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English Guide

Gala Porras-Kim

Precipitation for an Arid Landscape

November 20, 2021 – March 17, 2022

Curatorial text

In this exhibition, Gala Porras-Kim traces the life of cultural artifacts as they are designated as heritage sites or move from their original context to their present locations in museums and research institutes. The artist uses archival documents, correspondence, and technology to expose such processes of displacement, and also considers the lives and stories of cultural objects, raising questions about how they speak, for whom, and for what purposes.

In posing these questions, Gala Porras-Kim presents these preservationist practices as contingent endeavors. She foregrounds how museology's emphasis on classification and display inscribes a narrative for objects that does not necessarily correspond to historical truth or leave room for the unknown. The artist also revisits the legality around which artifacts are moved, and how these same frameworks stipulate repatriation. At the same time, these projects explore strategies that can help to enrich understanding of the object and its ownership on multiple grounds. In combining disparate systems of meaning and value, Porras-Kim aims to establish a new ethics of care.

As the exhibition title suggests, a common theme in the projects on view is the weather– an extra-human phenomenon that has been given cultural meaning as a cosmic or divine power, and which is also a force that impacts the life of artifacts by preserving, eroding, or hiding them.

Gala Porras-Kim carried out part of her research for this exhibition while being a Fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies at Harvard University (2019–2020) and as Artist in Residence at the Getty Research Institute (2020-2022). We would like to thank the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University for providing access to the archival material showcased in this exhibition.

This exhibition is organized and produced by Amant Foundation in cooperation with KADIST and is curated by Ruth Estévez and Adam Kleinman.

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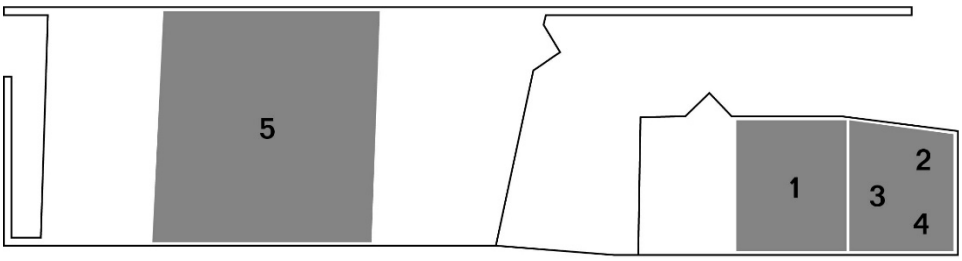

932 Grand **315 Maujer**

On view at 315

1.
Asymptote Towards an Ambiguous Horizon, 2021

Through graphite drawings, a topographic site-model, and a sound design featuring various interpretations of Göbekli Tepe, a Neolithic UNESCO World Heritage in present day Turkey, *Asymptote Towards an Ambiguous Horizon* (2021), surveys how the narrative of civilization has been written, and rewritten, by divergent actors, and how multiple realities can occupy the same landscape. The drawings picture the northwest-facing ground location of the current site (as it was in 2020) beneath twelve changing depictions of how the south-facing sky looked 12,000 years ago, reconstructed as a progression of two-hour intervals. The ground and sky approach one another at the horizon, like curves towards an asymptote; however, they can never exist in the same plane.

The audio tracks layer accounts by documentarians, archaeologists, and pseudo-archaeologists with non-human voices such as those made by 3-D laser scanning devices, and even the howl of the wind, while the drawings depict a hybrid scene mixing prehistory with contemporary attempts to reconstruct it.

New York (GMT - 5), and Göbekli Tepe (GMT + 3) are separated by a space of 8 hours. To note this time difference, and thus link the two sites together, a single gallery spotlight shifts clockwise on every even hour. Like a dual time zone clock, this sweep establishes a correspondence between the actual time in New York, and the time depicted in each drawing.

Context about Göbekli Tepe:

The unearthing of Göbekli Tepe reorganized the story of humanity. Previous to the site's rediscovery in 1963, and its later study, the reigning theory for why homo sapiens transitioned from small hunter-gatherer groups into larger, settled, permanent communities was because of the development of agriculture. Since Göbekli Tepe predates evidence for this agricultural turn, Klaus Schmidt, the archaeologist who led excavations at Göbekli Tepe from 1995-2014, argued that religion, and not agriculture, was the primary glue binding people together. Schmidt considered Göbekli Tepe as a possible purpose-built temple from which to view and worship the "Dog Star" Sirius. Folding this position into the artwork, Porras-Kim worked with colleagues at a planetarium to simulate the ancient celestial lighting conditions over Göbekli Tepe when it was occupied, approximately 12,000-years ago. Her graphite drawings depict the physical monument as it stood in 2020 underneath her simulations of a day's worth of long-lost heavenly skies—and in so doing, suggest that civilization is not only a product of technological advancement, but also a projection of human desire.

