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Esperanza Cortés, Canté Jondo / Deep Song at Smack Mellon

OCTOBER 30 *by* JONATHAN GOODMAN



Esperanza Cortés, *Canté Jondo/Deep Song* at Smack Mellon curated by Gabriel de Guzman.
Installation view courtesy of Smack Mellon and the artist.

Colombian-born artist Esperanza Cortes is the originator of the strong show “Canté Jondo” (“Deep Song”), composed of a series of works, mostly sculptures in the form of decorated chairs; chandeliers, and embellished skulls. She brings attention to the colonial practices that so badly damaged the indigenous peoples of her region. Decoration is key to her sensibility, in the form of artworks that address the problem of colonialism indirectly—likely because literalism in regard to the travails she describes would limit the emotional power of what she does. To jump from a beautifully decorated chair to the severe problems still experienced by native peoples in Colombia is a way of evading the literalism that plagues much political art today—if the references are obscure, we are forced to complete the metaphor, surely a particularly effective means to understanding the suffering Cortes obliquely refers us to.

The problems suggested in this show have to do with the generations-old gems conflict still alive in Colombia. It would make sense, then, for Cortes to embellish the chairs with a gold chain and other seemingly valuable baubles—it is a way of referring to the difficulties there without making them too overt in her art. This means that the backstory of each work is important to know—a requirement that may be difficult to internalize as Cortes’s audience moves from piece to piece, but at the same time forces us into a position of political recognition, which is needed to fully appreciate the art. In the several examples taken from the 2016 series called “La Minera,” long gold or silver chains cascade downward from the clay heads of women the artist has sculpted. These heads represent the Afro-Colombian gold miners, mostly women, whose lands are now being taken by the Colombian government—this despite the fact that the miners have lived there for generations. Eerie, ghostlike, and somehow representative of the suffering these women continue to endure, the heads represent the depredations of history—if, indeed, we know what they represent (the situation is clarified with a wall card).



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The necessity of knowing the circumstances, not available from the art itself, points out the implicit difficulties of seeing some of Cortés's art. This is not to deny the artist's achievement—she is extremely gifted. But so much of today's social criticism, imaginatively speaking, is indirect, we must comment on the necessity of a written explanation. As sympathetic to these situations as we can be, to be required to research the background of

the work we are seeing poses a difficulty. *Empire* (2016) is a tall chandelier that reaches the ceiling of the gallery space—it consists of metal chains, metal bead, and glass beads, and was made while Cortes was an artist at Sculpture Space in Utica (the actual chandelier was constructed by Meyda, a regional lighting company specializing in custom work). The narrow vertical form ends on the floor on which a plush red rug has been based: the piece is an ironic homage to the wealth derived from the colonial exploitation of indigenous peoples in Colombia. It is an affecting piece, vaingloriously beautiful despite the modesty of the materials used. But the situation it circumnavigates is not known easily.



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For all its jewel-like adornment, *Charlotte* (2019), a chair made by Cortes while she was at a residency in Charlotte, North Carolina, operates again as a critique of economic and cultural power. The chair is covered with found embroidery, glass beads, crystals, metal, faux pearls; in the center of the seat is a semi-realistic flower composed of small, light purple blossoms. As exquisite as the piece may seem at first, it does not ring true as a homage to grandeur. Instead, it invokes the hollow facade of power used to exploit the disadvantaged. In general, the sculptures do not offer much hope, although there is *Second Sight* (2019), a group of glass- and metal-beaded sculptures arranged across a narrow white tray and pedestal; the pieces include full-size skulls and small versions of body parts like legs—offerings in homage to the artist's grandmother and other women working with herbs and spells in the hopes of bettering the health of those seeking help.



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To summarize: this powerful show attempts to transform the brutalized, brutalizing history of those in power in Colombia as they attempt to wrest away the goods and lands of people there. The situation is tragic but maybe unnegotiable; it is hard to say from the work itself. Thus, the entire show becomes a melancholic elegy—likely, all elegies are melancholic—for the losses sustained by Colombian minorities. As such, it gives us a tragic, but also beautiful, sense of social meaning at a time when art is rife with such an outlook. But this show, despite the ubiquity of politicized intention in art., stands out for its specificity of theme and materials. Its particularity made it a pleasure to see.

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