



*Pequod Co.*

**Fabiola Iza: You joined the contemporary art world somewhat recently: you studied architecture and began working in contemporary art in 2013. Tell me about that transition. What did you learn from your architecture studies?**

Yolanda Ceballos Before I talk specifically about what I learned from studying architecture, I think it is important to talk about what I learned from ballet. I practiced ballet since childhood until I was 22, and the last seven years professionally. I was used to studying and dancing, and always worked to accomplish that unachievable perfection sought by that dance style. Afterwards, when it was time for me to choose a career, perhaps unconsciously, I looked for one with demands similar to those I had experienced. With one of my professors, Agustín Landa, for example, I felt the type of pressure I had felt with ballet and I enjoyed it, I found it productive.

While I was still a student, I participated in several contests and won them; afterwards I asked Agustín for a job, and even though he did not usually hire students, he offered me a job, in part because I was very persistent, and also, because he already knew, me he was aware of how important that job was for me. I have always felt that there is no time to do everything, it is something I have always felt.

In hindsight, besides from discipline, I think architecture provided me with a mental structure. The ability to know that one thing leads to another. I was taught to work, architecturally, with the same module. Transporting that to another field, the artistic field let's say. John Cage worked on his experimental pieces in a similar way: variations on a theme. That is why it is difficult for me to talk about a single

Fabiola Iza interviews Yolanda Ceballos on her work, touching subjects such as influences, references and production processes.

project— I don't see my work in terms of projects, I see it a series of events. Everything is linked.

I should also mention my yoga practice. I have been practicing Ashtanga yoga for 12 years; it is a type of yoga that works through the same series of postures. It is a sequence where one posture leads you into the next and one strives to achieve a perfect form in each. They say that you should do the pose a thousand or ten thousand times— I'm not sure how many— to achieve this perfection; it is considered something possible. Some artists create a piece, then do something very different, and a long time later they find a connection between them. That does not happen to me: I work on the same module which keeps leading me to another and to another and another.



Yolanda Ceballos, *Reconstrucción escala 1:20, 7/81 - 12/81, 2019*. Concrete, wire, steel and water, variable measures. Photo © Sergio López

**Would you then define your practice as modular instead of serialized?**

In truth, it is both: it is modular and the same idea, repetition, that you work on over time and it becomes a series. You understand

something in one and you find it can be applied in another.

The same ideas I have for my latest project might be present in the first one, even though I was unaware of it. I am working around the same idea, trying to make it perfect, even if using that word makes me laugh a bit.

**Based on your experience in ballet, when you talk about perfection, you mean performing a better execution each time?**

I guess so, but at the same time perfection for me is something unattainable. It has taken me a long time to understand it. For a long time, it was something I was unconsciously looking for. Suddenly I understood that “perfection” must be something personal, my own idea of what perfect means, and that felt very liberating. I think it was then that I allowed myself to work on my own ideas and to work on the same idea every time.

What is perfection for me? To see the finished work and have the feeling that you had nothing to do with it, that it was done by someone else; to be amazed by the fact that it was built by your own hands. It is the best feeling I ever had, so, maybe I have achieved perfection on occasions? I do not know but I want to keep on working towards that direction.

**Ballet left a strong imprint on you, and that introduces the idea of the body in your work. In architecture, perfection is sought through a series of steps— research, drafting, projecting, etc.—, and in ballet there is the corporeal element as well. Even though you are not doing performances, the body—your own body— is key in your work: your**

**sculptures are made to your scale, the material dimensions are defined by your own dimensions.**

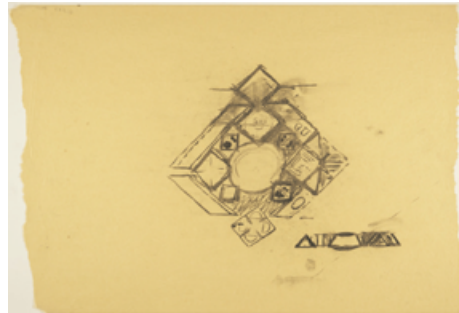
When I think of perfection in terms of architecture, I think of works in which the first sketch and the finished work are the same. I find it impressive that a project can go through all of its stages, and in the end, the architect has the ability to make it real, to translate an idea to the physical world so clearly.

For a long time, I tried to deny that my work had anything to do with ballet, as well as with architecture. I was forced to move my work into the realm of sculpture. It seemed obvious: if you leave architecture you move into sculpture. I tried for years to avoid that path and deny my background in architecture, that is why I started documenting sites with demolished houses. The destruction was the equivalent of anarchitecture, and I thought that in that way I was no longer an architect.

In December 2017 I was in Tokyo after spending a few days in Naoshima, and I was still moved and impressed after visiting the Chichu Art Museum. The transition inside the museum and the way in which art and architecture communicated among themselves shook me. There, in Tokyo, I saw Oka Kesuïke's work, an artist that has been working for more than ten years with found materials in what will become his home. Seeing him work, building his house, I understood I could not deny anything, I needed to work with spatial elements: I understood that, in truth, the way I process things personally is through the relationship between my body and architecture. My memory is linked intimately with spaces, and I understood that I needed to externalize things as well. That is, I must create pieces, physically; that was the only way to really get an idea out of my head.

Something similar happened with my drawings: clearly, they are made with my body's movements and with my physical dimensions as a model; it is a memory that I am able to register due to my body's experience of a particular space. Nonetheless, I would not like it to be so important as to show videos or

photographs of me creating them. That makes me uncomfortable. I think it is too obvious to think that one moves from ballet to performance art. It is important to mention that the drawing leads me to sculpture, and vice versa, sculpture leads me to drawing. That link between both activities is very important to me.



Louis Kahn, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dacca, Bangladesh. Building of the National Parliament: plan and elevation sketch, 1963  
Photo © 2020 Estate of Louis I. Kahn



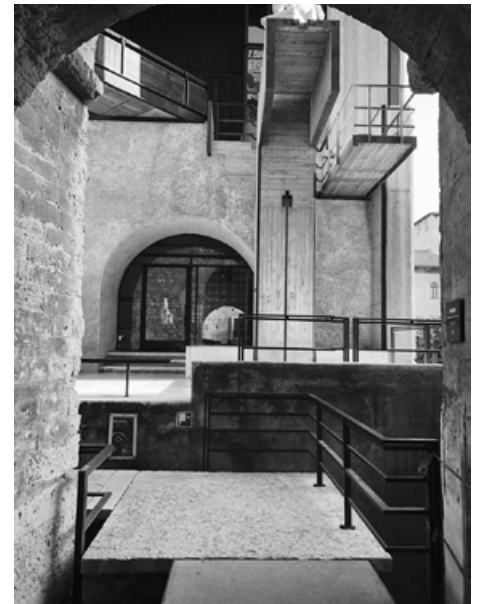
Oka Keisuke, Arimasuton Building, 2017, Tokyo, Japan. Photo © Yolanda Ceballos

**Your body is crucial for the ideas behind a work and its production, not at the center of the exhibition. That difference is very clearly defined: you do not want to subtract from the objects' autonomy.**

That is right, I have never wanted to be a protagonist. To me, the most important thing is the production, and since it is a memory, something that is intangible, I don't want to place images of the process. I feel much more comfortable being behind the work.

