Notably, Ybarra-Frausto does not include any discussion of works by women artists (or for that matter, work by women) in his essay. He does include an illustration of an altar dedicated to the healer El Niño Fidencio, made for a home by an unknown individual in 1987 in San Antonio, the only possible opening in his essay for how women artists could figure into his thesis.61 Rasquache might be said to contain numerous ideas that could be considered feminist concerns: it champions a sense of historical continuity; it “proclaims itself from the margins and borders of the culture”; it subverts mainstream narratives and culture; it recuperates vernacular forms and sensibilities; and its “self conscious manipulation of materials or iconography” can be either satiric or “sincere and pay homage.”62 Though Ybarra-Frausto does not pursue it, a path is left open for a critical expansion as to how rasquache could be applied to the lives and artworks of women, who experience a double marginalization, or a marginalization of “both-ness” — both Chicana and a woman— that would expand on rasquache’s own both-ness.

Mesa-Bains herself takes up this path in the 1991 essay she wrote for CARA, “El Mundo Feminino: Chicana Artists of the Movement — A Commentary On Development and Production.” In it, she places Chicana artists in a twenty-five year historical framework (1965–1990), outlining their focus on “cultural identity” through the four “female lenses of narrative, domestic space, social critique, and ceremony,” which are the thematic headers of her essay.63 In

61 Frausto does mention a single work by a woman artist, in a footnote regarding which works in the CARA exhibition reflect the rasquache sensibility: Linda Vallejo’s Food of the Gods (1984), a mixed media work approximating a circular food and sticks offering. Though Amalia Mesa-Bains An Ofrenda for Dolores del Rio (1984) appears on the previous page and was also in the exhibition, her work goes unmentioned in his catalogue essay. Perhaps because of its visual language of femininity, it was difficult to understand its role in multiple categories of CARA.
62 Ibid., 160-161.
63 Amalia Mesa-Bains, “El Mundo Feminino: Chicana Artists of the Movement - A Commentary on Development and Production,” in Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, eds. Richard Griswold del Castillo, Teresa McKenna,
“domestic space,” Mesa-Bains describes what home altars are comprised of and why these are “perhaps the most prevalent” style of Chicana art. However, her framework does not expand to consider these strategies as “feminist.” That said, she does introduce works and strategies in language like “feminine space” and “female images of everyday life,” perhaps wishing to avoid generalizations or labels in order to garner the largest readership, or to avoid ascribing politics to artists or work that may not be self-identified as such.

Mesa-Bains’s distance from “feminism” may also point to the fissures between dominant white feminism and Chicana experience. In her brief summary of Judy Baca’s murals and images of “feminist empowerment” in her essay, Mesa-Bains notes that Baca’s experiences with Judy Chicago and Suzanne Lacy marked one of the few overlaps between the “White feminist art movement” and Chicana artists, but that, “in general, Chicana artists were located within the broader cultural reclamation movement of the Chicano community while espousing a critical discourse related to women’s issues.” For Chicana artists, politics were central in the Chicano movement, and their lived experience as women or feminists in turn inflected that.

In defining a Chicana aesthetic, Mesa-Bains highlights negotiation and movement among multiple themes, but does not associate these dynamics with feminism. Instead she emphasizes Chicana artwork as expressing the “balancing of enduring, sustaining aspects of cherished cultural roles and practices, and the strengthening of emancipatory devices.” This power comes from a matrilineal legacy, but not a feminist trajectory, as the term ‘feminism,’ she explains, “simply did not fit.” As she further reflected in 2019:

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64 Ibid, 132.
65 Ibid., 134.
66 Mesa-Bains, phone interview with author, March 5, 2019.
I tried to find a vocabulary, but there just wasn’t one. I couldn’t find a word that would give the sentiments and the value that we had with our mothers, and grandmothers, and our madrinas… those women were the women that gave us the strength to turn away from the patriarchy in our own community. Even though they couldn’t in their generation, they taught us how to stand up for ourselves.67

In that way, embodying Chicana experience through art into the 1980s and 1990s specifically honored Chicanas and bypassed a need for solidarity or identification with white feminists.

However, it is essential to note that the immense efforts exerted to frame herself in the 1991 essay and within and by the CARA show and catalogue emblematizes the problems inherent in cordonning off the artist’s practice within the confines of Chicanx art. Much is lost when her relations to broader forms of feminist art are neglected. Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s incisive book *Chicano Art Inside/Outside the Master’s House: Cultural Politics and the CARA Exhibition*, summarizes and unpacks these gender concerns. Gaspar de Alba’s most basic analyses show that, although gender was a stated concern of the various organizing parties of the exhibition, there were approximately 100 more Chicanos than Chicanas in the exhibition of about 180 artists and collective members.68 Mesa-Bains’s essay mentioned the trailblazing work of the Mujeres Muralistas collective, but, shockingly, their work was not included in the exhibition. Instead, the show featured three artist collectives representing nearly all-male groups: Los Four, Royal Chicano Air Force, and ASCO.69 These collectives, it is interesting to note, were presented in micro-showcases that took the form of domestic home altars: a concentrated display of masculine artmaking was thereby translated and contextualized through the visual and accumulative forms of the domestic traditions of women folk artists. Gaspar de Alba described it as “male appropriation of a space and a discourse traditionally manipulated by women.”70

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67 Ibid.
68 Gaspar de Alba, 119.
69 All three collectives had at least one female member. Gaspar de Alba, 120.
70 Ibid., 146.
Nonetheless, the women in the exhibition were not granted the same cross-gender flexibility. Gaspar de Alba breaks down the numbers to demonstrate how art by women was included in the exhibition’s themes (Fig. 9). Of course, women entirely dominated the Feminist Visions section [14 women, 0 men]. Women artists also had strong showings in certain themes: Regional Expressions [10 women to 24 men], Redefining American Art [6 women to 8 men], and Reclaiming the Past [3 women to 7 men]. However, their perspectives were starkly marginalized in the opening themes of the show: La Causa [3 men to 1 woman], Cultural Icons [13 men to 1 woman], Civil Liberties [9 men to 1 woman], and Urban Images [26 men to 1 woman]. For a viewer, this dispersal seems to imply a division of political potential and import by gender, even if subconsciously. By these numbers, male artists established their domain in labor and civil rights, and in creating images of Chicanx icons, while women artists upheld regional, traditional culture.

According to Gaspar de Alba, though CARA did feature women artists, these thematic divisions indicate their art was circumscribed into gendered expectations of how political action, city life, and fame and valor belong to men, while regional, historic, and feminist perspectives belong to women. In her definition of Chicana feminism, she recognizes that it is, Third World-identified in its concerns over class and color as key nodes of subjectivity and oppression, but it also occurs in the context of entrenched Catholicism, a colonized history, and a First World economy; and so issues of language and culture, of nationality and citizenship, of autonomy and choice, all play significant roles in Chicana identity.71

As categorized by the CARA organizers, Chicanas were considered madres, virgens, or putas, effectively standing in for the “affirmation” rather than the “resistance” of the exhibition’s title.72 Prominent feminist writer and activist Cherríe Moraga’s critique of the show underscored this,

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71 Ibid., 123-124.
72 This translates to “mothers, virgins, or whores.”
noting that CARA avoided a true revisionist critique of women’s role within Chicanx art and social movements, and that the “rage and revenge of women” was lacking, as were critiques of the church, while sexuality was confined to heteronormative, youthful beauty in relation to the male gaze or filtered through the experience of motherhood.\textsuperscript{73} So while the CARA exhibition introduces a Chicana feminist conversation, it does not reflect its complexities. Mesa-Bains appeared in Reclaiming the Past, circumscribing and obscuring her work’s relationship to feminist art by situating it as a form of reflection of folk traditions, precluding an understanding it of it as a contemporary critique.

**Altar/Installations as Domesticana**

In 1992, Mesa-Bains responded directly to Ybarra-Frausto by theorizing *domesticana* as a kind of female *rasquache*, in which values are asserted by women artists in a purposeful and feminine subversion of traditional cultural forms. Though Mesa-Bains’s original text on *domesticana* was composed in 1992 and existed as an unpublished paper for several years, the text, “*Domesticana*: The Sensibility of Chicana Rasquache,” was not published until 1995 in *Distant Relations: Irish, Mexican, and Chicano Art and Critical Writing*.\textsuperscript{74} Both rasquache and domesticana reject dominant perspectives of art in the early 1990s, which excluded personal or cultural narratives: in rasquache and by extension in domesticana, “the intention was to provoke the accepted ‘superior’ norms of the Anglo-American with the everyday reality of Chicano cultural practices.”\textsuperscript{75} Thus, the act of presenting and affirming Chicano culture can be understood as an affront to white artistic or cultural hegemony. Looking back in 2019, Mesa-

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 145.
\textsuperscript{74} In 2003 it was included in a book with wide circulation: *Chicana Feminisms: A Critical Reader*.
\textsuperscript{75} Mesa-Bains, “*Domesticana*,” 300.
Bains describes her text as a double reclamation: whereas rasquachismo was reclaimed by Ybarra-Frausto, she “turned it around one more time, into feminism.” It is this strategy of subversion, Mesa-Bains posits in her text through close examination of her work and that of other Chicana artists, that enables the private arts of the home to translate to public exhibition spaces and achieve a political repositioning for art as a “social reality through which particular world views and identities can be lived, can be constructed, even reproduced, redefined, and redistributed.” This worldview is that of a woman. Domesticana can be understood as a space carved out from the patriarchal forms and definitions of the Chicano movement.

In creating a separate aesthetic category for domesticana, Mesa-Bains is arguing that the accumulated forms of seemingly gender-neutral cultural objects and forms of rasquache—like that of the Mexican flag, or currency, or urban culture—can be re-signified along the lines of female experience. Rasquachismo emphasizes the backstory and personal or cultural meaning of an artwork or object, and through the customized assemblage of feminist domesticana this engenders a separate filter of the aesthetic imprint or conceptual strategy of women, their domain and circumscription in the home. Its frequent use of traditional objects or references—saint figures or flowers for example—creates a complicated relationship between “the old” and “the new,” the latter both mixing with other objects but also representing the very act of re-contextualizing something in a contemporary art context.