The full extent of what Göbekli Tepe may still tell remains unknown; ground penetrating radar reveals that only five percent of the site has been uncovered. According to the German Archaeological Institute (DAI), the yet unexplored layers may contain artifacts and structures which date back several thousand years earlier to a period before the Ice Age. Regardless of what it may hold, the site has been worn down by erosion and the freeze/thaw process, not to mention past looting, and possible destabilization from the use of heavy machinery to build a visitor center as the fulfillment of Turkey's bid to place Göbekli Tepe on UNESCO's World Heritage List.

Recent observation has also provided new insights. At least fifty megalithic T-shaped limestone pillars adorned with reliefs of humans, game animals, carrion birds, and other creatures, dating from at least 6,500 years before the Great Pyramids of Giza, are some of the site's most prominent features. Analyses of these and other carvings have been mapped to star patterns and in so doing, reinforce the idea that the site answered some astronomical as well as ritual thirst. Archaeoastronomists Martin B. Sweatman and Dimitrios Tsikritsis from the University of Edinburgh (School of Engineering) have argued that the site's *Vulture Stone* pillar records a heterodox conjecture known as the "Younger Dryas Impact Hypothesis", or the idea that a return, around 12,900 to 11,700 years ago, to glacial conditions similar to the late Ice Age was the result of a comet strike that covered the world in dust and ash, and thus blocked out the sun's radiation. On-site archaeologists from the DAI have subsequently disputed this theory, while scholars continue to debate whether advancements in agriculture around the same time caused this climate collapse, or whether this global cooling event was what first led humans to band together to cultivate crops for their survival.

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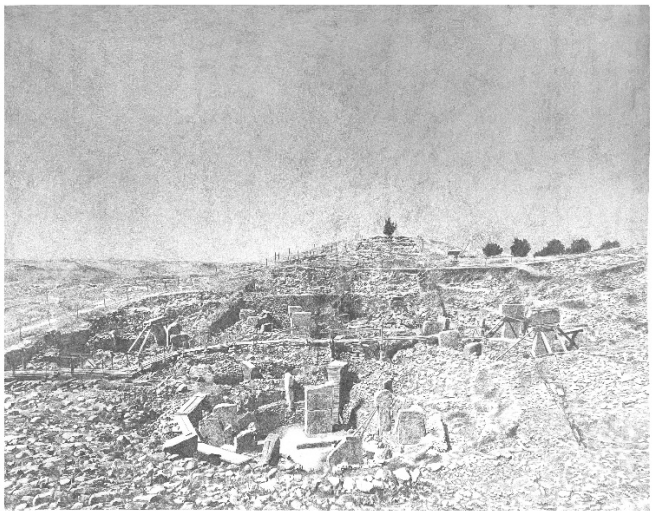
Asymptote Towards an Ambiguous Horizon, 2021

12 drawings. Graphite on paper

Commissioned by KADIST; supported by Commonwealth & Council and Labor Gallery.



Defining an Ambiguous Horizon, 2021

Model with sound

2.
Proposal for the Reconstituting of Ritual Elements for the Sun Pyramid at Teotihuacán, 2019

Working with the National Institute of Archaeology and History in Mexico (INAH), Porras-Kim created official replicas of two plain greenstone monoliths that were found and extracted from inside the top of the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacán, an ancient Mesoamerican city located 25 miles northeast of modern-day Mexico City, which hosts significant pre-Columbian pyramids. Through these surrogates, the artist made a counter-proposal to INAH: to place the replicas into the Pyramid of the Sun as proxies for the original elements, which might have been used for ritual purposes. The installation includes a letter addressed to Juan Manuel Garibay Barrera, National Coordinator of Museum and Expositions, INAH. A graphite drawing recreating the darkness inside the pyramid, and a brass structure, *All Earth Energy Sources Are Known to Come from the Sun* (2019), that waits to be activated when hit with direct sunlight, are placed alongside. These artworks are joined by an audio work in which the artist combines the noise of one year's worth of solar oscillations with the ambient sound of the inside of the Pyramid of the Sun, and a drawing of the image that is formed when staring at the sun with your eyes closed.

