

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Esperanza Cortés: *Canté Jondo/Deep Song*
Viviane Rombaldi Seppey: *Voice*

September 28–November 3, 2019

Opening Reception: September 28, 6–8 PM

Artist Talk: October 20, 4–5:30 PM

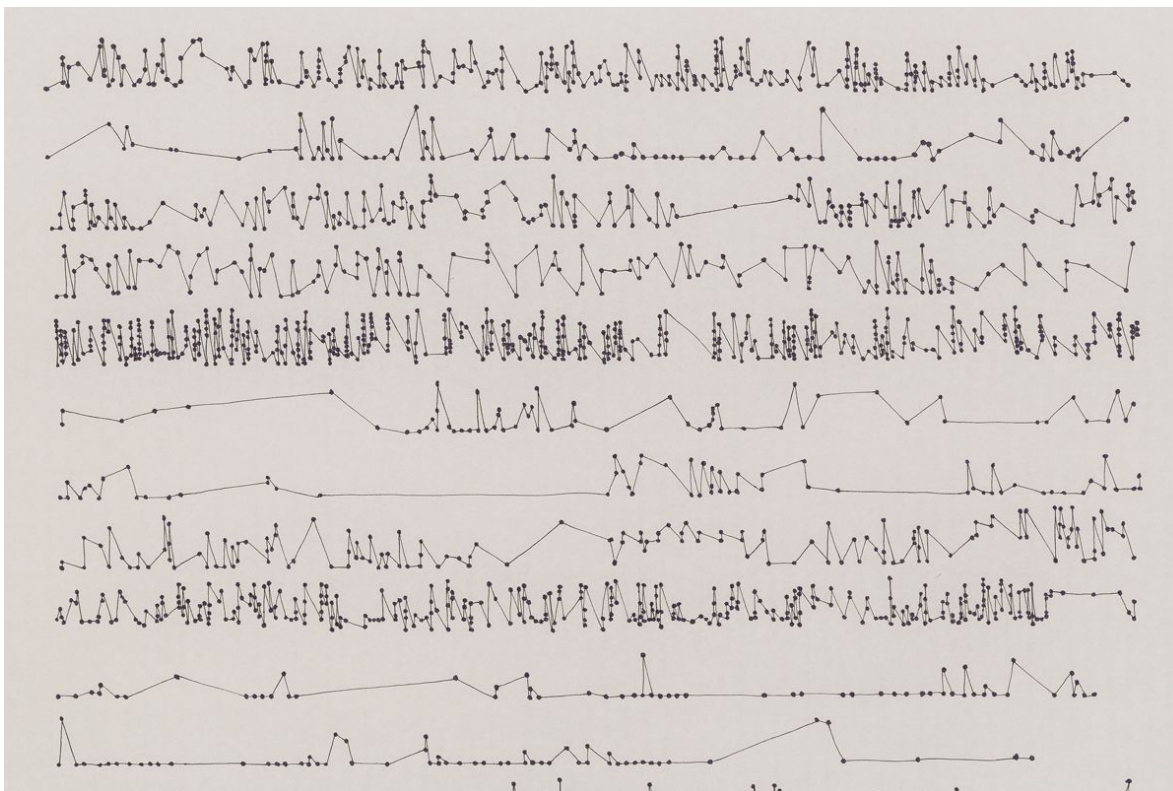
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Image left: Esperanza Cortés, *Charlotte* (detail), 2019, installation with chair, found embroidery, glass beads, metal, chain, ceramic, pigment, faux pearls, plaster on wire mesh, 9' x 15' x 9'. Courtesy of the artist. Image right: Viviane Rombaldi Seppey, *Along the Lines* (detail), 2016, phonebook pages, ink, paper, 14 1/8" x 6 3/4" x 2" (closed book). Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Etienne Frossard.

Smack Mellon is pleased to announce two solo exhibitions, **Esperanza Cortés: *Canté Jondo/Deep Song*** and **Viviane Rombaldi Seppey: *Voice***, opening concurrently on Saturday, September 28, 2019. Both artists make work that grapples with varied immigrant perspectives. The work of **Esperanza Cortés** addresses the ongoing aftermath of colonialism, particularly as it relates to social justice, labor, and cultural heritage, as well as individual and collective memory. **Viviane Rombaldi Seppey**, on the other hand, explores language and communication through work that is inspired by her own background as French-speaking Swiss with Italian grandparents.

Viviane Rombaldi Seppey
Voice



Viviane Rombaldi Seppey, *Pulsating* (detail), 2016, ink on Wenzhou paper, wooden sticks, 60" x 34"

Viviane Rombaldi Seppey's work is informed by her family history and migratory experiences. In her creative process, she uses varied source materials, such as phonebooks, maps, and dried leaves, that hold an intimate connection to her wandering life. They are woven into personal and social narratives to explore ideas of place, identity, and memory. By using ordinary or found objects, Rombaldi Seppey gives the viewer a measure of accessibility with the work through the familiarity of the material. At the same time, in transforming the mundane into elaborate artworks, she asks her audience to consider the construction of their place in the world and their interaction with the environment.

Her recent visual and sound art pieces contemplate human exchange and the role of verbal language in communication and comprehension. Having lived most of her life in places where the spoken language was not her mother tongue, Rombaldi Seppey began to question how arbitrary words can be, especially when an accent can generate misunderstanding. The Roman alphabet became the starting point of the themes in her work, as it is the common element among the languages she has encountered. Rombaldi Seppey then employed repetition, sequence, and systematic methods as tools to invent a non-verbal language, transforming letters into new communicative sounds with the help of a musical collaborator.