Another important element of domesticana is its insistence on tradition and continuity, rather than over-emphasizing the new- or next-big-thing, as contemporary art tends to do. Mesa-Bains terms rasquache an “aesthetics of survival,” and presents both of her essays as a response

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76 Mesa-Bains, phone interview with author, March 5, 2019.
77 Mesa-Bains, “Domesticana,” 305.
to the “oversimplification” of its meaning. Mesa-Bains directs her essays towards well-respected scholars like Celeste Olalquiaga, who describes the form as “third-degree kitsch” (meant as a compliment); Mesa-Bains argues that Olalquiaga and other writers miss the crucial aspect of artistic legacy and continuation that is the hallmark, according to the artist, of altar-and ofrenda-making. What makes these contemporary practices so interesting and important for Mesa-Bains is “the aspect of tension in the spiritual affirmation, cultural reclamation, and feminist interrogation of just the practices that have given meaning to Chicana communities.”

Mesa-Bains refutes the notion that when a work of art is comprised of accumulated found objects, it constitutes kitsch. (This descriptor has long plagued the work of women artists who seek to elevate domestic traditions within contemporary art contexts.) In 2019, Mesa-Bains considers her “Domesticana” text her most essential, since it corrected an inaccuracy and created space for a positive characterization of women-made accumulative art forms.

As implied by its neologism, the specific site and context of the domestic is essential to this art practice. Mesa-Bains outlines a tension between the domestic as a site for gender oppression and as a resource for challenging patriarchal norms, whether social, cultural, or familial:

For the Chicana artist, the position of the underdog and the strategy of making do is situated in the domestic. She employs the material of the domestic as she contests the power relations located within it. The visual production emerges from the everyday practices of women’s life with style and humor. I have chosen to define this feminist rasquachismo as domesticana.

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78 Ibid., 298.
79 Ibid., 299.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid., 302. Mesa-Bains goes on to riff on the neologism itself, which contains an implicit critique of dominant and monied white culture, as it relates to “Mexicana,” a form of tourist art. “The play on domestic and Mexicana refers to the stereotyping of Chicanas within their own culture,” she writes.
By aligning this art form with the domestic, she underscores her lived experience, a source of both tension and spiritual satisfaction. Mesa-Bains cites Griselda Pollock’s definition of art (including art picturing or by women) as a “vehicle by which ideologies can be constructed,” and this brief reference to feminist theory lays the groundwork for a potential feminist emancipation for domesticana in its recapitulation of the domestic sphere. Mesa-Bains is imagining a feminist domestic space as she calls it into being.

The need for Mesa-Bains to define domesticana points to the unique tensions that distinguish it from simply being a women-made rasquache. Her point is that “The domestic tension signifies the contradiction between the supportive aspects of the feminine and the struggle to redefine restrictive roles.” As covered in the sociopolitical context that opened this chapter, this need extended to even the most radical contexts. Just as Chicanas persisted to achieve activist gains despite the Chicano movement’s gender imbalances, so too can a feminist framework emerge from patriarchal constraints. Mesa-Bains posited that “Critical to the strategy of domesticana is the quality of paradox… to create a mimetic worldview that retells the feminine past from a new position.”Simply put by González, domesticana is the “feminist affirmation of cultural domestic values in combination with emancipation from traditional, feminine roles.” This paradox is also reflected in domesticana’s genuine respect for the domestic environment and its accoutrements. Its major distinction from rasquachismo (beyond the gender of the maker) is how the “strategies of inquiry” that surround these “sincere sources” create a tension between affirmation and contestation.

82 Ibid.
83 Ibid., 307. It is at this stage that Mesa-Bains lists “artists whose work embodies domesticana Chicana… Santa Barraza, Carmen Lomas Garza, Celia Muñoz, Patricia Rodriguez, and Patssi Valdez.”
84 González, Subject, 129.
When Mesa-Bains applies *domesticana* to artists other than herself, she describes their specific political stances. In her exploration of the work of Santa Barraza, Carmen Lomas Garza, Celia Muñoz, Patricia Rodriguez, and Patssi Valdez, additional aspects of *domesticana* are delineated: these artists use of “memory as a device of emancipation is a persistent characteristic”\(^{86}\); their centering on “the duality and flux between private and public space”\(^{87}\); their desire to “stand against… colonial patriarchy”\(^{88}\); and their representation of the “tension among glamour, beauty, and ruin.”\(^{89}\) Valdez’s work, in particular, is a response to the male gaze: “The juxtaposing of patriarchal polarities of the good and bad woman transgresses the control of the masculine gaze that brings a redemptive enunciation to the language of domesticana.”\(^{90}\)

For Mesa-Bains, *domesticana* can contain a dual critique of systems of patriarchy and oppression in dominant white culture (including museums), and Chicax culture:

The Chicana altares and ofrendas as contemporary art also stand against a museum system born of a colonial patriarchy that seeks to distinguish between the artist and the artisan, the masterpiece and the artifact, the folk and the fine. My domesticana is a resilient defiance both in my own culture and in the broader definitions society holds for women, art, and culture.\(^{91}\)

In writing her own formulations of *domesticana* as a form of *rasquache*, Mesa-Bains also creates her own system of naming, acknowledgment, and value, outside the dominant criticism and context of the time. Mesa-Bains’s feminist art practice is enhanced by her scholarship and writing in the realms of decolonial and cultural criticism. In one of her most widely-read texts, 1992’s “The Real Multiculturalism: A Struggle for Authority and Power,” published in the

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\(^{86}\) Ibid., 308.
\(^{87}\) Ibid., 311, in relation to Rodriguez’s work.
\(^{88}\) Ibid., 311-12, in relation to her own work.
\(^{89}\) Ibid., 313, in relation to Patssi Valdez’s work, going on to say that in Valdez’s work, “ruin is both the form and content.”
\(^{90}\) Ibid., 314.
\(^{91}\) Mesa-Bains, "Domesticana...,” 312.
Compendium Reinventing the Museum, Mesa-Bains disambiguates concerns of multicultural representation in mainstream museums attempting to broaden their connection to the diverse viewerships of the “postcolonial diaspora,” and traces the “Western subjectivity” at the heart of museums as the progeny of a history of colonial acquisitions of land, people, and art.\textsuperscript{92}

These subjectivities of the dominant perspective are not limited to segregation (i.e. “folk” and “fine” art, or “ethnography” and “Western art”), but include an active misrepresentation of non-Western art and artists. She concludes by asserting the need for historically marginalized communities to be in active positions moving forward, not just on display, asserting that “Access is not the only issue. Interpretation is the new forefront.”\textsuperscript{93} This is the root of her own writings, on both her artwork and Chicanx art and culture as a whole; whereas typically artists do not create their own critical contexts, Mesa-Bains began to do so in 1984 to address a lack, and continued to do so throughout her career. This not only helped define her work, but helps ensure its longevity in the culture, as she believes ideas “must be written about for them to have any lasting impact,” and that for Chicanx art in particular, “If you wanted people to know what this [art] was, then you had to find structures that would deliver it, interpret it, and value it, and that’s what we did.”\textsuperscript{94} Given the dominant white structures of the art world, this self-authoring of one’s own critical context is a radical act of critique.

Mesa-Bains’s writing in response to Ybarra-Frausto is a feminist critique, as well, but there is little critical engagement with the ideals of feminist art. One linguistic note is the way in which her essay uses the term “feminine” rather than the “feminist,” generalizing a gendered

\textsuperscript{92} Mesa-Bains, “The Real Multiculturalism,” 99, 102.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 107.
\textsuperscript{94} Durón, “How to Altar the World.”
experience rather than situating a political positioning. This is seemingly at odds with the descriptions and strategies of *domesticana* as articulated above.

Mesa-Bains’s work, and her conceptualization of *domesticana*, emerged as an art form inflected by the racial, social, and gender politics of the Chicano movement. Drawing strength and inspiration from her mentor Yolanda Garfias-Woo, and writing her own text examining Chicanx *rasquache* through a feminist lens, helped her conceptualize her altar/installations as projects that explore gender dynamics amidst broader Chicanx power dynamics. Still, her work evinces contradictions in its marshaling of domestic spaces and traditions forged by patriarchy in symbols of affirmation. In the following chapters, I will read Mesa-Bains’s work against the feminist art movement at large, suggesting a reading of her work that aligns with California feminisms while still emphasizing Chicanx and Chicana concerns. Prior to this re-contextualization, however, a close reading of Mesa-Bains’s visual strategies is necessary.
Chapter 2. Honoring a Woman, Honoring an Experience

An Ofrenda for Dolores del Río

Most of Amalia Mesa-Bains’s large-scale altar/installations honor a woman. As summarized in the Introduction, the impact of the artistic legacies of women in her family—her mother’s clothing design, her grandmother’s home altar, her neighbors’ care for the decoration of the local Catholic church—influenced her visual strategies and aesthetic forms. These forms are all marked by repetition, accumulation, and sustained upkeep, primarily for spiritual purposes. They echo the repeated domestic actions of the home—cooking, feeding, washing—executed for the physical sustenance of those within it. Mesa-Bains locates these gestures of labor and endurance in her own practice. They are achieved through the reclamation and renovation of the domestic altar tradition as outlined in the previous chapter. What began as an ofrenda created for San Francisco’s Mexican Museum to mark the 1983 death and celebrate the life of the Hollywood star and Mexican icon Dolores del Río, developed into the altar/installation form Mesa-Bains is known for and has theorized in her writing. An ofrenda is a specific altar made to honor the deceased, and Mesa-Bains’s altar/installations reframed this type of altar, transforming it from folk art into contemporary art, which meant moving it into the gallery and adjusting some of its strategies.

Mesa-Bains’s best-known work, An Ofrenda for Dolores del Río (1984, revised 1991, Fig. 10) is an altar/installation in which the vernacular form’s principles of embedded cultural references, spiritual potential, and hybridity also are reflected in the life of its subject. Dolores del Rio is one of the earliest cross-cultural examples of positive representation of Mexican

95 Durón, “How to Altar the World.”
people. Del Rio’s beauty and talent landed her roles as various non-white (Russian, Spanish, Indian) protagonists in the 1920s and 1930s. She was paired with actors such as Rudolph Valentino or Fred Astaire, and she was popularly adored for her lovely face and glamorous style, influencing the sultry representation of women in the black-and-white films of the period. From the beginning of Del Rio’s career during the silent film era, however, she insistently identified herself as Mexican, correcting her first 1925 billing to read “Mexican,” not “Spanish,” despite the commercial advantage of the latter. Her early success in Hollywood was followed by a decline in satisfying roles, as her Mexican accent limited her popular appeal after the advent of talking pictures. In 1943, Del Rio returned to Mexico, where her career blossomed with serious starring roles in film and theater, and in the establishment of the robust Mexican film industry. Perhaps a nod to the popular and crossover success of the actress, Mesa-Bains titled the work “an ofrenda,” indicating a singular ofrenda rather than a definitive one. This can both suggest the existence of previous ofrendas to the actress, and encourage personalized manifestations of the form by others.