Context about the Sun Pyramid at Teotihuacán:

Teotihuacán, a UNESCO world heritage site, is Mexico's most-visited archaeological monument. Founded around 150 BCE, the city grew to be the largest in the Western Hemisphere before its decline and collapse in circa 600 CE. No one knows why or when exactly this happened. One theory proposes that internal unrest caused a revolt, which is supported by archaeological evidence suggesting how buildings and structures associated with the ruling class were burnt down. Famine due to climate crisis is also another potential reason; skeletal evidence from the same period shows many malnourished bodies. Near contemporaneous records describe how a blanket of fog and dust darkened the skies for over a year in 536 CE, which caused crop failures. While the exact reason for this event is likewise unknown, arctic ice core samples suggest a comet or meteor impact, or a massive eruption may have caused a volcanic winter.

Just as the cause of the city's downfall is unknown, its original builders are also unknown. Regardless, Mayan, Mixtec, and Zapotec peoples settled in Teotihuacán before its abandonment. Following this period, the Aztec rediscovered the site and venerated the ruins, but subsequently left following the end of their empire at the hands of the Spanish in 1521. Teotihuacán was the host to several excavations in the centuries that followed: in 1905, the regime of Porfirio Diaz commissioned archaeologist Leopoldo Batres to restore the Pyramid of the Sun, the largest such structure at the site, to celebrate the centennial of the Mexican War of Independence in 1910. Teotihuacán was host to numerous acts of plunder. Following a 2008-11 excavation, Alejandro Sarabia González (INAH) reported the find of an ancient and

large looter trench at the top of Pyramid of the Sun, inside of which were two large smooth greenstone monoliths.

The intention of these monoliths is obscure; however, Nelly Zoé Núñez Rendón (INAH) and Alejandro Sarabia González speculate that the stones might have acted as astronomical markers similar to artifacts found in caves near the pyramid.

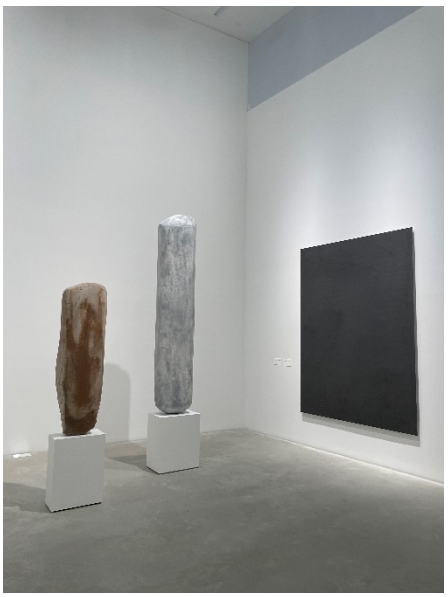
The total extent to which Teotihuacán may have been pillaged is also a mystery.

Proposal for the Reconstituting of Ritual Elements for the Sun Pyramid at Teotihuacán, 2019
Polyurethane, acrylic and letter to Juan Manuel Garibay Barrera, National Museums and Exhibitions Coordinator, INAH (National Institute of History and Anthropology), Mexico.

All Earth Energy Sources Are Known to Come from the Sun, 2019
Brass and sunlight

Two Plain Stelas in the Looter Pit at the Top of the Sun Pyramid at Teotihuacán, 2019
Graphite on paper

What the Sun Looks Like with Your Eyes Closed, 2010
Graphite and acrylic ink on paper



3.
Rehearsal for Surveying the Ruins, 2017
Video loop. Silence, 3' 20''

In this video, Porras-Kim uses a stone proxy to symbolically return *La Mojarra Stela 1,* an Epi-Olmec carved basalt monument, back into the river in which it was rediscovered. This artifact also became the basis for the three works that featured in the 2019 Whitney Biennial.

Footage of an underwater boulder conceals as much as it reveals, allowing glimpses of the indeterminate surfaces of rock that fade in and out of view along the river's murky bottom. Composed of materials found in abundance in Oaxaca, they amount to projections of what they may have been in the past, before exposure to the elements caused their fragmentation.