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Voice, Rombaldi Seppey's exhibition at Smack Mellon, includes artist books, drawings, collages, and an interactive sound piece. In the work *Sometimes I dream in French, sometimes in English*, 26 pages of a phonebook have been taken out, one for each letter of the alphabet. On each page, all of the letters and numbers except the chosen alphabet letter have been blacked out in ink so that the final pieces resemble a picture of the night sky in which the stars are represented by each letter of the alphabet. For *Along the Lines*, 26 pages of a phonebook, each one representing one letter of the alphabet, are attached together like a concertina leaflet. A drawn line connects all occurrences of the selected letter. In the central piece of the exhibition, *Pulsating*, the 26 "alphabet" lines from *Along the Lines* are rotated from vertical to horizontal, retraced onto paper, and ordered from A to Z. These lines are then reinterpreted into musical scores by composer Benjamin Velez and transcribed onto paper sheets to be played with musical boxes. Visitors are then invited to choose a letter to play on the music boxes, which are operated by hand crank. The "singing" letters become a language in itself, encouraging viewers to expand their ideas about modes of communication.

Born in Sion, Switzerland, Rombaldi Seppey currently lives and works in New York. Her solo shows in New York have been presented at Kentler International Drawing Space, Summit Art Center, Wave Hill, and Mixed Greens Gallery. Rombaldi Seppey has also exhibited in numerous institutions, both nationally and internationally, including the Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami, Hunterdon Art Museum, Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art, Pelham Art Center, Carriage House at the Islip Art Museum, John Jay College, Walsh Gallery at Seton Hall University, and the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Australia. Residencies and Fellowships include the Lower East Side Printshop Keyholder Residency; the Bronx Museum's Artist in the Marketplace program; Bundanon Trust in Illaroo, Australia; Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, MA; Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity in Alberta, Canada; and Ucross Foundation in Wyoming.

Esperanza Cortés
Canté Jondo/Deep Song



Esperanza Cortés, *Second Sight*, 2008-2018, table, mirror, 20 glass beaded and metal beaded clay sculptures, 54" x 36" x 20"

Colombian-born, multidisciplinary artist Esperanza Cortés shares a passion for the mosaic of the Americas, and their ever-evolving confluence of cultures, which informs their traditions, rituals, music, and art. She employs a wide variety of materials and artistic methods, combining handmade pieces with reworked found objects to evoke cultural symbols that act as sites of memory. Her work gives form to complicated issues in both aesthetic and poetic ways, often evoking the human body as a symbol and expression of nature, vulnerability, and power. Bejeweled, opulent surfaces draw the viewer into the work, while the shape of skulls and disembodied organs reveal a more sinister reality beneath the façade. Although the jewels and metals that Cortés uses are faux, they are nonetheless enticing and brilliant.

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In *Canté Jondo/Deep Song*, her exhibition of mixed media sculptures and installations at Smack Mellon, Cortés explores the theme of injustice that is at the root of the predatory gem and mineral excavation industry. The mining of precious stones has been an influential factor in the continued colonization of Colombia, having helped to fund the more than 60-year conflict there. Violence stemming from the mineral mining industries has also affected Brazil, as well as several African nations. *Canté Jondo* makes visible the human cost that is provoked by these mineral extractions, raising critical questions about the politics of erasure and exclusion in the aftermath of colonialism. In this way, Cortés uses beauty as a mask that belies the hideous atrocities that were enacted in order to achieve fortune. The glint of gold and glass beads in sculptures such as *Empire* (2016) and *A Charmed Life* (2008–12), ultimately expose an abuse of power. At the same time, the appeal of the work comes from the gleam of its reflected light, which imbues it with a sense of hope and renewal.

Women and their under-recognized roles in sustaining spirituality, labor, and cultural heritage is another important theme that underscores much of Cortés's art. *Second Sight* depicts sculptural skulls and human organs encrusted with crystals and metal beads, recalling an altarpiece or reliquary. The work honors the Curandera, or traditional faith healer in Latinx cultures, including the artist's own grandmothers who dedicated their lives to supporting physical and spiritual health for their families and communities. Cortés created her *La Minera* series—clay female faces with gold or silver chains flowing down—to acknowledge Afro-Colombian gold miners, many of whom are women, whose land is being seized by the Colombian government even though their families have lived and worked there for many generations. *Charlotte* (2019) and *La Cordobesa* (2016–17), two works from the *Embroidered Allegories* series, reflect the diversity of the Americas by incorporating embroidered elements from all over the world and showing how textiles can be vehicles for sharing linked cultural narratives. Overall Cortés's body of work reveals the extent to which a consciousness, whether personal or collective, can emerge through the proponent of transcultural experience.

Born in Bogotá, Colombia and based in New York, Cortés has exhibited nationally at venues such as the Neuberger Museum of Art, Bronx Museum of the Arts, Queens Museum, El Museo del Barrio, MoMA PS1, Socrates Sculpture Park, Cleveland Art Museum, and Lorenzo Homar Gallery, Philadelphia. Her work has also been shown internationally in Germany, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, Japan, Mexico, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Spain and Greece. Residencies include McColl Center for Arts + Innovation, Museum of Arts and Design Artist Studio Residency, BRIC Workspace Program, Caldera Residency, Fountainhead Residency, MoMA PS1 International Residency, and Abrons Art Center residency, among many others. She has also received numerous awards, including the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship, Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters & Sculptors Grant, U.S. Department of State Art in Embassies Program, the Bronx Museum's Artist in the Marketplace Program, and the New York Foundation for the Arts Sustained Achievement in Visual Arts Award.

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