Del Rio’s history is visually traced by Mesa-Bains in An Ofrenda: her Hollywood and Mexican film roles appear in framed photographs flanking the altar (Fig. 11), canisters of film join candles and tin milagro charms at its base, and objects exemplify the finery and fashion that outwardly marked her crossover success. Del Rio’s image is repeated throughout the installation,

96 Gaspar de Alba highlights the contradiction inherent in a “token” celebrity of an otherwise criminalized group, saying the Mexican film stars were “border crossers of the elite class who used Hollywood as their green card” while campesinos and obreros “were greeted first by the short-handled hoe, then by militarized resistance on the border,” on through the deportation of hundreds of thousands of Mexican workers between 1929 and 1939.” Still, the importance of representation can be understood as early and important steps to furthering truthful and nuanced views of otherwise oppressed people. Gaspar de Alba, 77.

paired with precious objects like jewelry, folk traditions like carved wooden skulls, allegorical offerings such as silver-painted fruit and traditional votive objects like flowers and candles.

The objects form what Jennifer González describes as an “ornamental canonization.” Del Rio is canonized as a popular icon through Mesa-Bains’s use of the home altar visual vocabulary: the altar shares the recessed placement, hierarchical arrangement, mélange of objects and images, and sumptuous surroundings of fabric and scattered flowers of the most formal religious home altars. At its center, Mesa-Bains pairs images of the actress and the Virgin Mary: a traditional carved Virgen de Guadalupe statue sits before the most central photograph of Del Rio in the altar/installation (Fig. 12).

In innovating the altar format, Mesa-Bains visualizes considerations of nationalism, religion, and culture through found objects. The pride-of-place image of Del Rio in a white, Virgin-like veil is from the 1944 Mexican film *María Candelaria*, noted for its nationalist themes and embrace of indigenous beauty. The framed still of Del Rio sits in a richly embellished recessed frame, and is draped in another veil, this one opulent and laced. The shared space and visual parallelism between the Virgen de Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico, and Del Rio-as-Candelaria presents a unifying space for religious reverence by way of Chicana culture. It is also a daring problematization of the spiritual form of altars, where family photographs intermingle with holy figures, but there is little confusion between their roles or relations to one another. Here, the use of the veiled Del Rio as pulled from mass media may point to how an immensely popular actress like Del Rio represents the cultural power of film and mass media. When she first created the work in 1984, Mesa-Bains also may have been pointing...

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towards the vast influence of film and mass media in the 20th century as a potential challenge to centuries of religion.

Thus, the work is both an argument for cultural canonization of a Chicana icon and for the power of traditional spirituality as a contemporary methodology for remembrance. As in vernacular altar-making, where temporalities are troubled by accumulation that prioritizes image-gathering over narrative display, Mesa-Bains’s An Ofrenda appropriates images from Del Rio’s childhood as well as stills spanning her career, presenting a simultaneous biographical portrait of the actress. In transforming her previous practice of community altar-making for the context of the art gallery, Mesa-Bains relies on spiritually-associated formal strategies to elevate her subject. She also has acknowledged, in a conversation with Laura Meyer in preparation for her 2011 exhibition Amalia Mesa-Bains: Geography of Memory, that the work is more static than she would like, as museums forbid candles, fresh flowers, or continued adjustments or additions to the altar during an exhibition.99

The strictures of museum and gallery contexts vexed Mesa-Bains in later showings of An Ofrenda, and changed the way in which she made her work. Certain aspects are in direct defiance of how institutions care for objects: the fire hazard of her candles; the insect-attracting properties of accumulated flowers and dirt; and its intended immediacy that tempted visitor to touch and potentially damage the work. As such, Mesa-Bains had to weigh her artistic choices against “the museum’s concern.” 100 When museums started asking that her altars be protected by large stanchions or walls to keep viewers away, Mesa-Bains refused. Instead, she explains how she “developed floor work in order to keep people at a distance. I started covering the floor with broken mirrors, dried flowers, shards of pottery… I became masterful at negotiating the organic

99 As related in Meyer, 7.  
100 Mesa-Bains, phone interview with author, March 5, 2019.
nature of the ofrenda.**101 In An Ofrenda for Dolores del Río, dried flowers pool in a circular perimeter around the most accumulative area of the altar form. As galleries and museums cannot necessarily adapt to the spiritual necessities of these hybrid artworks, Mesa-Bains had to adapt the altar form for these contexts.

Given the inherent limitations of the gallery space as a place for spiritual consummation, one may question Mesa-Bains’s transference of the formal strategies of altars to the secular art world context. However, González’s important text, “Rhetoric of the Object: Material Memory and the Artwork of Amalia Mesa-Bains,” defends her use of spiritual forms to represent the self. González argues that rhetoric itself—the concept of verbal argument that has shaped Western society and academia—and specifically epideictic rhetoric, or the “ceremonial oratory of display,” is the core metaphor at work in Mesa-Bains’s altar/installations.102 The metaphor is created by the combinations of materials and objects that constitute an altar/installation, and references how oratory is influenced by ideas and memories in a “spatial and visual” way.103 González draws on Roland Barthes’s acknowledgement of the “projective power” of images as different from the “repressive value” embedded in texts, and locates in images the subjectivity of ideological groups for which certain objects have certain meanings, such as Chicanas or Chicanxs.104 An Ofrenda for Dolores del Río’s frontal display, symmetry, and visual abundance create a spatial unity in which the varied objects enunciate a memorial for Del Río that is also a canonization of her life and impact. The artwork, as a memorial, creates a form of memory of its subject.

101 Ibid.
103 Ibid., 83.
104 Ibid.
González develops a theory as to how Mesa-Bains’s altar/installations deliver their meaning: beyond the tribute to Del Rio’s life, she contends that the work effectively embodies hybridity and bicultural experience as its what—that is, as its content. The intermingling of personal and cultural objects assembled into the spiritual architecture of the altar/installation both reflects and represents the intersectionality of a mestizo life. Mesa-Bains has cited Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands - La Frontera: The New Mestiza* as an influence in recent conversations. In this text, Anzaldúa describes the bifurcation of Chicana identity as a “place of contradictions” and also a “metaphor for crossing geographical boundaries, sexual transgressions, social dislocations…” There is possibility there— for social change, for personal growth— but also a certain confusion. As Anzaldúa states, “The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity… She learns to juggle cultures.”

The altar/installation is an active site for discovering dichotomies: the personal and the religious, feminine creativity in the face of patriarchal religious and art-world cultures, and private domestic arrangements expressed in public forms. In the many details of the work, paired cultural opposites drive the sensation of a lived experience of hybridity that characterizes Del Rio’s Mexican-American success story. In fact, many of the same types of objects are displayed in both white settler and Mexican forms: wealth is evoked through dollars and pesos; fashion is illustrated through European cameo jewelry and Mexican hammered tin crosses; the church is called forth in Spanish black lace gloves and Mexican Día de los Muertos carved skulls; and a cheap Eiffel Tower trinket and Mexican liqueur represent two culturally-divergent gifts or

105 Mesa-Bains, phone interview with author, March 5, 2019.
107 Ibid., 101.
ofrendas (Fig. 13). In fact, there is a literal divide in the space in which Mexican childhood and adolescence (photographs of her parents, a doll) are positioned opposite the above-mentioned accoutrements of Hollywood wealth and glamour. There is also an odd outlier, continually overlooked in writing on the artwork: a small bronze statue of a mermaid playing guitar (also visible in Fig. 13). The sirena, half-fish and half-woman, forms a mythical whole from its parts, alluding to Del Rio’s bi-cultural success, and her identity as one rooted in intermixing. These trinkets and details in the Ofrenda draw the eye, but ultimately “unsettle the mind,” with their abundance and bifurcated, simultaneous associations.\textsuperscript{108}

As Mesa-Bains’s culturally-specific and genuinely spiritual vocabulary of the altar/installation collides with a culturally uninitiated audience in the gallery context, she intercepts misunderstanding with a subtle opening into the artwork that is contingent on engaging the viewer. Mesa-Bains crucially includes a mirror in the central altar formation, inviting the viewers’ identification with Del Rio, as well as their own phenomenological engagement with the altar as they encounter it. Mirrors very rarely appear in Chicana or Mexican home altars, given their intended subject is by definition not its maker. In this case, the mirror’s size and central placement indicate Mesa-Bains’s use of it as a way to bridge the discursive potential between contemporary art and Chicana folk traditions.

Although the mirror and its invitation for identification is a major element of An Ofrenda for Dolores del Rio, the spiritual meaning its inclusion conveys has been ignored in writing on the artwork. The work’s title labels the altar/installation an ofrenda, signifying its classification as a tribute to the deceased most often composed for Día de los Muertos celebrations. In the domesticana text, Mesa-Bains displays an anthropological knowledge of all of the types and

\textsuperscript{108} Meyer, 8.
terms for varied altar formats, so the title can be understood as resolutely defined. Notably, however, it lacks the nourishing offerings of food and drink and seating at which the dead rest during their one-day return for the holy day, both of which would characterize it as an ofrenda rather than an altar. These objects, meant to invite the deceased loved ones back into the family home, do appear in other works by Mesa-Bains, such as Borders: Emblems of the Decade [1990/2016] (Figs. 14 and 15). Without a place for the dead to rest, the mirror instead presents a radical gesture of openness: the altar/installation is not made for Dolores Del Rio’s spirit, but rather for a direct engagement and identification, with the art viewer experiencing the work in a contemporary art context.

Altar/Installations, Adapted as Institutional Critique

Mesa-Bains’s aesthetic, spiritual, and conceptual strategies were later further developed to more pointedly address art institutions and colonial history, as well as the overlap between the two. In works like Venus Envy I: First Holy Communion Before the End (Fig. 16), which was exhibited in 1993 at the Whitney Museum’s Philip Morris Branch, key details enunciate this critique. Venus Envy I comprises a vast altar/installation with autobiographical memorabilia from Mesa-Bains’s life—a First Communion dress, a confirmation dress, and a wedding dress, all pure virgin white (Figs. 17 and 18). A focal point is a sumptuous home vanity mirror, embellished with beauty products and personal trinkets (Fig. 19). Etched into the large mirrored vanity is the ghostly but powerful image of the Aztec deity of death and rebirth, Coatlicue, visible when one approaches the mirror.