Named after the nearby Mexican village in which it was found in 1986, the eight-foot-tall carved slab of *La Mojarra Stela 1*, features an image of a possible dignitary next to twenty-one columns of inscribed glyphs. This script was transcribed in 1993 through nighttime examination under artificial light by the Americans John S. Justeson, an anthropologist, and Terrence Kaufman, a linguist. Although Justeson and Kaufman proposed a decipherment, anthropologists Stephen Houston and Michael Coe, also American, refuted their claim on methodological grounds. As the artifact was being prepared for permanent display at the Museo de Antropología de Xalapa, an anthropology museum in the city of Xalapa, Mexico, archaeologist Sergio Vásquez and geologist Fernando Muñiz, both Mexican, brought to light a highly eroded, and previously neglected, set of glyphs on the slab. In 1997, Justeson and Kaufman used these marks to reaffirm their reading. According to the epigraphers, the stela describes, in pre-proto Sokean, the trials and tribulations of a warrior-king, including battles timed according to the position of the planet commonly called Venus in the constellation Scorpius. The frontal text of the stela includes two long-count calendars with dates equivalent to May 1, 143 CE and June 23, 156 CE. Based on these findings the monument itself was dated to 156 CE. At the time this was established, the monument therefore provided evidence of a complex writing system that predates the first surviving example of Mayan, a structurally similar, but fundamentally distinct language. As such, *La Mojarra Stela 1* rewrote the history of the development of pre-Columbian writing practices. Just as the exact meaning of the text still remains in question, its author(s) remain obscure.

4.

Leaving the Institution Through Cremation Is Easier than as a Result of a Deaccession Policy, 2021

Napkin, ash and letter addressed to Mr. Alexander Kellner, Director of the National Museum of Brazil, Rio de Janeiro, Los Angeles, July 31st, 2021. Courtesy of the artist; commissioned and produced by the 34th São Paolo Biennial

On the night of September 2nd, 2018, a fire devastated the National Museum of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro, destroying almost all of its historical and scientific collections. Nearly twenty million items collected over two hundred years were turned into ashes. The museum's rescue team spent months identifying and cataloging pieces that had gone through the fire. Among these precious objects were the remains of Luzia, a skeleton of a human female discovered in a cave in the 1970s in the state of Minas Gerais. According to radiocarbon dating from 2013, the human remains belong to a young woman who died sometime between 11,243 and 11,710 years ago, making her the earliest evidence of a human population in the Americas.

The 2018 fire melted the glue holding the fragments of Luzia's skull together, cracking and damaging some of the pieces. After the fire, museum staff proposed reconstructing Luzia's body using information obtained through DNA testing.

In keeping with her practice of writing letters to museum officials, Gala Porras-Kim wrote to the National Museum Director, Alexander Keller, with a request: instead of reconstructing Luzia from her remains and presenting her once again as a scientific object, they could treat her like a human being, letting her ashes rest with respect. Ironically, the fire freed Luzia's bones from being objects of study. In her letter to the director, Gala Porras-Kim acts as a speculative mediator for human remains that come to be treated as archaeological curiosities. She asks open-ended questions about the last wishes or original intentions of these humans. Through this work, she also scrutinizes the customs that govern the exhibition of human remains, even if they belong to another era and cultural context. How do we decide which objects are to be preserved over others? Who is given this responsibility? Are these decisions made just by museum specialists, or are there other agents that should also be part of the discussion? Gala Porras-Kim does not denounce historical facts or the desire to conserve relics of the past. Instead, she attempts to offer alternative ways of preserving and understanding human history.

On view at 932

5.
Precipitation for an Arid Landscape, 2021

Precipitation for an Arid Landscape is comprised of several works that investigate the historical and legal facts surrounding the dredging and subsequent removal of objects from the Chichén Itzá cenote, a sacred Mayan sinkhole located in one of the most important archaeological sites of the Yucatan peninsula of Mexico. At the beginning of the 20th century, these sacrificial artifacts and remains (about 30,000 of them) became part of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology collection at Harvard University. Through drawings, installations, and text, Porras-Kim analyzes the journey of the artifacts following their removal from the Sacred Cenote, spanning from preservation to the legal proceedings regarding their ownership.

About the Sacred Cenote of Chichén Itzá, Yucatán, México

Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula is a limestone plateau with many underground caves, or sinkholes, called cenotes. It is believed that the Mayans saw these openings as portals between the earth and the underworld, and that they were temporary dwellings of Chaac, the Mayan god of rain and thunder. Human bodies and funerary objects were buried in the cenotes through different rituals ensuring that the rain god would have access to them.