**Let's go back to the transition from architecture to art. How did it happen?**

At first, I did not think it was a great transition, timewise, but it actually was. When I was deciding what to study, I considered visual arts, but the university I decided to attend did not offer that program, so I went into architecture. I had thought more about it, being an architect. While I was a student, I favored more "artistic" architects like Louis Kahn, Carlo Scarpa or Luis Barragán.



Carlo Scarpa, Castelvecchio Museum, 2017, Verona, Italy. Photo © Yolanda Ceballos

The art itch came back in 2008. I took an architectural trip to London, I was a couple of semesters away from graduating, and I found a book on Gordon Matta-Clark. It was the first time I saw something like that, and I was amazed that architecture could lead to something like that. The first image I saw was *Splitting* (1974); at first, I thought it was created as a photograph, I did not understand that they had split a house in half, and that was the first time I felt disconnected with traditional architecture. Something was changing within me, but I was not aware of it then.

That same year I found Elliott Smith's *Either/Or* album (and later Kierkegaard's homonymous book, the inspiration for the album), and I remember that it inspired a simple idea, something like: "either I learn how to really do this or I won't get anywhere." I didn't know where that "anywhere" was but I felt

that it was the step to take at that moment. I felt that my strongest suit in architecture was the conceptual part in projects, and when it came to executing the blueprints I felt completely lost, I again put the idea of art aside. I decided to focus on working to enter the toughest studio, Agustín Landa's office, where I was going to learn how to develop a complete executive project. There I found Mauricio Rocha's work, and his side work as an artist surprised me, and it rekindled my curiosity for art; I wanted to work with him. I was there for a year almost, and returned to Monterrey in 2011 really overwhelmed.

I wanted to be an architect and maybe have something on the side in the art world, but I had no idea how to achieve that. In Monterrey, I returned to Agustín Landa's office, but I also came back thinking that was going to be the last studio I was going to work in. All that year I was conflicted because I realized that if I did not want to work in a studio, I would have to start my own. The problem is that I dislike working with a group of people who I have to give instructions to; I like to work alone, working at my own pace. I did not want to lead and command a group but I did not want to depend on them either.



Elliot Smith, *Either/Or*, 1997. Cover photo © Debbie Pastor

**So, you did not like architecture's structure? Perhaps there is more freedom in projects but the work's hierarchy is a given (a little bit like movie production, for example), the roles are already assigned.**

**Projects can vary a lot, but there is little space to change the work dynamics.**

Another thing is I started doing some projects, but there you have to deal with clients. Working with clients brought me down, in particular when creating a merely functional architecture. I had to try to know what the client had in mind, try to work as good as possible, and then see if it was suitable to include some of my ideas. I wanted to work with concepts.

Then I realized if that was not something I liked, then I had to figure out what was. At the office I was not getting that. Also, I was in a relationship and I ended it. I felt that offices had consumed too much of my time over the years. I was living at a very high pace: the office, prior to that, university –I was very committed to it–, and before that, ballet. I had the feeling I had never questioned what I wanted. So, I made the time for it. Maybe I was influenced by the Beat generation –I had been reading some of those authors before I left for Mexico City, and while I was there too. I guess I was looking for a freer lifestyle than the one I had had until then. (It is comical to me because I am working more than when I was at the office, and even though it is a different type of work, I do it with the same amount of discipline or more). So, I left the office in 2013, I felt the need to leave everything and begin again.

For the next two months at least, I read and wrote down ideas. At the time I was reading Theo van Doesburg and the avant-garde. I was interested in artistic movements like De Stijl, in particular Gerrit Rietveld's furniture. Seeing his furniture was like seeing De Stijl paintings in 3D and functional, like the zig zag chair –I love that one–.

I was interested in the Bauhaus in university and I tried to work on those ideas. Two months after leaving the office I was at a bar, talking about Matta-Clark, and someone came from behind and asked what was I talking about. After I talked to him about it, he told me he did not know what I did or who I was but he invited me to his gallery, and from there, to participate in a show. I did

not even have any works by then, but he liked what I said. I remember it was July, the show was in October 2013, and I had a few months to think and come up with something. That is how it happened. That period between July and October is what I refer to when I say it wasn't that big a transition timewise, but, retrospectively, and thinking of all the times I tried to move towards the art world, I get the opposite impression.



Luis Barragán, House Studio. Photo © Museo Amparo

I participated in that show, and at the same time, I developed the ideas I was already thinking over in a write-up I prepared for a grant submission in Nuevo León. I received the grant and from then on, I thought that I could do it [being an artist], because I began a project without knowing where it was going to lead. I did not think I was going to end up as an artist. Maybe I would end up creating a publication, or studying the Colonia del Valle neighborhood's history and the modernist houses being demolished, I didn't know.



Gordon Matta-Clark, *Splitting*, 1974, Englewood, New Jersey. Photo © Centre Canadien d'Architecture/ccca.qc.ca

**Before you told me this I wanted to ask if architecture was unsatisfying because of the codes that govern it, not because of the discipline. Was there no way to resolve these dissatisfactions within architecture itself? It seems that fate itself lead you to art.**

In architecture I sometimes thought it would be incredible to do this or the other, but it had to have a particular function, in a way people understand functionality. It stressed me out things could not be as I wanted them to be, but that is what I mean when I say that I could not execute that “first draft” I mentioned before.

**Do you think in art you are less at risk of losing control over your own production?**

Yes. I can develop my own ideas and execute them myself. I feel better working without having to depend on so many people.

**You were researching architecture from an outsider perspective for an unorthodox practice. What else were you reading then?**

Matta-Clark was very important, also Frederick Kiesler, at least during half of my university career. One time, in university, we were assigned case studies in a class; while others received famous architects, I was assigned Kiesler. I think that the professor who gave the case studies knew, even before I did, that concepts were the most important part for me. In school they taught me that “concept rules,” and there was no turning back: I was assigned Kiesler. His work fascinated me and I have been studying him since. Once I finished school I read Theo van Doesburg and realized that they coincided in the *avant-garde*; as he also worked on theater. And at that time, there was very little information about him, both in the university’s library and on the internet. I connected them and everything made a lot more sense. So, between Kiesler and Matta-Clark I began to sketch my ideas.

**Did you have an idea by then of what you wanted to do or were you in a stage in which you knew what you did not want to do? That is to say, you had complaints**

**about architectural practice, but, did you have a project?**

Honestly, it was a moment in which I had to leave everything: architecture, the office, my relationship. I knew I did not want to build but was not sure about what I wanted to do. I was still very involved with anarchitecture and those concepts, as well as with the Situationists. There was no real project, or at least I did not see one; there were just a few ideas.