Venus Envy I is a complex psychological portrait, mired in intimacy and personal struggle between Catholic gender codes and more fierce, pre-colonial female referents. Coatlicue had, to
that point, long been used by Chicana artists and writers to symbolize powerful indigenous women. Gloria Anzaldúa saw her as a way to, per González, “articulate the confluence of contradictory positions— both internal and external— that cross-cultural, and in some cases cross-gendered, subjects are able (and obliged) to occupy.”

In Alzaldúa’s own writing, she sets out that Coatlicue “represents duality in life, a synthesis of duality, and a third perspective— something more than a mere duality or synthesis of duality.” This perspective acknowledges the interplay between largely white institutions, and queries whether the cultural tension of Mesa-Bains’s works are legible to the (presumably also white) average museum viewer.

For Mesa-Bains, the task of interpretation should include undoing the reordering and misapprehension of the colonial project as a whole. In the New World Wunderkammer (2013, Fig. 20), for example, the artist highlights her own lineage alongside a tripartite reflection on the three divisions of the cabinet/installation: Spanish (Colonial), Indigenous (Americas), and African culture. These objects reflected the collections of the commissioning institution, UCLA’s Fowler Museum, and the makeup of Mesa-Bains’s own family and community, from her mestiza grandmother to her African-American husband. Mesa-Bains’s work emphasizes parallelism and cultural resonance across geographies, creating three spaces for three cultures with myriad overlaps and syncretism. She places Fowler Museum collection objects on each section’s upper rungs, placing personal artefacts and remnants of spiritual actions (like plant smudging) at ground level (Fig. 21). This visually represents how an understanding of the institutionalized objects is incomplete without a sense of their use and engagement by living people, up to and including the continuity of their uses today. By collapsing her personal and emotional realities into her institutional installation projects, she calls into question the inherent

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109 González, Subject…, 150.
110 Anzaldúa, Borderlands, 68.
bias of institutional spaces, influenced by Eurocentric displays, colonial collecting histories, and the legacy of the Enlightenment. In her case, this in in part to specifically redress Chicanx life and culture, as she has said that Chicanx people “do not suffer from an absence of memory but from a memory of absence, what we have lost is never far from our memory and our spiritual practices help in the healing of this loss.”\textsuperscript{111} By articulating the ethnographic collections of the Fowler Museum through her feminist, familial, and spiritual strategies of altar/installation, Mesa-Bains simultaneously mourns the losses of colonial violence and reconstitutes cultural memory. In her wider practice of altar/installations and as theorized in her writings on \textit{domesticana}, this represents that “stand against… colonial patriarchy.”\textsuperscript{112}

**The Need for a Feminist Context**

Mesa-Bains’s altar/installations connect domestic traditions, evoke \textit{mestizo} spiritual and cultural symbols, and critique patriarchal institutions; but they should also be understood as feminist works of art. As altars moved into the home and out of view of patriarchal church control, women became the creative force balancing spiritual and personal iconographies through the accumulated objects on display in ensembles expressing subversion and subjectivity. In her writing and reflections on the subject, from catalogues for \textit{Ceremony of Memory: New Expressions in Spirituality Among Contemporary Hispanic Artists} (1988) and \textit{Geography of Memory: Land, Nature, and Spirit in the Works of Amalia Mesa-Bains} (2011), to writings in \textit{Home Altars of Mexico} (1997) and “\textit{Domesticana}” (1992), Mesa-Bains consistently and pointedly uses the word “artist” to refer to home altar makers.

\textsuperscript{111} Rachel Jones, “Interview: Amalia Mesa-Bains,” July 21, 2015, see Bibliography for link.
\textsuperscript{112} Mesa-Bains, “\textit{Domesticana},” 311-312, in relation to her own work.
Naming a female maker of a domestic form an artist—rather than a practitioner or hobbyist—is a political choice to elevate the role of women in under-appreciated art forms. Kay Turner, a leading scholar in the field of global altar arts with a particular interest in the Mexican tradition, posits women as the engineers of this trans-historic and trans-geographic art form. Turner traces a lineage from the domestic and spiritual strategies of altar-making to the goals of feminist artists in the 1970s. Feminist art historian Arlene Raven’s 1983 assessment of the feminist adaptation of the altar tradition “as aesthetic model, performance genre, artist’s object, and women’s art” ascribes power to the maker. Raven argues,

The altar, by definition of its form and use, is an artistic implement for getting and giving power. By acknowledging the legitimacy of the altar as a woman’s art form we further legitimize and encourage a feminist understanding of art: that for us the assembly of images is not mere representation but a potent means towards realization of a new culture which both criticizes patriarchy and transforms it.

The feminist, oppositional potential of the visual form of altar-making is reflected in the content of the fourteen altar/installations that Mesa-Bains created between 1975 and 1997: these works honored women like Juana Inés de la Cruz, Saint Teresa of Avila, Frida Kahlo, and the artist’s own grandmother. The altars were personal tributes, as well as redressals of history, where women’s lives and contributions were underknown. Affirmation and continuation of their stories was important to Mesa-Bains, who outlined such in her domesticana writing. In order for these legacies to survive, their images and stories are replicated, shared, and exhibited as visual statements.

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115 These include The Library of Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz from the installation Venus Envy Chapter II: The Harem and Other Enclosures (1994); Altar for Santa Teresa de Avila (1984); the altar for Frida Kahlo (1975) was not titled as an artwork, and the altar to her grandmother (date unknown) precedes the rest.
Though Mesa-Bains’s art and writing signal a distinct arena of feminist practice, most critical writing has contextualized her work as Chicanx first, and feminist second, if at all. Mesa-Bains’s work and writing figures into many, if not most, Chicanx art exhibitions and publications, but her work rarely appears in strictly feminist contexts, even those that prioritize an inclusive definition of feminist art. Mesa-Bains’s work is absent from many of the important, intersectional exhibitions of feminist art, such as the 2007 *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, which looked at the years 1965-1980, and originated in Los Angeles at MOCA. Likewise, she was absent from the inaugural show of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum of the same year, which represented multiple and intersectional global feminisms.\(^{117}\) *Women House*, which explored domestic themes in global feminist art in 2017, did not include her work, either, and Mesa-Bains’s work has never appeared at the National Museum of Women in the Arts.\(^{118}\) Even the resonant context of the major 2002 exhibition and catalogue *Art/Women/California 1950–2000: Parallels and Intersections* describes her as an artist who created expansive topographies of land-based Chicanx cultural expression, but does not mention feminism or *domesticana.*\(^{119}\)

Looking back to feminist art history’s early scholarly scaffolding, there is a paucity of white feminist reflection on the possibilities of Chicana art practice. This gap is particularly stark

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\(^{117}\) The *WACK!* exhibition subsequently traveled to the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington DC (2007), PS1 Contemporary Art Center, New York (2008), and Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver (2008-09). *Global Feminisms* did not travel. Not only does Mesa-Bains not make an appearance in the exhibition or the publication, she does not appear on the chronology of women-centered exhibitions included in the backmatter, which goes up to 1984 and includes two specifically Chicana exhibition histories: *Las Chicanas: Las Venas de la Mujer* (The Woman’s Building, 1976) and *Chicana Voices & Visions: A National Exhibit of Women Artists* (Social and Public Arts Resource Center, Venice, California, 1984). Given 1984 is the year of Mesa-Bains’s first prominent work, one can see how she evades association with the “second wave” despite strong conceptual and thematic concerns.

\(^{118}\) It traveled between the Monnaie in Paris in 2017-18 to the National Museum of Women in the Arts, DC in 2018

given feminist art’s early embrace of domestic narratives and forms. For instance, in 1973 Lucy Lippard summarized what she saw as a trend in women’s art to deal directly with the domestic in her *Ms. Magazine* essay “Household Images in Art.” This early essay is predicated on the work of largely white artists, with no notations as to how the cultural significations of the home may differ between women of different races, ethnicities, or classes. As such, projects like Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro’s *Womanhouse* (which will be introduced in the following chapter, Fig. 22), which sought to “concretize the fantasies and oppressions of women’s experiences,” rely largely on the assumption of home as the domain of frustrated, isolated, and unhappy white, middle-class women. This existential dilemma marked the work of largely white and middle-class women artists of the second wave; for those surviving at the margins of society, little time is left for feelings of frustration, isolation, or unfulfillment. When Lippard zeroes in on these experiences and feelings about domestic life, she categorizes them as “either a cool detached realism, or funky fantasy.” Given that Mesa-Bains insists on continuing traditions and emphasizing legacy, her work does not coalesce around either conceptual pole.

Lippard does include Mesa-Bains in her fascinating and nuanced reflection on cross-cultural art processes in the era of identity-politics, 1990’s *Mixed Blessings*, but does not raise any comparison to the second wave feminist artists she has championed. In her short analysis of Mesa-Bains’s work, she quotes the artist in relation to lost histories of African-descended artists who regarded art as a form of memory, or re-making memory, a survival mechanism: “art for the sake of life… remembering what we had chosen to forget.” Although Lippard goes on to laud the material complexity, visual dynamism, and cultural resonance of Mesa-Bains’s work for

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121 Ibid.
Chicanas, she draws no connections to the work’s remarkable resonance with other feminist artists.

One notable exception is the exhibition and catalogue for the Bronx Museum’s 1995 Division of Labor. The exhibition was organized thematically, allowing for cross-cultural connections. Mesa-Bains was exhibited among white feminist artists like Miriam Schapiro, Martha Rosler, and Harmony Hammond, as well as artists of diverse backgrounds, including Emma Amos, Yayoi Kusama, Faith Ringgold, and Faith Wilding. This exhibition was a corrective one, arguing that multicultural views of the domestic should be seen alongside more dominant white narratives of the enduring subject. Though Mesa-Bains’s lack of visibility at mainstream art venues can partially be attributed to the lack of representation of Latinx and Chicanx artists at large, it is difficult to reconcile the absence of Mesa-Bains in feminist art contexts. In response to this issue, the following chapter will assess Mesa-Bains’s work against and within more mainstream feminist contexts, situating her between the second and third waves of feminism.