During her fellowship at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies in 2019-20, Gala Porras-Kim researched the collection of objects from the Sacred Cenote of Chichén Itzá stored at Harvard's Peabody Museum. Founded in 1866 as the first anthropology museum in the Americas, the Peabody received the relics from American diplomat and archaeologist Edward H. Thompson (1857-1935). Thompson was American Consul in the nearby city of Merida and owned the land of the archaeological site of Chichén Itzá. The Peabody Museum indirectly financed Thompson's archaeological work through remittances from Charles Pickering Bowditch, a businessman and patron of the museum. Thompson began dredging the cenote in 1904, and over the course of several years, he extracted multiple artifacts made of ceramic, gold, jade, copal, flint, obsidian, shell, wood, rubber, and cloth as well as human remains. Thompson, aided by local workers, built a lifting device that allowed them to dredge more than 100 feet down into the cenote's muddy basin. During the excavations the cenote got damaged, which halted the search for several decades.

In 1897, Mexico created a law that outlawed exporting antiquities from Mexico as they were declared national patrimony. To avoid problems with the authorities, Thompson hid some of the artifacts from the sacred cenote in the luggage of friends and colleagues. His detailed correspondence with the Peabody Museum's curators

describes his extraction system and stipulates preservation methods by the staff of the Peabody. In the years after the Mexican Revolution (1910-20), Thompson lost his estate encompassing the archaeological site of Chichén Itzá. In 1926, T.A. Willard, an amateur archaeologist and friend of Thompson, wrote The City of the Sacred Well, which hailed the treasures found in the cenote, in particular the gold objects. While the Peabody's own reports on the collection differ from Willard's hyperbolic accounts, this book caused local and international controversy. It also prompted the Mexican authorities to reclaim the objects and file criminal and civil lawsuits against Thompson and his supporting institutions.

The case against Thompson was eventually dismissed over technicalities, but the affair severely blemished the Peabody's reputation. In the 1940s, the Mexican anthropologist Alfonso Caso, on behalf of the Institute of Anthropology and History in Mexico (INAH), asked the director of the Peabody Museum to return the objects to Mexico. As a way of promoting collaboration, Caso also proposed to make a future donation of a group of artifacts to the Peabody. Caso's request wasn't fulfilled, but the Peabody did return several jade and gold artifacts during the 1960s and 1970s, some of which can now be seen at the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. During two expeditions in the 1960s, the Mexican National Institute of Anthropology and History returned to the cenote and extracted additional artifacts.

Harvard University is under no legal obligation to repatriate the Peabody Museum's sacred cenote collection. Until the UNESCO Convention of 1970, there was no international law overseeing the trade or export of antiquities. In 1990, the US Congress passed the North American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), which only applies within the Unites States borders. As such, the case for repatriation of the Chichén Itzá artifacts is primarily an ethical question.

254 Offerings for the Rain at the Peabody Museum
228 Offerings for the Rain at the Peabody Museum
303 Offerings for the Rain at the Peabody Museum
342 Offerings for the Rain at the Peabody Museum
615 Offerings for the Rain at the Peabody Museum
931 Offerings for the Rain at the Peabody Museum
2576 Offerings for the Rain at the Peabody Museum

All the works are from 2021
Seven panels, each 72 x 72 inches
Color pencil and flashe on paper

This series presents the Peabody Museum's objects from the Sacred Cenote following the museum's cataloguing records and documentation.

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Mediating with the Rain, 2021-ongoing

Letter to Jane Pickering, William and Muriel Seabury Howells Director of Harvard University's Peabody Museum of Archaeology & Ethnology

Precipitation for an Arid Landscape, 2021

Copal, dust from the Peabody Museum storage, institutional structure for rainwater and rainwater

This sculpture is made with copal, dust, and rain with the same approximate volume of the dredged objects of the Sacred Cenote. Copal, a clear resin from the copal tree often burned as incense in ceremonies, was the main material found in the sacred cenote and is a proxy for the volume of removed artifacts. The dust, collected from the storage area at the Peabody Museum, comes from the objects themselves. Mixed with the copal, the installation is meant to be *watered* by a system determined by the institution where it is currently installed. Rainwater, collected over the duration of the exhibition, will be poured onto the sculpture, facilitating the role and authority of the institution to create a reunion of the collected objects with Chaac, the Mayan god of rain

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Documentation room

Edited by Gala Porras-Kim and Ruth Estévez

This interpretative room displays photographs, documents, publications, and letters from the Peabody archives and other sources. The documentation includes: letters between Edward H. Thompson and the Peabody Museum curators at the beginning of the 20th century; letters and memorandums from the 1960s and 1970s preceding the first donation of objects from the Peabody to the Mexican authorities; newspaper clippings from the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s documenting a legal case and addressing the legitimacy of the removal of these objects from the sacred cenote; books and articles about this case; and some publications analyzing copyright laws affecting the preservation and display of these archaeological objects as well as repatriation and restitution concerns.

Installation view at Amant.