**What were you interested in, Constant’s New Babylon?**

No, I was most interested in the *dérive*. In the mornings I would always go for a coffee and suddenly I stumbled upon a demolished house that was left as it was done by Matta-Clark, sectioned. I took pictures and thought I felt like that: as fragments of an architect but not much more. I connected several ideas then: besides from Matta-Clark, I thought of Kiesler’s idea about how theater set design should allow actors to interact with it, not just be something flat. I considered his idea of “organic architecture,” a construction that grows according to its proportions and individual needs, and thought about the film *The Shining* (1980), particularly the scene where Dick Hallorann tells Danny: “Some places are like people –some shine, some don’t–” while they talk about places that can tell a story and people who have the “shining” and can see what happened in the past or in the future.



Stanley Kubrick, *The Shining*, 1980. Photo © Warner Bros. Pictures

I saw in that building a house that was open to the public, a stage. I wondered what happened there what happened to its inhabitants. I rebuilt the house in my mind from

the fragments that remained. This mental reconstruction followed my needs, it turned it into organic architecture and I imagined what it would turn into in the future. I took a picture and, the next week, I found another house and I photographed it as well, and I kept on doing that. I started collecting them. When the encounter at the bar happened, I had three photographs but I did not know where they were going to lead. I had a lot of information in my head but couldn’t take it anywhere. There was a lot of theory but it had not materialized into something specific.

**Were you influenced by Robert Smithson and his theory of the site/non-site?**

I had seen it but did not understand it much. Of course, Smithson was a reference, even if it was merely visual; I had seen his photos and liked them, but I saw my pieces more along Gordon Matta-Clark’s anarchitecture, Kiesler and *The Shining*. Matta-Clark place entire walls in galleries, I chose something I could carry myself. It was clear to me that I was generating a record, instead of a thing in itself. I suppose that from the beginning I understood that this was going to be a work of several years.



**I mean, you already had the intuition that there was a long development ahead?**

Yes, I thought it could become something, that is why I started taking pictures. I was interested in how my environment was being destroyed. There were beautiful houses and suddenly, from one day to the next, there were no longer there. Ten months later there was a house just like the others: an all-white box that took up most of the site, very few

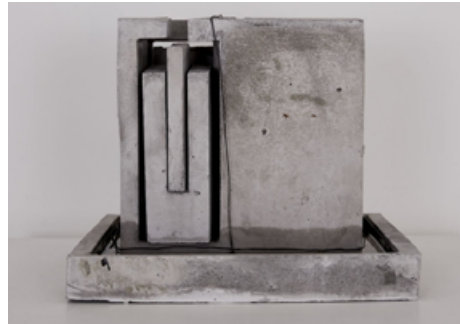
green spaces, and with as much constructed area as possible. Very uniform and also out of scale. I thought that maybe I should have taken pictures of those modernist houses, in Le Corbusier or Frank Lloyd Wright's style.

I should have taken pictures, researched about the house and create a book on San Pedro before it became what it now is: it changed from being a county with mostly single family homes to apartment buildings and shopping malls. But in the end, the project went in another direction. On the other hand, I was also testing myself, seeing how far I could go.

### So, your initial interest was in patrimony and architectural heritage?

In a way. It began like that but it changed. Smithson's influence came later, in 2016, when I got the BBVA-MACG grant [a joint grant from the BBVA bank Mexican branch and the Carrillo Gil Museum of Art in Mexico City]. In the interview I presented a project that consisted on the passing of time in several terrain fragments, basically non-sites. It was the first time I faced the art world outside Monterrey (and my experiences there were scant), and it was the first time I hung out with artists. We had to use part of the grant's money for a trip, and I decided to go to Chicago, New York, Washington and Montreal. I had been to those places before, but engaged in an architectural perspective, not in an art one. I wanted to learn from the Chicago Art Institute, from the Met, MoMA, Guggenheim, New York's galleries, the National Gallery in Washington, where my objective was to study Robert Smithson's archive at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, and Matta-Clark's in Montreal at the Canadian Centre for Architecture.

Before that trip I decided to go to Yucatán and Chiapas, where I tried to recreate, in a way, Smithson's route with the idea of understanding him better through the trip, his writing, and his archive.



Yolanda Ceballos, *Habitación # 125*, 2019. Concrete, wire and water. Photo © Sergio López



Frank Lloyd Wright, house and studio, 2018. Oak Park, Chicago. Photo © Yolanda Ceballos

### Tell me a little bit more about your decision to present your piece in your first show.

The decision to present the piece came up, really, because I thought the fragments were the most important thing and they were enough. I thought that each of the fragments had been part of a stage set and each told a different story. I thought that, in front of me I had, seven stories that I had reconstructed mentally. I remember that in the show someone asked me why seven pieces, why that number and at that moment the Pixies song *Monkey Gone to Heaven* came to my mind, the lyrics: "If Man is five, and if the Devil is six, then God is seven."

I finally understood that song! I thought. For me, it speaks about the three levels of consciousness. The three levels, plus the past, the present and the future, were in front of me on this seven fragments. That was the beginning

of what I called the "theory of transition"; I understood that I had to do something that spoke about three phases, like Freud, but also like the three levels of consciousness in Hinduism. Anyways, I only said that they were seven because of the song and said nothing else; I kept that for myself and kept on working.

### What is the transition theory, specifically?

It is an indexical record in which for the last six years I have tried to keep my memory in the present. It consists of three phases: destruction (the record of a site), habitation (memorizing a time and space), and reconstruction (constructing memory in the present time). It works similarly to memory's basic stages: codification of experiences, storage of that information and recovery of this last one translated as memories.

The theory has Frederick Kiesler's *Endless House* (1950-59) as reference, where he explains organic architecture as something that grows according to each individual proportions and needs. I have been building spaces according to my proportions, my needs and my memories. My architecture is endless, just like Kiesler's house, because it is in an eternal state of transition and its sole purpose is to document a body in sites at specific frames of times.

### How did the houses project continue, influenced by that theory?

Later on, in 2015, I participated in Monterrey's Biennial of Emerging Art. I exhibited a piece as a document: the photographs of thirty-five houses, a map, and some boxes where I collected concrete structures of the houses which I turned into dust. The project changed a lot while I worked on that piece.

It was until I was around the twenty-fifth house, that I started to collect pieces from the structure, besides photographing the site; I turned them to dust and collected it inside a little box. I thought it was very important to keep a log where I wrote date, hour, location and some things about the terrain. Since I had begun doing this until the twenty-fifth house,

I was missing the dust of the first houses, so I started the route again from the first house. I also wanted to know what had happened in those spaces, what had they built.

Some were still the same, others had more shrubs. However, what stood out the most for me was that I remembered what was happening in my life during the days around the time I found those sites. I realized that more than a patrimonial registry, it was a sort of journal of my life, where documenting the sites in transition I was documenting my own transition. That 2015 piece felt like the end of a record, and I kept on working from that new focus: a project that showed a relationship between my memory, my physical environment, and my daily life.