Mesa-Bains’s work, as exemplified by An Ofrenda for Dolores del Rio, operates across multiple conceptual and aesthetic concerns. It engages Chicano and Chicana cultural traditions and forms, visualizes experiences of hybridity and duality, and seeks direct engagement with the viewer while considering the context of art museums. At times, Mesa-Bains’s altar/installations challenge the mechanisms and expectations of museums themselves. In their rich and multi-

123 The Division of Labor catalogue collects various essays, which showcase how the “dialogue on gender roles has further expanded with the impact of cultural debate and activism from many quarters, contributing different perspectives on domestic roles, responsibilities, and arrangements beyond the dominant nuclear family model. For example, the extended family structure of working class and immigrant households plays a crucial role in their economic survival.” Anastasia Aukeman, Division of Labor: “Women’s Work” in Contemporary Art (Bronx, New York: Bronx Museum, 1995), 11.
layered detail, they declare the importance of the life and legacy of the female subjects, whom Mesa-Bains honors with uniquely female forms that posit a feminist version of *rasquache*.
White Feminism in California and Chicana Feminism

Mainstream white feminism of the second wave did not embrace intersectional narratives, thereby limiting the influence and visibility of feminists or artists of color. Amalia Mesa-Bains’s education and early artistic career in the 1970s and 80s coincided with the feminist and Chicano movements in California and across the U.S., and the parallel practices and themes of the former can be traced in her work. These include the importance of biography, the idea that “the personal is political,” the inversion of spiritual authority to embrace female spiritual forms, the emphasis on “herstories,” the elevation of folk and craft forms, and the desire to bridge art and life praxis, or the tangible work, of feminists.

Feminism, in the context of the art world, developed largely in the early 1970s with major hubs of activity in California (Los Angeles, San Francisco, Fresno) and New York City. Across both locations, women developed strategies for working collectively and seeking recognition in the art world. Summarized briefly, scholars like Amelia Jones and Jenni Sorkin have delineated the ways in which New York’s feminist art movement was intertwined with larger activist projects working to integrate women into existing patriarchal institutions rather than create separatist or women-led centers.\(^\text{124}\)

California feminists sought change in internalized and external cultural experiences, prioritizing the creation of a separate and distinctive culture of support, production, and

\(^{124}\) Jones muses that New York’s patriarchal entanglement also reflected the reality that many women artists were married to male artists or curators in the scene. “Burning Down the House: Feminist Art in California, An Interview with Amelia Jones, by Daniela Salvioni and Diana Burgess Fuller,” in Art/Women/California 1950–2000: Parallels and Intersections, eds. Diana Burgess Fuller and Daniela Salvioni (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 165. Groups include the Art Workers Coalition, or Black Emergency Cultural Coalition protests at MoMA, the Metropolitan, and Artist’s Space.
institution-building. In a breathtakingly compressed period from 1969 through 1973, feminism flourished in California, as magnetic key figures created a community that theorized how the movement could intersect with art.\textsuperscript{125} Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro established the Feminist Art Program (FAP) in Fresno in 1970, where students and teachers explored a history of women’s achievements, studio instruction, and consciousness-raising to “explore the sources of their work in the specific experiences of growing up female.”\textsuperscript{126}

At the heart of this project was the premise, heretofore rejected by mainstream artists and critics, that one’s personal understanding of life experienced as a woman was a valid font of inspiration for artwork. Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro advocated for a female visual language, in which subject matter and form could mutually define or convey a feminist message. This was publicly tested with the sensational 1971–72 installation and performance space Womanhouse, which was built and activated by Chicago and Schapiro, their students, and other women in the Los Angeles art community. The artists renovated a derelict house with installations exploring women’s domestic life (Fig. 23), critiquing drudgery and marital entrapment—concerns centered in the work of white middle-class feminists of the time. Though definitions of mainstream feminist art are myriad from this period, a brief and useful framework

\textsuperscript{125} This included Amy Goldin’s visit to UC San Diego (1969); the formation of Los Angeles Council of Women Artists in protesting the all-male, purportedly future-heralding Art and Technology show at LACMA (1970); and the establishing of the Woman’s Building in 1973 in San Francisco, which ran until 1991.
\textsuperscript{126} Whitney Chadwick, “Reflecting on History as Histories,” in Art/Women/California 1950–2000: Parallels and Intersections, eds. Diana Burgess Fuller and Daniela Salvioni (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 25. Among the reasons cited by Chicago to Fresno State College for the validity of the program, Chicago underscored the shockingly low percentage of women in art classes who did not enter the art world following graduation, pointing to the failure of the academy to translate into real life experience. Thus, much of Chicago’s pedagogical practice at this time underscored that women should bring real life experiences into their studies, to better prepare them for the realities of a misogynist world, and perhaps even to begin to reshape it. In fall 1971, Chicago moved the program to the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in Los Angeles, with a stated emphasize to bring the environment established together by women teachers and students to the more commercially and critically relevant art city.
can be found in Faith Wilding’s 1977 “Principles of Feminist Education,” devised from her experiences in the founding Fresno Feminist Art Program and beyond:

1) Consciousness-raising; 2) Building a female context and environment; 3) Female role models; 4) Permission to be themselves and encouragement to make art out of their own experiences as women; 5) Collaborative and collective work; and 6) Exploring the hierarchies of materials and high/low art practices.127

Considering the formal and conceptual strategies within Mesa-Bains’s altar/installations, precepts two, three, four, and six resonate. Overall, these principles do not explicitly overlap with concerns of class, race, or other intersectional concerns. (It is worth noting here that Wilding is Paraguayan-American, having migrated to the U.S. in her late teens.) Mesa-Bains’s work elucidates how a dedication to questions of labor, family, culture, and rasquache forms can complicate feminist art.

Feminism was ascendant as an alternative art movement and a basis for improving everyday life for women, but despite geographic proximity, it was not relevant to Chicanas like Mesa-Bains. In 1971, Chicago and Schapiro traveled to San Francisco to meet with consciousness-raising groups there that included Judith Linhares, Phyliss Ideal, M. Louise Stanley, and Donna Mossholder, narrowly focusing on feminist groups rather than broader social movements, like the Chicano movement.128 At these intimate events, women met to share their experiences of oppression, isolation, or even outright violence in order to understand that these issues were not personal problems, but symptoms of systemic patriarchy. The relationships that grew from these shared experiences laid a foundation for artists to find support and mutual recognition. Artists who explored intersectional politics—constituting further oppression due to...

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race, sexuality, or economic class—or simply lived them outright were not a part of this mutual uplift. Still, Mesa-Bains has reflected on the ways that certain Chicana artists in her circle, such as Los Angeles-based Yolanda Lopez, were interested in aligning feminism with their community’s “struggle,” and used consciousness-raising as one of the tools to do so.129

Mesa-Bains stated in 2019 that, “I did never identify with [feminism],” of the time, and was instead focused on what she considered a foundational and intersectional concern of “social justice and cultural reclamation” for the Chicanx community.130 The first steps towards emancipation, then, began in Chicanx cultural considerations that superseded gender concerns. “Culture and its renaissance for us was probably more defining than feminism,” she has said.131 Mesa-Bains emphasized women’s lives in conceptual, material, and biographical ways, echoing feminist art concerns while locating them in Chicana specificity. In 2019, Mesa-Bains summarized this:

By the late ‘70s, it was really a parallel track… we had a double encumberment. You see white feminism emerging from juxtaposing with patriarchy and other institutions. But we [Chicanas] are in a movement of ethnic identity that is in opposition to that same mainstream that these women, their families inhabit. But we’re also in an internal battle against the patriarchy of the Chicano movement… we’re struggling on two fronts.132

For Mesa-Bains, white feminists are identified primarily with their dominant racial background. Despite their shared opposition to patriarchal institutions, the white “families” of the feminists nonetheless provided racial privilege not afforded to Chicanas.

Chicanas specifically found themselves at a crossroads of identification within the political currents of the 1970s and 1980s. As Mesa-Bains characterized it, the “context of our

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129 Mesa-Bains, phone interview with author, March 5, 2019.
130 Ibid.
131 Ibid.
132 Ibid.
struggle meant that stepping out into feminism really didn’t make sense at the time.”133 Rather than step “out” into white narratives of feminism, she and her Chicana peers remained “in” the Chicanx movement.

The radical writings of Chicana authors and theorists emerge more than a decade into the Chicano movement, in the late 1970s and through the early 1980s. Activists within the Chicano movement for labor rights became disillusioned by the machismo apparent when individual male participants were granted greater visibility than women’s concerns or efforts. Writers like Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, and Chela Sandoval were primarily concerned with carving out textual space for Chicanas. These women were all based in California, and the influence of their 1981 compendium of essays, poems, and writing, This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color, on an understanding of the limitations and failures of white second wave feminism— and a path forward for the next, intersectional or women-of-color-led wave— cannot be understated.134 In one of Anzaldúa’s thematic framing essays, “Entering the Lives of Others: Theory in the Flesh,” which precedes a chapter of experimental writing by women of color, she lays out the terms of difference and experiences of hybridity she learned from life:

A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives— our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings— all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity. Here, we attempt to bridge the contradictions in our experience:
We are the colored in a white feminist movement.
We are the feminists among the people of our culture.
We are often the lesbians among the straight.
We do this bridging by naming our selves and by telling our stories in our own words.135

133 Ibid.
Anzaldúa calls for a self-naming, a creation of theory from those who lived interlocking oppressions, in 1981. Mesa-Bains, who acknowledged Anzaldúa’s great influence on her life in a 2019 conversation, weaves her own writing with her art making from the late 1980s onward. Chicana scholars like Anzaldúa predicated their work on intersectional experiences of gender, race, class, sexuality, and more, in contrast to white feminism’s emphasis on gender equality from their privileged racial position.

In her own essay in the CARA catalogue, as we already know, Mesa-Bains framed “cultural identity” through the “female lenses of narrative, domestic space, social critique, and ceremony.” She proposed a matrilineal story of Chicana art. However, other writing on Mesa-Bains’s work has only superficially engaged with its feminism. Jennifer González, in her response to “Domesticana...” published in Chicana Feminisms in 2003, draws a contrast between the mainstream white feminists’ rejection of the confines of domesticity, and the “paradox” inherent in domesticana’s appreciation of the domestic as a unique and sustaining female space. In her essay, González lists the similarities between Chicana artists and Anglo-American feminist artists: “a similar critique of the interlocking forces of patriarchy and domestic labor, a similar attention to the social roles available to women, and a similar recuperation of traditional women’s crafts.” But even though she names those issues, she does not pursue them.

136 Mesa-Bains, phone interview with author, March 5, 2019. The artist recalled how people close to Anzaldúa called her following the author’s early death in 2004, asking for advice on how to document and preserve Anzaldúa’s home altar.
137 Mesa-Bains, “El Mundo...” in CARA, 131-133.
139 Ibid., 320.
The Personal Is Political

Feminist artists defended their position that personal experience and autobiography are appropriate subjects for artwork, in the face of a rigid, lasting postmodern art canon. Often summarized by the adage that “the personal is political,” consciousness-raising groups and feminist pedagogy confirmed the systemic foundations of individualized oppressions and the importance of sharing one’s story. Mesa-Bains’s altar/installations endeavored to make the private public: the privacy of pre-colonial and unofficial spiritual strategies, the privacy of the home, the privacy of one’s hybrid identity. These tensions are articulated and made visible in her altar/installations because, as she outlines in “Domesticana,” her work is about the “duality and flux between private and public space.”