**Your work was shaped by your context in Monterrey: a city where modernization, progress and acceleration reflect architecture in a very specific sense: Do you think that context defined your work or could you have reached that same point living in another city?**

Perhaps it would have developed in a similar way in another place. For example, San Pedro's development is no longer a part of my work. I met people who wanted to impose that interpretation on my work, but it was not the main theme. I was working on my surrounding's transformation, a transformation that I felt was living at the same time and the memory I was generating. I discovered in that process that memory was the most important part.

**It is an autobiographical work, filtered by personal experience. It was not a sociological, nor a purely architectonic approach to Monterrey.**

I have said that in those ruins, in that transition where you know something is about to happen, but you don't know what— I felt I was there. Three years after I began that registry I found in sites that had completed the theory of transition.



Yolanda Ceballos, *Habitación #1183*, 2019. Graphite on canvas. Monterrey Center for the Arts Collection. Photos © Sergio López

**You were going through an emotionally difficult moment, what was your social context like? You have told me that you were linked to the architecture world, but not to the art world; you did not grow along with the Monterrey art scene. Did you feel alone in that transition? I don't know if you had someone to share your ideas or if it was a closed dialogue between you and your books?**

I was invited for that other show I told you about, and met Marco Granados there, he is currently the Director of PARAC [Program of High Performance within the Contemporary Arts], but after that I was alone again. At the gallery where I had my first exhibition, I was invited to participate in a couple more, but it did not seem like a long-term relationship. The same thing happened with Marco Granados, with whom I used to talk about my work. At PARAC was the first time I was among artists from Monterrey. The next time was in 2016, at the FEMSA Biennial. I was then on my own for a year, more or less, from mid 2014 to 2015, writing, and thinking that it all might have been a fleeting thing. I kept gathering ideas, writing and participating in several local events, like the Biennial of Emerging Art, among others. All of them accepted me, and I became closer with the city's art scene.

During the Biennial of Emerging Art, a curator invited me to a project that eventually didn't happen. At the end of 2015 I kept developing my ideas and at the beginning of 2016, Leo Marz and Willy Kautz invited me

to FEMSA. I worked on a project with them also related to the theory of transition but focused on another thing.

It is worth mentioning that, even though I left the office in 2013, by September of that same year I was back working as an architect, part time and from home. I did blueprints because I needed the money for my artwork. In October I did my first show and in November I entered PARAC, and by December I received the PECDA grant, and during all 2014 I worked part time in that architectural job, and part time in my PECDA project.

That is what I submitted a project proposal to the Biennial of Emerging Art in March 2015. Between 2014 and 2015, I also started an architecture office with a friend. We did several projects and constructed a couple of them, but from the beginning I was very clear with him that I was interested in the office but, once my art project started I was out. That was the most important thing for me. The two architectural jobs I did were for the money, so for some time I had the part time job, the office and I tried to continue the theory of transition.

It was not until 2016 that I really left architecture, when I got into the BBVA-MACG program. It was then that I concluded that I could not keep doing the two things and I needed to focus on myself. Working on my project was working on myself.

**Do you think that being socially distanced from Monterrey's art world contributed to your practice being solitary? Not that it is insular, in the end you are working with languages that are akin to art and to your generation, but you stand apart from trends thanks to your distance from these groups.**

That also comes from architecture I guess. I was educated with all the moderns and was taught not to follow trends. Architecture is not subjected to tastes: it is either well done or not. It obeys principles. I was always interested in architects like Louis Kahn, who was a serious and solitary guy; you did not know whether he was doing architecture or writing a poem. I like to do things that come from me

and from what I read, respecting history and working with the same modules.

It influenced that I was doing a lot of things at the same time, especially about architecture. I went to some art shows, but I hardly knew anybody, I still don't know many people. I began meeting people from the Monterrey art scene in the summer of 2016, at Lugar Común, part of the Curatorial Program at the FEMSA Biennial. It was during that same summer that I got the BBVA-MACG grant, so in a way I skipped the Monterrey art scene.

A short time later, in March 2017, I met Mau Galguera, and in June of that year did the group show *La nueva onda del silencio* at El cuarto de máquinas [an exhibition curated by Esteban King].



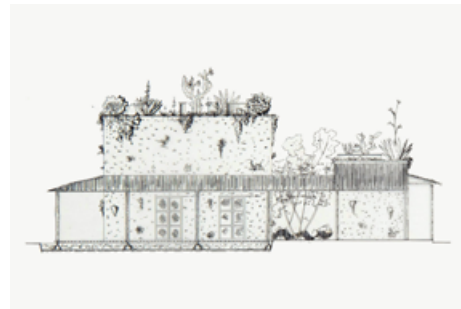
Exhibition view: *La nueva onda del silencio* at El cuarto de máquinas, 2017. Photo © Sergio López

**Back to architectural research, I have not heard you mention women among your influences. Even today architecture is a practice dominated by men, –or references to women are not common because of a historical issue sadly–, women are often erased from these accounts. I recall an example, Carol Goodden, Matta-Clark's partner and collaborator in projects like FOOD the restaurant/art experiment they founded in Soho, who rarely gets the credit. Architecture's sexism and machismo, were they part of your complaints against that practice?**

Yes, I felt the discrimination at the construction sites. Sometimes I went with an intern and the workers always turned to him for validation of what I was saying; they didn't know I was the architect and he was the intern. But

there were women's ideas informing my own, mainly Lina Bo Bardi. From the beginning of the career I was interested in ideas of "the void as an intermediary element," like those transition elements that, within her work, are found in the Modern Art Museum of São Paulo. There is a "void" generated by having the rectangular volume of the museum suspended by two structural frames. She referred to these spaces as ambiguous spaces being at the same time one thing or another, where past and present came together, the artificial and the natural. These spaces made a lot of sense to me. She had spoken of those empty spaces, and I, in some way, said the same thing, but about time. You bring something from the past but don't really know how to carry it towards the future. It is from these ideas that my theory of transitions comes up.

From Lina Bo Bardi I'm also interested in her similar life experiences: she worked with Gio Ponti, then left for Brazil, and started doing a very similar kind of architecture inspired by LeCorbusier. Suddenly she realized she could not keep doing that in Brazil, that she needed to find modern Brazilian architecture and deny all the knowledge she had, and look for what was modern there. I was very fond of that. Even though at that time I felt I was old, I was 27, I felt very brave taking that step. I saw what Lina did and thought it was possible: you could deny what you knew and find new things.



Lina Bobardi, Facade: Valéria Cirell House  
Photo © Instituto Lina Bo e P.M. Bardi

**Now that you are operating fully within the art world, are your references and considerations still influenced by architecture? Do you think you'll move away from it gradually?**

I think not, I always come back to it, both in phrases and concepts I learned from architecture that help me put in order my ideas. I have felt pressured at times –by gallerist for example– to leave architecture altogether, and I have tried but have not been able to. I come back to Louis Kahn, Kiesler, Lina Bo Bardi, and Le Corbusier even, who will always be an influence in my work, beginning with Le Modulor. I come back to them because they are at the root of my work.

At times I have felt lost when trying to solve a piece, and going back to them has helped. They are architects who had an artistic practice aside. Architecture is always there, and as I said before, I feel like I'm still doing architecture. Yes, I do research about art, but my interest is elsewhere.



Frederick Kiesler, *Endless House*. Project 1950–60; model 1958. Photo © George Barrows

**Is there a direct influence from Le Modulor in your work? The anthropometric scale is crucial to your work.**

Just as an idea. In 2014 and 2015 I played with a scale I did of the Modulor, and included it in my blueprints, I enlarged or shrunken it according to those spaces so that it occupied all the space to see how much of its body could fit in the space. The Modulor might be me, my sculptures now are spaces for my body, my dimensions, and they speak about the space I take, or the space I will cease to take.



Le Corbusier, Ronchamp Chapel, France  
Photo © Cara Hyde-Basso



Exhibition view: *Modos de ver*, fifth edition of the Bancomer MACG program. Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, 2018. Photo © Araceli Limón

### What have you been reading recently?

Instead of art, I have been reading narratives. It has influences in terms of ideas, not necessarily in helping to solve a test. In general, they are existentialist readings: James Joyce, David Foster Wallace. Books about how we live and how we feel.

**As I see it, the novels of both authors are constructed through minutely wrought structures, almost architecturally. It might not be the most interesting part of their work but it is there.**

Yes. I have been reading Clarice Lispector and Sylvia Plath. She has been a direct influence in my works right now, a sculpture that has a direct relationship with the idea of *The Bell Jar* (1963).

**You mean, the state of mind of the novel's protagonist? That she feels trapped, suffocated under a bell jar.**

Yes. A few months ago, I felt in that same state as when I found the house. Several personal matters radically changed my life in three years and I found myself again in a state of transition. I feel my life happens in three year cycles. That theory I formulated is still valid but no longer with houses now with other things. I am especially referring to cycles. That was the subject of the last individual show I had (Galería Hilario Galguera, fall 2019). As I said before, I am at the point of leaving things transitioning: I am transforming again.

In 2018 I created a project for the Young Creators Program grant of FONCA with this idea in mind, related to an idea from architect Angelo Bucci and another one from Smithsonian. However, what I am currently working on has no recent architectural concepts, although the initial concepts that shaped my practice are still there, like Kiesler's for example. I am referring to variations on a theme. Again, it speaks of the construction of livable spaces but now those spaces don't come from the physical destruction I am witnessing but from an internal destruction. It works backwards, I now create a sculpture and different sections extend from it; previously I did a lot of things to finish the work in a sculpture. That comes from the idea of the module, from its repetition and sequence.

**At first glance, it is easy to identify the architectural elements in your work: there are volumes, lines, and it can feel a bit cold. However, if it is not narratively autobiographical, it is related to your emotions and comes from an intimate enunciation. Have you felt tempted to insert a narrative device in a piece, or do you prefer to keep that distance from your personal history? That can generate vulnerability. I am thinking, for example, in the concept of a home. It is something that protects, covers, creates a shield: Your work operates as a shield? You use solid materials even when the situation you are going through is fragile.**

I think I am like that. I am very serious and laconic, that is why I seem like I am very strong but I do not consider myself that way. I prefer

not to include something more personal in a piece; I'd rather continue down the path I have explored until now, and maybe refer to it in writing or in an interview like this one. I find it corny to show vulnerability; it does not have to be so but that is how I perceive it. I don't want to delve into it in the pieces but yes, my work has a strong emotional charge. On the other hand, it is also related to my understanding of spaces. In Husserl's words, everyone understands things depending on what they have inside.

Now, in this transition of mine, I understand I have to make a space for myself, to build something for me. I think the last pieces I created, the emotional charge is there one way or the other. A piece that shows the passage of time reveals a strong emotional charge. To think about something being eternal seems like something perfect to me.

**Another of architect's teachings is thinking of the practice regarding its hard aspects, rarely by the soft aspects. What happens to affectivity in an inhabited space? That is not part of discipline.**

I think human aspects are addressed. That is why I like Kahn, he took an interest in that, about what you felt. I also took some of Barragan's ideas on what happens to light, how it affects our senses, or even living in your workshop. How his house, where he changed elements to live feeling better inside that space: he changed walls (build them taller, then demolishing them to make them shorter), or thought of colors in every space.

In his studio-house you are guided through a transition of spaces and colors so that when you arrive at the living room, your eye perceives the green of the trees more intensely. That is why I liked those architects: they focused on human matters, like Barragan's contributions to the Emotional Manifest.

**We discussed your transition into the artworld but did not delve on its more practical matters. I imagine that practical changes in your life were also needed, like establishing an atelier or a studio fit for doing art. You told me about your first**



**show, where the work you presented was a ready-made for which you did not need much space. As your practice has evolved towards sculptures, and seeing that you use large formats, how did that other side of the transition take place?**

In the beginning I wanted to create pieces that did not take up that much space, that could be done with my computer and other elements. They were mostly photographs and other small items I could work with. I had never drawn with an artistic intention. I had done constructive drawing, and began doing very simple things. By then I was using instant photographs. I had my computer, my notebook and that was it for a while, until 2015. I had space to work, but not for a formal workspace.

I had begun drawing but at the drawing table and the outcome went nowhere. I thought of doing blueprints, but I still used rulers and drafting pens; I used the same working space I used when doing blueprints for school. Until 2016 I moved to the space in which I currently work--I needed a big wall to draw. I used paper for cycloramas because it was the biggest kind I could find, and it was the first time I drew my dimensions. From then on, I went from drawing on walls to drawing on the floor; I have a lot of space for that.



Yolanda Ceballos, *050916-200419*, 2019. Plaster, wire, steel and water, variable measures. Photo © Sergio López

**That evolution facilitated the anthropometric ideas in your work?**

Yes, it did, and that was around the first time.

I started doing more artistic drawings, when I had the need for a space like that. Although I like to work in a space where the piece will be, I prefer to work directly in-situ.

**In general, your work is related to two spaces: the studio and the exhibition site.**

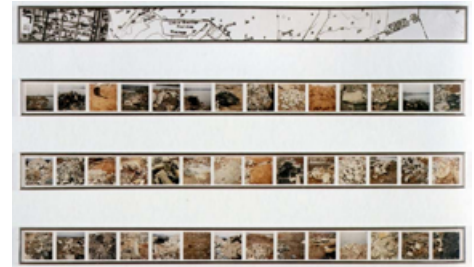
Yes. I like to start working so that the final work is ready shortly before the show because I enjoy that rush, the exhilaration of when you have to solve things in that same instant. I feel that is the moment where you do your best work. Although I am thinking about it a lot, in the end I always change some things, or solve others in a different way. I think it comes from the stressful deadlines in architecture: that final stage, for me, allows for the best work.