Mesa-Bains’s sense of this sharing emerged from a cultural emphasis on story-telling: “When I think about the platicas, or the little discussions, there have always been models of this kind of exchange in the Latin community, from ordinary story-telling to corridos, which are these running, historical songs.” Women who simply announce to each other their lived experience activate a feminist impulse to reveal daily and internalized oppressions. This performs a kind of passive consciousness-raising, for instance, when Chicana Cherríe Moraga recognizes her own bicultural positionality during a reading by Black author Ntozake Shange: “Sitting in that auditorium chair was the first time I had realized… I had disowned the language I knew best— ignored the words and rhythms that were closest to me. The sounds of my mother

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and aunts gossiping—half in English, half in Spanish—while drinking cerveza in the kitchen.”142 With such greater visibility comes greater identification.

Mesa-Bains’s work explores the shared material realities of women by making art from the domestic trappings that trap and circumscribe them. This relates to projects like Womanhouse (Fig. 23)—where feminist installations were built within the very structures of domesticity—as well as to the work of artists like Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz, whose 1977 In Mourning and In Rage (Fig. 24) convened women to speak truthfully about the pervasiveness of sexual assault and rape culture. Judy Chicago, reflecting on the advances of the California feminist art movement in 1974, argued that women’s ability to create great art lies in finally “transform[ing] our circumstances into our subject matter,” thereby bringing the seemingly personal into conversation with broader social contexts.143 Mesa-Bains’s use of domestic objects, trinkets, mementos, and photographs in her altar/installation relates to these shared concerns.

Mesa-Bains uses female experience and objects coded as female to explore the “paradox” of hybridity as embedded in works like the Ofrenda, relying on Chicanx narratives, objects, and contexts. She makes visible the insistent poles of Anglo and Mexican identity that bedevil the individual Chicanx, either personally or through systemic oppressions. This embodied mestizaje is the lived and intersectional reality of the Chicana: stuck between her roles and goals in the movement, the church, the home; hedging her relationship to two languages and two nations; and bridging the chasm between the feminine and the feminist. These daily tensions are reflected in the altar/installations—open, overflowing works that nonetheless require cultural knowledge or deep study to truly understand their myriad political ramifications. Notably, in a 2019

143 This is from a conversation between Chicago and feminist art critic Lucy R. Lippard. Judy Chicago, “Judy Chicago: Talking to Lucy Lippard,” Artforum 13, no 2 (September 1974), 65.
conversation, Mesa-Bains joyfully articulates her first realization of the power of the notion of “the personal is political,” after she saw a 1982 presentation of Frida Kahlo’s paintings at London’s Whitechapel Gallery. Mesa-Bains identified with Kahlo’s paintings of her bodily, gendered relationship to Mexico—its cultural objects, landscapes, and stories.

The use of private life and private materials as fonts for art making also relates to the Chicano movement and its fraught gender politics. Of particular resonance is the Chicana feminist literary tradition built by writers like Anzaldúa and Moraga. Their “testimonial autobiographical fiction,” nonfiction remembering of often traumatic, highly gendered experiences (of inequality, physical debasement, or physical or sexual violence), expound theories and serve as sites for creativity in language. In a 2003 interview, Mesa-Bains described the importance of this uncovering and recovering of private life:

... the autobiographical form, that has cut across all of that [the private/public divide], has been a way to allow me to use myself, my family, my sister, all the things in my life as a way of telling stories and narratives that also question what happens to women, what happens to families, what happens in racial politics, what happens in the economy of this country and why do we stand by and let those things happen. Even though they look very personal and mythological, and in some instances, they’re quite convincing aesthetically, I believe that they’re based on really severe questions about the current society that we live in and the trajectories that brought us to that point. Because I really, really believe in the power of history.

In altar/installations as diverse as 1990’s Borders (Fig. 14) and the 2013-14 New World Wunderkammer (Fig. 20), extremely personal artifacts and mementos perform crucial roles. Mesa-Bains engages family photographs of her grandparents in both works, as manifestations of the passage of time, cultural inheritance, and the Mexican origins of Chicanx culture. As its culture and life is inextricably bound to U.S. Government, state, and city policies enforcing white

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144 Mesa-Bains, phone interview with author, March 5, 2019.
145 González, Subject, 145.
supremacy and acculturation to Anglo forms, the insistent presence, replication, and space for Chicanx objects in Mesa-Bains’s work is a political positioning. In *Transparent Migrations* (2001, Fig. 25), the mantilla worn on the artist’s wedding day occupies a reflective armoire, the intimacy and rarity of this personal object residing in a space flanked by crushed glass. An apparent tenderness towards marriage and partnership emanates from the object, but its surrounding sharpness acknowledges the inequitable gender dynamics of the institution itself. Mesa-Bains’s belief in the power of history is manifested in her work’s respectful subversion of the home altar format, as her altar/installations guide historical strategies and objects into present conversations with “herstory,” and specifically female narratives.

**Herstories and Pre-Patriarchy Religion**

Mesa-Bains’s simultaneously spiritual and feminist strategies work together to honor the women who came before her, from the early inspiration of the matrilineal creativity of her family, to her selection of subjects for artwork throughout her career. This aligns with the work of the California feminist artists, who were interested in building separatist possibilities in which the intellectual and political legacies of women were shared and sustained. While Dolores del Rio represents a visible representation of positive and powerful Mexican femininity, the other subjects of Mesa-Bains’s altar/installations carry different meanings. In *Altar for Santa Teresa de Avila* (1984, Fig. 26), made in the same year as the altar/installation for Del Rio, images of the saint’s physical ecstasy repeat and accumulate to create what González described as a “feminist recuperation of Catholic iconography” as well as a “visual allegory of female desire enshrined in the frame of Catholic ritual.”147 Mesa-Bains later honored another Catholic woman, but in a very

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147 González, *Subject*, 121.
different way, electing to represent the *library* of self-taught scholar, scientist, composer, poet and nun, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, rather than her visage or narrative. Sor Juana’s body of work, livelihood, and life were challenged by patriarchal authorities who rejected her calls for educational possibilities for women. Popularly interpreted as an almost scandalously forthright woman, Sor Juana’s legend sees her refusing to stand down to the forces of the Inquisition. In actuality, it was the everyday patriarchal executors of that vision that dogged her achievements and resulted in her selling her library.

Mesa-Bains includes an expanded installation of this library, going far beyond the altar/installation format, in her series, *Venus Envy Chapter II: The Harem and Other Enclosures* (Figs. 27–29), which was exhibited at Williams College Museum of Art in 1994. The desk is covered in an assortment of objects indicating intellectual activity: globes, books, papers and notes, mathematical and scientific instruments (Fig. 28). Given Sor Juana’s eventual persecution, the objects also represent personal risk and potential violence. Reflecting on this work in particular, Mesa-Bains re-contextualizes Sor Juana as both Chicana and feminist: “Sor Juana is truly a Chicana to me… she’s the first feminist in the New World.” The connections between the women that Mesa-Bains has honored—Sor Juana, Dolores del Rio, the artist’s grandmother, Santa Teresa, and Frida Kahlo—create and map a matriarchal strength within Mexican and Chicana contexts. This lineage creates trans-historical connections among women who preceded, or may have rejected, the term “feminist,” up to and including the artist’s own feminism. Mesa-Bains personalizes these categorizations: “As a Chicana, I have always seen these women in a genealogy of feminism which holds relevance for me.” Her identification as a Chicana is predicated on this awareness of, and reverence for, herstories. This same identification is

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148 Durón, “How to Altar the World.”
149 hooks, 16.
reflected in Anzaldúa’s writings, in which she outlines a Chicana (or “new mestiza”) practice:

“Her first step is to take inventory. Despojando, desgranando, quitando paja. Just what did she inherit from her ancestors?”150 Only after taking stock of the women before her, can the contemporary Chicana know herself.

By sharing the lives of these women, and sustaining their legacies through the altar/installation activation, Mesa-Bains creates a repository of herstories, a “memory as a device of emancipation,” a cited strategy of domesticana. When writing on her own work in the domesticana essay, Mesa-Bains characterized these women as agents of feminism:

I have chosen to create offerings to those women whose lives and work struggle against the power and domination of the masculine world. The struggles of these women reflect the iconic battles of women and religion, women and society, and ultimately, women and the dominion of patriarchy.151

As the altar/installations utilize spiritual forms to honor women, they enact a resistance to patriarchal religions. The altar/installations revere women as subjects and sustainers of indigenous spirituality, explained in Chapter 1 as defying patriarchal Catholic doctrine and religious codes of conduct. Mesa-Bains describes in “Domesticana” how elevating immersive herstories in spiritual altars is inherently anti-patriarchal work, particularly in a home altar dedicated to her grandmother Mariana: “images of women, the role of women, the practices of women, the domestic labor of women, have a centrality. So much so that I found a way in religion to dispense with Christ.”152 This is a powerfully destabilizing statement, in which the very subject of Catholic worship is discarded, while the syncretized Catholic forms are engaged to instead honor women.

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150 Anzaldúa, Borderlands, 104. This loosely translates to “stripping, shelling, removing the chaff.”
151 Mesa-Bains, “Domesticana…,” 311.
152 Ibid.
Mesa-Bains recognized that home altars’ syncretized spirituality could be merged with installation art “as a flexible means of synthetizing her feminist sensibility with the goals of the Chicano/a civil rights movement,” locating altars at the intersection of her feminist and Chicanx identities. In 1988, Mesa-Bains curated *Ceremony of Memory*, an exhibition for the Center for Contemporary Arts of Santa Fe of Chicanx artists working with spiritual forms. As in her writings on her own work, she lauds the use of non-dogmatic syncretized Catholic forms as a form of affirmation for the marginalized. Though Catholicism is broadly anti-feminist, Mesa-Bains and others articulate how a personalized, ancestor-anchored spirituality can form part of cultural emancipation. Activated in contemporary art, spirituality and this cultural memory can be empowering, as Victor Zamudio-Taylor explored in his catalogue essay:

The aesthetics of fragmentation in the ceremony of memory is driven and ordered by that which the established reality and the traditional models for social change devalues or erases: the other and the otherness of experience… as images of emancipation there is a self-consciously constructed reception which makes those images acquire a permanence in the viewer. This permanence can potentially contradict the internalization of the established domineering culture in the subjective make-up of the individual.