**I understand the relationship between the site you found the materials in and the work in your workshop, but the work is half way between being an in-situ piece and something finished in the space of the exhibition. That works well when they are new pieces, but once you are showing existing works, how do you manage to reformulate it?**

For example, in my last individual show, I did a drawing that encompassed a whole gallery. That drawing was especially thought for that space, and then I was asked to take it to an exhibition in Monterrey and they wanted it to work there in the same way --with people entering and experimenting the space intervened by my work-- but the space was very different. It was not a sort of box, like the original gallery was, and the organizers did not seem to mind that much. I did, a lot, because it spoke of a new site. If I was taking the site to another place for me it was a displacement, as Robert Smithson formulated it. That displacement generated a non-site, and it did not work as well. I also saw it as a torn piece of land, with a fence, one you can't access, because it is out of its site. I conceive my work according to the spaces I have to exhibit in, and when it is moved from them I have to reconfigure it.

**Do you think your work is not autonomous?**

Your work can't separate itself from the architecture it is inserted in, then? Some pieces can, but others go along with their space. Right now, I am thinking of that drawing, which needed that particular space. I think according to the space where the pieces will be held, but they can be transported, they are not that difficult to redo again.



Robert Smithson, *Line of Wreckage*, 1968, Bayonne, New Jersey. Photo © Holt/Smithson Foundation, licensed by VAGA at ARS, New York

**Talking about your free-standing sculptures, part of the series *Terreno #42*, how do they work?**

I know where I want to take them, but don't know how will they evolve. I want to give them space for them to transform a bit. I would have liked those sculptures you mention to be always together or in sets of three. These sculptures speak of a space I exploited in fourteen pieces and because of that, initially, I considered that the fourteen should go together.



Yolanda Ceballos, *Reconstrucción 3/14*, 2019. Concrete, rod, steel and water, 210 x 42 x 42 cm. Photos © Sergio López

**What is the process for those sculptures? They refer to a site, but in the end, I think, what ends up winning is its sculptural quality and not the referent.**

Those, along with the one I showed at the Carrillo Gil Museum, are about remembering a moment through a site I found a few years ago. I started doing a video in which I was documenting all the times I had been to that place in the past, all the visits I had tried to memorize, years had pass since that. I matched the takes on the video: the image becomes blurrier because memory and time change. That video aids in placing me in an instant in time, and that way, memory is brought into the present, and I remember with my body and how I was located in that space. After that I transfer that memory to a drawing that responds to my proportions, my needs and my memory, inspired by organic architecture: there are no ninety-degree angles, and it grows according to me. That drawing then is used as a sort of blueprint to transfer memory into a third dimension: that is, to turn it into sculpture. The result is a space in which I can live, up to a point, but it has little to do with the original space I initially documented. That is how the piece at the Carrillo Gil Museum worked, it was about 2 x 2 x 2 meters, which is what my proportions can reach out while doing the drawing.

For these latest pieces I did for my solo show, the process changed a bit. I was working on drawings with graphite and chalk, fragile materials in the sense that while I draw, I erase with my body at the same time. But also, it is in drawings where I began to involve time: I am using materials that are constantly changing, that will always seem different. Those are drawings that I made with plaster and wire, the last one will rusts and reveal the drawing. The drawings' mark will grow, modify and eventually erase the drawing itself. From the drawing I first worked with smaller sculptures, 20 x 20 cm, in part because I felt I needed to move away from my greater proportions. I chose those dimensions because they were more or less the length of my forearm, and I realized then that I had to take that 20 x 20 cm to 1.80 x 1.80

m, that several repetitions would get me to those dimensions. With this smaller sculptures which I repeated, I began to question myself how many times I could fit inside them, so I divided the into pieces of 40 x 40 cm, which is the largest measurement for my body: fourteen sculptures resulted, which I build in 1:1 scale.



Yolanda Ceballos, 050916-230819 and 050916-090819, 2019. Plaster and wire on canvas, 180 x 180 cm. Photos © Sergio López

**The choice of materials was intended to signal back to the site?**

The materials are the ones I am already familiar with. I know how to work with a metal rod, with concrete, with plaster. They referred to what was in the site, but I chose them also

because I know how they work. I have tried to get away from those materials, for example, I started using wax, and worked with it for a while and thought that in the latest individual show I would feature pieces made entirely with wax. Still, two months before the show –and having many pieces done– I left everything and decided it was better to use materials I already knew. I thought I should go back, let's say, to my origins. All of a sudden it made no sense to do an exhibition in wax, when all my other pieces used metal rods, soil and plaster. It was not a comfort issue, that would have been to keep going with the wax; it was more to maintain a line. I thought it was a gratuitous jump from one material to another; there was not a very important reason.

**Why did you choose wax in the first place?**

After participating in an exhibition, someone told me that it would be interesting to see the drawings I was doing in tracing paper and in chalkboard as encaustic painting. I was not familiar with that technique and was motivated to learn it, it was a challenge because it is not architectural and I began my research, I wanted to see if it could lead me someplace. I was trying to work with that, and allowed intuition to be my guide. I got to somewhat interesting things. I liked the fact that it could be a material I could use several times, especially from the point of view of reconstructions: I could use it, melt it, use it again, melt it again and so on. It was very helpful working with wax, especially process-wise, but I was not convinced for the final pieces.

**I feel it is a huge jump because encaustic painting is, as the term itself suggests, a pictorial technique, it refers to other traditions, another medium, a different way of thinking. There are different ways of thinking about sculpture and painting: universes apart in terms of process and conceptualization...**

I worked a piece that I actually liked but it had nothing to do with what I was doing back then. Now it is more related. I did not include it in the show precisely because I did not know where it could fit in at that moment,

but now I can place it with what I am doing.



**When you mentioned you were working with wax I thought of casting, closer to sculpture, like a material for creating volumes, not to facilitate it inside another material.**

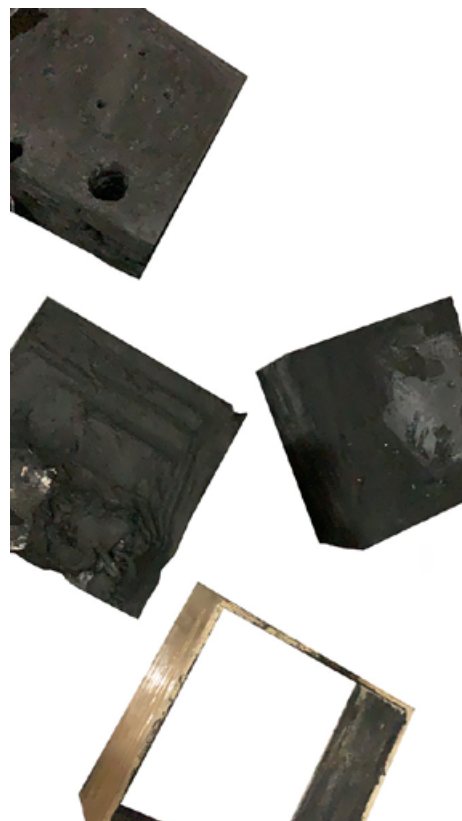
Yes, I am using it to create volume inside another material, and I also used it like in painting, not following the encaustic technique –it takes years to learn it– I painted with it in searching for other forms.

**Are you experimenting with that technique for the sculptures inspired by Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*?**

I was working with wax and I was decided to make sculptures with it. I wanted to do some reliefs. I was working on that and the project I submitted to FONCA –some sculptures that were in eternal entropy, again related to Robert Smithson–, balancing all the time. That balance was a transition: a perfect moment between past and future where everything is in equilibrium, however the slightest thing can change everything and destroy it. I had to keep working with the materials I proposed for that project: metal rods and plaster volumes. Obviously, I started having complications because that entropy had to be

achieved with 60 kg blocs, those blocs had to be balanced one with another and suspended on metal rods. A 60 kg piece of plaster is very small and it was impossible for the sculpture to come together. While I was working on the project I came across a phrase by Kierkegaard in his book *Either/Or* (1843) which I liked a lot: it said that the only real art was music because it involved time. Neither painting, nor sculpture, nor poetry, he said, achieved that. And in music, time was happening right now, at the moment of listening.

I tried to work with wax following that concept, that a material can change, that you can set it and it can start to melt, and to a certain point it contains time. How to introduce this factor in the work, with changes happening right now, making the transition evident, that present that is transformed in each moment? I realized then that I was forcing things with wax, and decided to do the show with what I was working for the FONCA grant. That is why I came back to the idea of working with plaster, white concrete and metal rods oxidizing and staining the pieces.



**Just as you mentioned Smithson, I thought of time. For example, in his *Spiral Jetty* (1970), and its current state, how much it has changed: the moment it was created it had a reddish tone due to the water's salinity, but now it is almost gray, and the work is completely out of his hands. The same thing happens with *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970), for example, left to its own, and it has transformed until almost disappearing. Such loss of control was partly his intent, there was a whole universe of ideas leading there. That attack on materiality was widely celebrated, in part, I think, because the work was not someone's property. You are working in a commercial circuit –with gallery representation, selling your works– and I am not sure if that factor slows down the self-destructive impetus in the pieces. In the end, whoever buys it would like his or her acquisition to last. Water, in the works made out of plaster and concrete with metal rods, contributes to the materials' decay. How much are you playing with that tension? Or do you rather separate your production for collectors and have it obey other rules?**

I would like to get to the point where the piece's transformations are accepted and sold that way. Until now, it has happened that way. The pieces will change but will not self-destruct, in the end I am working with construction materials. The ones with water are made with concrete and that will not dissolve completely. I have been wanting to do a series in plaster, and have those disappear completely, but for this occasion, I decided to do them in white concrete with marble dust. It was the best thing for the sculptures at that moment, in part because these materials were more appropriated for the sculptures.

**Were you interested in the reaction each material would elicit in the long run?**

White concrete, for example, oxidizes in the same way plaster does, but my intent when I changed it was to offer a material that seemed more appropriate and better for the changing sculptures. The ones made of plaster can suffer partial detachments, it is the material's nature.

I like those types of pieces that in the end the only thing left is the record. The ones I did for FONCA had something to do with *Partially Buried Woodshed*, and Angelo Bucci's ideas, when he talks about constructing a house in tension, all of it, with a water tank –the whole structure of the house is balanced on a water tank he installed–. I liked that idea, and in part that was the motivation to include water in my pieces. Before thinking about time, I began to incorporate water in a part of my work to play with equilibrium, to keep them balanced and in transition. Later I realized that point could be reinforced if I managed to make those materials transform in time.



Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970

Photo: Gianfranco Gorgoni © Holt/Smithson Foundation, licensed by VAGA at ARS, New York



Robert Smithson, *Partially Buried Woodshed*, 1970. Photo © Image taken from the book *Field Trips*: Bernd and Hilla Becher / Robert Smithson (Porto: Museu Serralves, 2002)

**(change of state), the series you are doing inspired by Sylvia Plath, does it follow these ideas?**

It is a series made of black concrete, and the color will be changing. I already had the idea of the sculpture to see how much space I take up or how much space I will cease to take in

case I disappear. There is a tension between positive and negative space. In my greatest dimension, which it is 40 cm, I was curious to know how much space of 40 x 40 x 168 cm I really take up.

The title also comes from James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), from the space you take up or won't take up anymore, and it was reinforced with Sylvia Plath's idea where she says that she never knows if she will ever feel that fog of things around her. That is how she sees it in the book, she is surrounded by stagnated air and that is what I wanted to achieve with the sculpture. I had already thought of it changing from black to white, I had already been doing tests for that, if I keep the concrete wet, a salt stain that the concrete expels appears –it is a drawing made by humidity–. In that moment the phrase from the book made sense to me because the sculptures disappear up to a certain point –I imagine placing them inside a white space, as well– so I am taking up more and more space or becoming more invisible each time. There is a transition from black to white, and the white will continue to expand over time. White will be the fog, and in the sculpture it marks the succession of events happening in time, and keeps it in an eternal transition in the now.

**Have you tested controlling the rhythm at which these stains grow or would you rather leave it to chance?**

I did the first test three years ago. They were very simple at first: some casts of black concrete and I left a black space to add water. What I wanted were saltpeter and humidity drawings, that I call, natural drawings. That was the initial interest, and I wanted to get to the point where the stain could develop as I wanted it to. I am still working on that, I have managed to get close though, but it is not very evident yet. I used wax there, it is a material I am incorporating as part of the process. I have done some tests in stretchers mostly.

**With the wax you direct water where you want and protect what must not be wet, I imagine.**

Right, that is how I started, but it became

more important to work with that in the sculpture as a volume. I have been trying it in plaster and concrete, but I'm not sure the stain will fully come out. There I will also have to let the sculptures decide, and it will be interesting to see how they behave over time. The sculptures will have an internal mechanism to distribute water. It will depend on the person if they want to do so or not, but still they will absorb humidity from the environment.



Yolanda Ceballos, wax model, 2020. Photo © Yolanda Ceballos

**That water irrigation leads me to ask about the anthropomorphic –and organic even– character of several of your sculptures. I think water flowing through the volume like blood keeping a body alive, and the metal rod as the spine. Even the knots in those make me think of vertebrae.**

Mauricio Rocha used to say that one has to work with bones and skin, that is a poetic way of talking about the structure, of making it evident. It is an idea that got stuck in my head. It comes from there and from seeking

the balance.

I don't know why but an image from David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers* (1988) comes to mind. In it, a couple of doctors –obstetricians– create some medical instruments in the shape of weird animals, and I see sculptures and see some reminiscence of that. The idea of a spine is something I am still working on, for example, these sculptures [the (*change of state*) series] are lacking a spine. I don't feel they are finished yet because of that, and I think of that movie again, and think of spine, bones and skin.