Mesa-Bains has described Zamudio-Taylor as one of the artists and thinkers who helped develop her understanding of her own visual strategies. In this conception, spiritual manifestations around women may help to demystify, subvert, and eventually honor their various gendered and oppressed realities. A powerful form of identification is produced when the work of “the other” is displayed in the museum or gallery which typically honors the work of white men.

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153 Meyer, 6.
156 Mesa-Bains, phone interview with author, March 5, 2019. This was due to their frequent collaborations at the Studio Museum in Harlem, at Cornell, and at the New Museum.
As home altar traditions bypassed Eurocentric modes of worship, the feminist recapitulation of these altars bypasses their association with patriarchal worship. This reflects the second wave feminist turn to “the goddess,” where male spiritual figures were rejected as figureheads of a systemic patriarchy. Frequently, they were substituted with worship or intellectual admiration of prehistorical or pre-patriarchal female goddesses as embodiments of life and creation itself. For instance, and in particular relevance to both “herstory” (or history written through female experience) and the goddess (or acknowledgement of prehistoric woman-worship), allusions can be made to the iconic and pervasive legacy of Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* (Fig. 30), made between 1974 and 1979 and debuted in San Francisco. In it, the narrative of Western civilization is recast through glorifying visual cues of gold, embroidery, and ceramics to honor the lives of 1,038 mythic and historical women. These patriarchal, Judeo-Christian visual strategies are subverted in order to elevate women left out of history. In considering Mesa-Bains’s individually honorific artworks as rooted in Chicana herstories and syncretic spiritual antecedents, her work can be seen as a furtherance and improvement on the types of feminist strategies that, as in *The Dinner Party*, subverted the rubric of patriarchal art from within. In recent reflections, Mesa-Bains considers this notion of a pre-patriarchal spirituality as “the more singular part of the linkages between the feminists and the Chicanas… [as] in indigenous tradition, women hold a very prominent space.”157

**Women’s Work, Craft, and Labor**

One feminist approach was to draw from art forms commonly referred to as “women’s work,” a parallel in art to the notion that domestic labors of childcare, cleaning, and cooking are

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157 Mesa-Bains, phone interview with author, March 5, 2019.
the domain of women. For some feminist artists, this translated into works that looked at domestic labor as a form of creativity, such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles and her project *Maintenance Art* (1973, Fig. 31), in which she made scrubbing steps, dressing her children for winter, or honoring the work of maintenance crews the basis for performance art. For others, the material ramifications of “women’s work” were more relevant. This refers to anything tied to domestic or private female life— needlework, intimate ceramics or china painting, quilt making, photo-montage and collage, and more. In the context of institutional and scholarly hierarchies, these forms were often considered hobbyist or decorative, thereby less “important” than the work of male artists. Many artworks challenged this hierarchy by reveling in traditional forms, as in Miriam Schapiro’s *Anonymous Was A Woman* series (1977, Fig. 32) reproducing and isolating needlework silhouettes, its title alluding to the lost and unrecognized creativity of female makers.

Mesa-Bains’s extension of the female tradition of domestic home altars can be understood in this lineage. Kay Turner, whose research on home altar forms has been cited in earlier pages, adopted the term “femmage” to describe home altars. Femmage was coined by Miriam Schapiro in 1977 to encapsulate any and all of the varied forms of personal artmaking that were both historically assigned to women, and engaged by women as tools to make art. In an essay first published in feminist magazine *Heresies* in 1978 by Schapiro and Laura Mayer, they name and define femmage in terms that resonate with Mesa-Bains’s work and writing:

“Collected, saved and combined materials represented for such women acts of pride, desperation and necessity. Spiritual survival depended on the harboring of memories.”

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158 These quotation marks delineate a level of irony; following Linda Nochlin’s foundational 1971 text “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” one must acknowledge how conceptions of artistic achievement have been plagued by gender imbalances. The “great” male artists of art history were sustained by generational wealth and power and access to academies and art networks that denied women entry or value.

Black feminist and activist Michele Wallace, however, reminds us that the domestic is always marked by race and class, as she articulated in her essay “Feminism, Race, and the Division of Labor”:

‘women’s work’ may have always been the key divisive issue in the Women’s Liberation Movement in the US… [it] continues to mean very different things depending on your age, your race, your sexuality, your economic status, and whether it was you or your grandparents or your great-grandparents who came to this country as immigrants, or your ancestors who came here as slaves, or your ancestors who have always been here.160

Wallace’s deft deconstruction of what exactly “work” means to women of varying ethnic, race, class, and citizenship status effectively posits that a greater understanding of feminist art requires a more inclusive framework. If white artists engage “women’s work” to elevate it, but do not consider its larger intersecting conditions, they risk replicating its privilege and circumscribing its power. Herein lies the importance of considering a Chicana artist like Mesa-Bains’s work in the lineage of femmage or women’s work. Mesa-Bains sees in her own work a language of labor, as she lived it, citing the influence of feminist writers like Griselda Pollock on her personal understanding of “women’s work as a sort of grounding and a form of labor: what we make, what we grow, how we live.”161 Therein lies the necessity of domesticana as a politically motivated version of femmage for Chicanas. It moves feminist art into a more intersectional and relevant conversation, one that can encompass and sustain numerous starting points, cultural references, and visual possibilities.

**Feminist Art and Praxis**

The feminist art movement was not only established within the stretchers, notebooks, galleries, and studios of artists, but was underscored by activism and praxis. For Mesa-Bains, this

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160 Aukeman, 57.
161 Mesa-Bains, phone interview with author, March 5, 2019.
can be traced back to her work’s progression and debut in Chicanx community spaces: “The period from 1969 to roughly 1980–81 was a period within a community base [including Carmen Lomas Garza, Judy Baca, and Ester Hernandez] of making art. The ‘art world’ was something out there that we were pissed off at or didn’t even care about. Then little by little, I started what I would describe as crossing over.”

Like the feminist artists of California who established their own systems of value and support, so Mesa-Bains found a community to sustain her before installing her work in largely white contemporary art spaces.

Mesa-Bains frequently wrote about other artists, and even shared the work of other Chicanx artists within her artworks. For instance, in her Whitney Museum exhibition of Venus Envy I, she also included reproductions of Yolanda Lopez’ Virgen of Guadalupe, Patssi Valdez’s Black Virgin, and John Valadez’s La Butterfly. This evinces a dedication to the notion, previously cited in interviews with the artist, that a relationship to her artist community preceded her interest in the contemporary art world. This paying-of-respects is reflected in the writing style of Anzaldúa, whose “Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers” quoted liberally from the words of Cherríe Moraga, Naomi Littlebear Morena, Nellie Wong, Alice Walker, and others, directly in the running text of the piece.

For this author, one of the most compelling aspects of Mesa-Bains’s work is her insistent use of actual personal belongings and family heirlooms in her altar/installations. Mesa-Bains often re-uses important objects in several artworks over time; this indicates her work is rooted in the actual uses and lives of these objects as individual, tactile forms, rather than metaphorical visual stand-ins, or as cultural markers in static displays. For González, this act of caring (or curation, linguistically) is the unique achievement of artists of color who work in installation.

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162 Griffith, 16.
163 Durón, “How to Altar the World.”
formats: they attend to the “historical materiality” of the objects in uniquely personal ways.\textsuperscript{164} It evidences an authentic dedication to each items’ use or value, no matter the context. It exemplifies a completely different relationship between artists, artwork, and collector rather than more colonial conceptions of art objects as static and “belonging” to its collector, rather than its maker.

However, Mesa-Bains’s insistence on this form of praxis has contributed to her institutional marginalization and relative invisibility in the art world. By her own estimation, the first twenty-five to thirty years of her artistic practice were forged “with no concept of selling anything at all,” since her work was in most cases comprised of singular photographs and heirlooms.\textsuperscript{165} This limited her circulation in the private collections, public collections, and loan shows that constitute typical museum exhibition programs. But it also points to a fundamental divergence from the commercial values ascribed to art, and grounds her practice in an embedded critique of this notion of value: “What you discover is that clearly you are outside the realm of what ‘we’ [white, elite arts administrators] consider art. You know that all along, because it’s so obvious that your way of working doesn’t make any ‘sense.’”\textsuperscript{166} As Mesa-Bains’s work pushes against notions of hegemonic, patriarchal values, its audience is broader than the art world. For the artist, her practice not only articulated her worldview in dominant spaces, but also “opened up a discourse for people who would not normally go to a museum.”\textsuperscript{167}

Mesa-Bains recalls how this discourse would manifest in notes that visitors stuffed into the drawers, shelves, and frames of her altar/installations. With warmth and joy in her voice, the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{164} González, \textit{Subject…}, 10. “They care about where the objects came from, who created them, who owned them, who bought or sold them, how they were stored, how they were collected, how they were marketed, how they were (or are) used in different cultural traditions, and how they were (or are) part of a given cultural hegemony.”
\item \textsuperscript{165} Mesa-Bains, phone interview with author, March 5, 2019.
\item \textsuperscript{166} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{167} Ibid.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
artist reminisced about how her artworks were frequently returned to her from museums with personal letters about migration and family, copies of documentation and residency identification, and other markers of “a dialogue of humanity, of love” between the viewer and the artwork.\textsuperscript{168} This points to how Chicanxs audiences, and likely others, recognized the altar/installation forms from their own cultural contexts and already knew it had the capacity for votive, personal offerings. This, for the artist, is as valorized an outcome of public displays of art as typical art-world benchmarks: “There has to be more profound meaning than selling something, or getting good reviews. The deep part of it is speaking to people who are either familiar with what you’re making, or \textit{need} what you’re making.”\textsuperscript{169}

Mesa-Bains, in some instances, drew the social environment or political context of the work’s display directly into the artwork. In \textit{Sor Juana’s Library}, part of \textit{Venus Envy II: The Harem and Other Enclosures} (1994), she incorporated images of concurrent protests staged at Williams College calling for a Latina professor to be hired. This collaboration with students began before she arrived on campus, and her exhibition “egged them on,” as she featured a “portrait of the women” activists in the work.\textsuperscript{170} The \textit{Library} featured articles and images of their advocacy, effectively co-signing their activism and canonizing the students (who were one of her primary audiences).\textsuperscript{171} This was also the first time she created a reading room, titled \textit{Life of the Mind} (Fig. 29), to provide ancillary readings so that students could “interact with the work beyond just its visual meaning.”\textsuperscript{172} This intellectual support for her visual art allows for expanded conversations, encouraging reflection on how her work and praxis may apply to the

\textsuperscript{168} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{171} González, \textit{Subject}, 158. According to Mesa-Bains, this well-funded exhibition allowed her greater flexibility in her approach, and she considers it one of the very best exhibitions of her work to date.
\textsuperscript{172} Ibid.
lives of students. The gesture of knowledge-sharing and institutional critique is another feminist aspect of Mesa-Bains’s work with altar/installations, fusing traditional forms with her own aesthetic strategies, and allowing for the political realities of an artwork’s display conditions to be manifest within the work.

Amalia Mesa-Bains’s works provide a space and engender a new visual vocabulary for Chicana feminism. In their expansiveness, her altar/installations claim a breadth of importance for their subjects and concerns, many of which complicate or add nuance to themes explored by feminist artists since the 1970s. From inflecting the notion of “the personal is political” with tensions of cultural hybridity, to aligning indigenous and Chicana women leaders within a broader herstory, to continuing the forms of women’s work, Mesa-Bains extends our understanding of what feminist art can look like, should stand for, and whose story it tells.
Conclusion

In the preceding three chapters, the altar/installation works of Amalia Mesa-Bains are explored through considerations of their relationship to the Chicano movement, to cultural or spiritual contexts, and to the feminist art movement. This thesis aims to locate Mesa-Bains’s infrequently-seen artworks within a broad trajectory of feminist art. In doing so, it hopes to accomplish a revisionist history, in which temporary installations of Mesa-Bains’s altar/installations find more permanence within contemporary discourse around the continuation of traditional forms by contemporary artists, of institutional critique, and of intersectional feminist art practices. It also points to the ways in which the histories of feminist art itself should continue to be expanded upon and questioned from varied viewpoints. It is necessary to reflect on how artists like Mesa-Bains can help bring nuance and depth to established notions of how feminist art impacted twentieth- and twenty-first century art. Her altar/installations provide rich examples of how the personal is political, argue the valence of herstories in the face of patriarchy, and elevate labor and praxis in their execution and display.

This author’s first introduction to Amalia Mesa-Bains was during the September 16, 2016 U.S. Latinx Futures Conference at the Ford Foundation in New York, in which she gracefully and acerbically told the audiences a range of “vignettes” about the cyclical and frustrating nature of the art word’s rising-and-passing infatuation with Chicanx and Latinx artists. In what she titled “Postcards from the Past to the Future,” Mesa-Bains shared how institutions and markets may pay momentary interest to Chicanx and Latinx artists, but ultimately keep Latinx artists subordinate to Latin American art. She also shared that, in her career specifically, she had up until then only sold four works of art, and had never had a monograph nor a survey of her work. The audience— the majority of which clearly knew and respected her— laughed and
emphatically agreed with many of her points. This indicated to me that she was well respected in Latinx circles and likely required more research and visibility across the art world, of which this thesis is, hopefully, a contributing step. In our recent interview, Mesa-Bains mused on how her identities as a “first generation Chicana” artist, a “West Coast” artist, and now, a “75-year-old” artist conspire to make her work invisible in the art world. She characterizes her short time in New York’s art circles in the early 1990s as “very perilous,” recognizing the intentionally slow pace of institutional acceptance of Chicanx art as a form of systemic oppression. Though moments like the 2016 Symposium point to an awareness of the need for change, the lack of support for Chicana artists in institutional settings, and the lack of recognition for pioneers like Mesa-Bains, points to the reality that much more work needs to be done.

This thesis foregrounds feminism as a method for understanding Amalia Mesa-Bains’s development as an artist, and to make apparent how the groundbreaking complexity of her altar/installation forms contains intersectional enunciations of traditionally feminist, second-wave strategies. Now that feminist art itself is approaching canonization within museums, artists like Mesa-Bains should be considered alongside these narratives to ensure their complexity and reflection of the actual conditions of art made within and in the face of patriarchal contexts. Thus, this thesis grounds her work in the critical framework of Chicanx art and culture, which Mesa-Bains herself often set out in her own writings. Although only touched on briefly by the artist, her altar/installations and domesticana are truly feminist forms whose power is underscored by their work as devices of memory and critique, of private and public experience, and as radical declarations of critical stances in their own right.

173 Mesa-Bains, phone interview with author, March 5, 2019.
174 Ibid. She stated, “I could see that trying to convince museum directors in their 60s, old white men, that they should ‘do the right thing’ was absolutely idiotic. Because the investment of their lifetime was in that perspective, and nothing that anyone could do would make them change it.”
Mesa-Bains’s work and her articulation of *domesticana* forms make more visible the lives of Chicanas, doubly sidelined by patriarchy within and external to the Chicano movement. Her upbringing as a Chicana woman surrounded by folk art forms, and her involvement in the Chicano activist movement, primed her to make work that embedded a cultural respect for the lives of women impacted by the patriarchy, rather than an outright rejection of this system of relationships and power dynamics. By employing the material and the subject of the domestic, she highlights a productive aesthetic tension that speaks to hybrid lived experience. By turning *rasquache* “around” and “into feminism,” she articulates a visual language that bridges the traditional folk forms practiced by mentor Yolanda Garfias-Woo with feminist strategies for critique in the art world. Mesa-Bains’s act of writing her own narratives and elucidating the importance of Chicanx cultural forms sustained her art making, and vice versa.

As Mesa-Bains’s practice took root a full decade following the flourishing of feminist art in California, her work operates in its legacy as a corrective to its white and middle-class frameworks. The strength of her practice, and its lessons for contemporary art history, lies in its expansiveness and space for possibility. Her altar/installations consider the multiplicities of culture, politics, history, and space. Their responsive, adaptable form allow for multiple readings, including powerful correspondences with key moments in recent history.

The context and extension towards feminism provided by this paper is not meant to simply “include” Mesa-Bains in a feminist trajectory. Instead, it argues that given her unique position of having created a new strategy for art—in realization, and also in its critical schema—Mesa-Bains actually expands an understanding of feminist art as a whole, adding another facet and strategy to its development as an art movement, critical framework, and force for changing the dominant and oppressive limits of the contemporary art world.
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— (artist). (March 5, 2019). Telephone interview.


Fig. 2: Carlos A. Cortés, ¡Sera toda nuestra!, 1977. Color linoleum cut on paper, 35 ⅛ x 22 1/2 inches. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, 1995.50.10.

Fig. 4: Malaquías Montoya, *Support the Farmworkers*, 1968. Poster print, dimensions unknown.
Fig. 5: Malaquías Montoya, [Exhibition poster design for *New Symbols for La Nueva Raza*], 1969. Poster print, dimensions unknown. Collection of the artist.

Fig. 6: Esteban Villa, *Cosmic Woman/Mujer Cósmica* and *Female Intelligentsia*, painted 1985 in Chicano Park, San Diego, established in 1970 and where Chicano artists began to paint murals in 1974.

Fig. 8: Ester Hernandez, *Sun Mad*, 1982. Screenprint on paper, 22 x 17 inches. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, 1995.50.32.
Table 1. Quantitative Analysis of the CARA Exhibition by Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Number of Works</th>
<th>Male/Female</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>La Causa</td>
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<td>3/1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Icons</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13/1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Civil Liberties</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9/1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Urban Images</td>
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<tr>
<td>Murals (slide show) *</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>47/7</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>24/10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reclaiming the Past</td>
<td>10</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist Visions</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0/14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redefining American Art</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8/6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Several of the murals displayed in the slide show were done by collectives whose members included both men and women; the seven murals done exclusively by women or women's collectives account for seven of the fifty-four mural images shown in the slides. Similarly, the grupo installations line does not reveal the number of men and women since all three of the grupos had at least one female member; rather, the number refers to the number of grupos presented and the dominant gender of each grupo.

Fig. 9: Alicia Gaspar de Alba. Published in Chicano Art Inside/Outside the Master’s House: Cultural Politics and the CARA Exhibition, 146. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998.
Fig. 11: Amalia Mesa-Bains, *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Río* (detail), 1984, revised 1991. Mixed media installation including plywood, mirrors, fabric, framed photographs, found objects, dried flowers, and glitter, 96 x 72 x 48 inches. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program, 1998.
Fig. 12: Amalia Mesa-Bains, *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Río* (detail, mermaid visible to right of skeleton on frame), 1984, revised 1991. Mixed media installation including plywood, mirrors, fabric, framed photographs, found objects, dried flowers, and glitter, 96 x 72 x 48 inches. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program, 1998.


Fig. 16: Amalia Mesa-Bains, *Venus Envy Chapter One (of the First Holy Communion Moments Before the End)*, 1993. Whitney Museum installation.
Fig. 17: Amalia Mesa-Bains, *Venus Envy Chapter One (of the First Holy Communion Moments Before the End)* (detail), 1993. Whitney Museum installation.

Fig. 18: Amalia Mesa-Bains, *Venus Envy Chapter One (of the First Holy Communion Moments Before the End)* (detail), 1993. Whitney Museum installation.
Fig. 19: Amalia Mesa-Bains, *Venus Envy Chapter One (of the First Holy Communion Moments Before the End)* (detail, with Coatlicue visible in mirror), 1993. Whitney Museum installation.
Fig. 20: *New World Wunderkammer: A Project by Amalia Mesa-Bains*. Fowler Museum, Los Angeles, 2013–14.

Fig. 21: Amalia Mesa-Bains, *New World Wunderkammer*, 2013. Mixed media installation with Fowler Museum collection objects.
Fig. 22: Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, *Catalogue of Womanhouse*, 1972. Printed book, 8.5 x 8.5 inches. Brooklyn Museum Library. Special Collections, Gift of Cindy Nemser.

Fig. 23: Sandy Orgel, *Linen Closet*, in *Womanhouse*, 1972. Installation, now destroyed.

Fig. 26: Amalia Mesa-Bains, *Altar for Santa Teresa de Avila*, 1984. Mixed media installation.

Fig 27: Amalia Mesa-Bains, *The Library of Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz*, from the installation *Venus Envy Chapter II: The Harem and Other Enclosures*, 1994, Williams College Museum of Art.
Fig 28: Amalia Mesa-Bains, *The Library of Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz* (detail), from the installation *Venus Envy Chapter II: The Harem and Other Enclosures*, 1994, Williams College Museum of Art.

Fig. 29: Amalia Mesa-Bains, *The Library of Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz* (detail, Reading Room), from the installation *Venus Envy Chapter II: The Harem and Other Enclosures*, 1994, Williams College Museum of Art.
Fig. 30: Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 1974–79. Mixed media installation, 48 x 48 ft. Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Collection of the Brooklyn Museum.