David Cronenberg, *Dead Ringers*, 1988  
Photo © 20th Century Fox

**In art history, these works of yours evoke, at least for me, other sculptures incorporating the spine. The *Bichos* by Lygia Clark, for example, tiny metal critters made of several sheets joined by hinges that conform their spine, which directs the way in which they can transform. The *Bichos* were not thought of as works to be contemplated but had a therapeutic nature, following Clark's interest in psychoanalysis. Spectators interacted with them, and the structure, articulated by that spine, dictated the multiple forms they took. I know that your references are more architectonic, but, perhaps without knowing it, you are getting closer to those attempts at questioning the nature of sculpture and its conventions.**

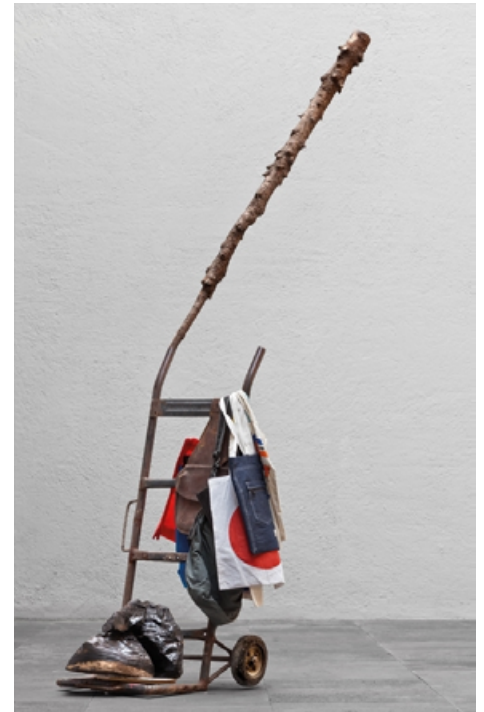
And in the end, they are both bugs, Lygia Clark's and those in the movie. There is something I do not fully understand but it is there. Because, in the end, the bugs in the movie have a sort of spinal column, have something inside that makes the animal take shape. In the movie, the doctor starts to lose his mind and creates his own tools for operations.



Lygia Clark, *Bicho de bolso*, 1966, metal plates. Photo © Tate Gallery

**On the other hand, the anthropomorphic nature of pieces like that you presented in your latest solo show, as well as the autobiographical weight they carry, remind me of Abraham Cruzvillegas' work, specifically in several self-portraits: these are constructing with several materials piled in an apparently spontaneous way, and they are kept in a really precarious balance. Instead, what I see in your pieces is a matter of vulnerability, even though the metal rod serves as a spine.**

In those pieces I am not that interested in balance as in the beginning. Let me tell you how they started developing. I have talked about the anguish time provokes in me, how I feel like there is not enough time or that there is no time to lose. In the end time passes, and I am struck by the space I take up now and how much space I will take up in some years. How will I change in that period of time: I began the pieces with that question in mind, and I did casts out of my body. They were made of concrete and I made them into blocs that I could manipulate, 40 x 40 x 20 cm, which is more less what I can carry. I made casts of my body in wax, I placed them inside a falsework and poured concrete, the wax melts, and can it is used again repeating the same process. It is always a different piece because I create the casts and they are not perfect: I am not looking for that either. What is left is empty space in my shape. I do not put them in a specific order –first the feet, then the thighs, and so on–, I arrange the pieces instead in a way that they can support each other and if I like the shape. Again, they are reconstructions, and the memory of something that it is no longer.



Abraham Cruzvillegas, *Indigent and Indigentous Self-portrait Pretending to Be Discrete at the Mall of America*, 2012. Photo © Abraham Cruzvillegas, courtesy of kurimanzutto



Yolanda Ceballos, *81-486*, 2019. Wax on canvas, 182 x 182 cm. Photo © Sergio López

**Now that you describe how you fragment your body, it reminds me of the shapes Surrealists created portraits fragmenting the female body. I think of René Magritte, for example, who created cut-up paintings, where a figure appears in stretchers linked with glass. In *L'Évidence éternelle* (1930),**

the naked body of a woman is fragmented. On the one hand, gender violence in paintings has been studied, and if fragmenting the canvas turns it into an object, but feminist criticism has been interested in how it is the female body what is violated, not an artistic genre. Through this optic, fragmenting, cutting, and dismembering becomes an element that frames and justifies the female degradation, opening the door to many images already present (in snuff films, for example), violent and pornographic images of women's dismembered bodies. In my view, the way in which you fragment the body reveals, on the contrary, a really honest fragility by revealing the spine. It is an exposed body (or volume) but it has not been subjected to violence. The way in which you do it is inversely proportional to the fragility or vulnerability in previous representations. I think also of a Giacometti sculpture, *Woman with Her Throat Cut* (1932), in which, even though there is some degree of abstraction, one can appreciate a woman on the floor, naked, with legs spread open, and the throat slit and dramatized by the lengthening of the top part, revealing the vertebrae on the upper spinal column. I am even reminded of the bugs you mentioned from Cronenberg's film.

There are many interests converging in my work. All the visual imagery of the Cronenberg movie, for example, as well as my fascination with vampires, witches, the occult and so on. It is not something that relates with my work, I think, but I would love to find one day that I lack a reflection in a mirror and all of that. If you don't reflect it means you are eternal. But with these sculptures I also think of Bergman's *Persona* (1966), and all the issues having to do with reflections shown in the movie –the ambiguous, the horror in recognizing what we have inside– and there is this phrase in the movie, spoken by the doctor to Elisabet Vogler: "The feeling of vertigo and the constant hunger to be unmasked once and for all to be seen through, cut down, perhaps even annihilated." The sculpture here is like that: I am here but I am not, like an absent body, a non-reflection that was trapped.

All that process made me focus intently on my body, to become very aware of it; I cutted it, printed it inside concrete, and destroyed it. It makes me think also in the series of rituals that were necessary to achieve the most perfect photograph that makes eternal the present moment.



René Magritte, René Magritte posing with *La ressemblance* at Mimosas House, 1954, MRBAB/AACB, inv. 39739  
Project sketch for *L'évidence éternelle* with attached letter from Magritte to Alexander Lolas in 1954. Photo © Charly Herscovici y ©Menil Foundation



Ingmar Bergman, *Persona*, 1966. © Svensk Filmindustri

All of that is a much more complicated process, not only it is a displaced architectural thought or applied to another field, but there is a voice, a single voice articulating several interests, disciplines, experimenting with techniques that come up intuitively. It is a work with many dimensions. To conclude, I would like to reevaluate the role that architecture plays within your practice: it is less preponderant that it seems at first glance. You are actually employing it as a tool to build both fictions and narratives. You are creating a series of memories that, quite possibly, are made up.

Architecture, for me, is a form of work and of mental order. Spaces mark me, I don't get to decide which part of the past I bring to the present. A lot of times I would rather not remember so that I won't rewrite the memory. I always try to be very honest with myself day to day. Of course I ask myself, if at the end, the video of my life is going to show me the truth, or if I will see each of the events of time that I built in the now.



Exhibition view: *Cinco de septiembre de dos mil dieciséis*, 2019. Photo © Sergio López