

ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

## Two artists — from Tijuana and El Paso — explore borders physical and theoretical



An installation view of Celia Álvarez Muñoz's "Petrocuatl," 1988, the photographic image in pink, at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. (Carolina A. Miranda / Los Angeles Times)

BY CAROLINA A. MIRANDA | COLUMNIST

AUG. 12, 2023 8 AM PT

The latest manifestation of [our ongoing climate emergency in Maui](#) has been devastating. Sending all the healing vibes to Hawaii. I'm **Carolina A. Miranda**, art and design columnist at the Los Angeles Times, and I'm here with the week's culture news:

## **Borders / Fronteras**

In 1981, artist **Celia Álvarez Muñoz** got up before her class in her graduate MFA program at **Texas State University**. Rather than deliver the assigned presentation, she began to impersonate the professor. She had big news, she announced. A major ancient Indigenous archaeological site had been uncovered in Mexico City and among the findings was an early 16th century artifact: a plumed mask depicting the deity "**Petrocuatl**," which the class would have the great privilege of seeing.

Like the persona Álvarez Muñoz had created, the artifact was also an invention: a vintage gas mask she had studded with beads and feathers whose name was a portmanteau of "petrol" and "cuatl," the Nahuatl word for serpent. "Petrocuatl" was not an ancient relic, but instead a playful critique of our modern lust for oil.



Celia Álvarez Muñoz, "Petrocuatl," 1988, an invented petroleum deity. (Celia Álvarez Muñoz)

Álvarez Muñoz is an artist who likes to *contar cuentos* — tell stories.

Throughout her career retrospective at the La Jolla branch of the **Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego** — which is now in its final weekend — storytelling materializes as a critical spine of her varied practice, combining word and image in playful and pointed ways. Sequences of staged photographs or appropriated images are combined with evocative stories about beheading her grandmother's saints or being asked to participate in an art show inside a dingy Texas motel.

Also materializing in these stories is her family's history: the journey her grandparents made from Mexico to **El Paso** (where Álvarez Muñoz was born) or the trains her dad took — from those he jumped in search of work during the **Great Depression** to the ones that deployed him around Europe during World War II. In a large 1991 mural titled "**Abriendo Tierra/Breaking Ground**," which she has recreated in the galleries at MCASD, she borrows Indigenous imagery to tell a story about storytelling.

In humorous, conceptual ways, she articulates the story — or the many stories — of growing up along the juncture of two nations, both of which she inhabits like a border Baldessari. It's an intriguing follow-up to the **Alexis Smith** exhibition that [was on view at the museum last fall](#), another show in which a woman toyed with historical and graphic clichés via object, image and text.

It's also one of two exhibitions by women artists from the border currently on view (only through Sunday) at MCASD. Two floors down is a solo show of recent work by **Griselda Rosas**, an artist from Tijuana, whose work engages storytelling in very different ways. The two artists hail from different countries, different regions of the border and different generations. (Álvarez Muñoz was born in 1937, Rosas exactly 40 years later.) Where Álvarez Muñoz uses the more oblique language of conceptualism, Rosas is preoccupied by craft.

On scraps of faux ostrich skin and pieces of plain paper, she combines painted surfaces, collaged images and layers of embroidery to reimagine — in humorous and fantastical

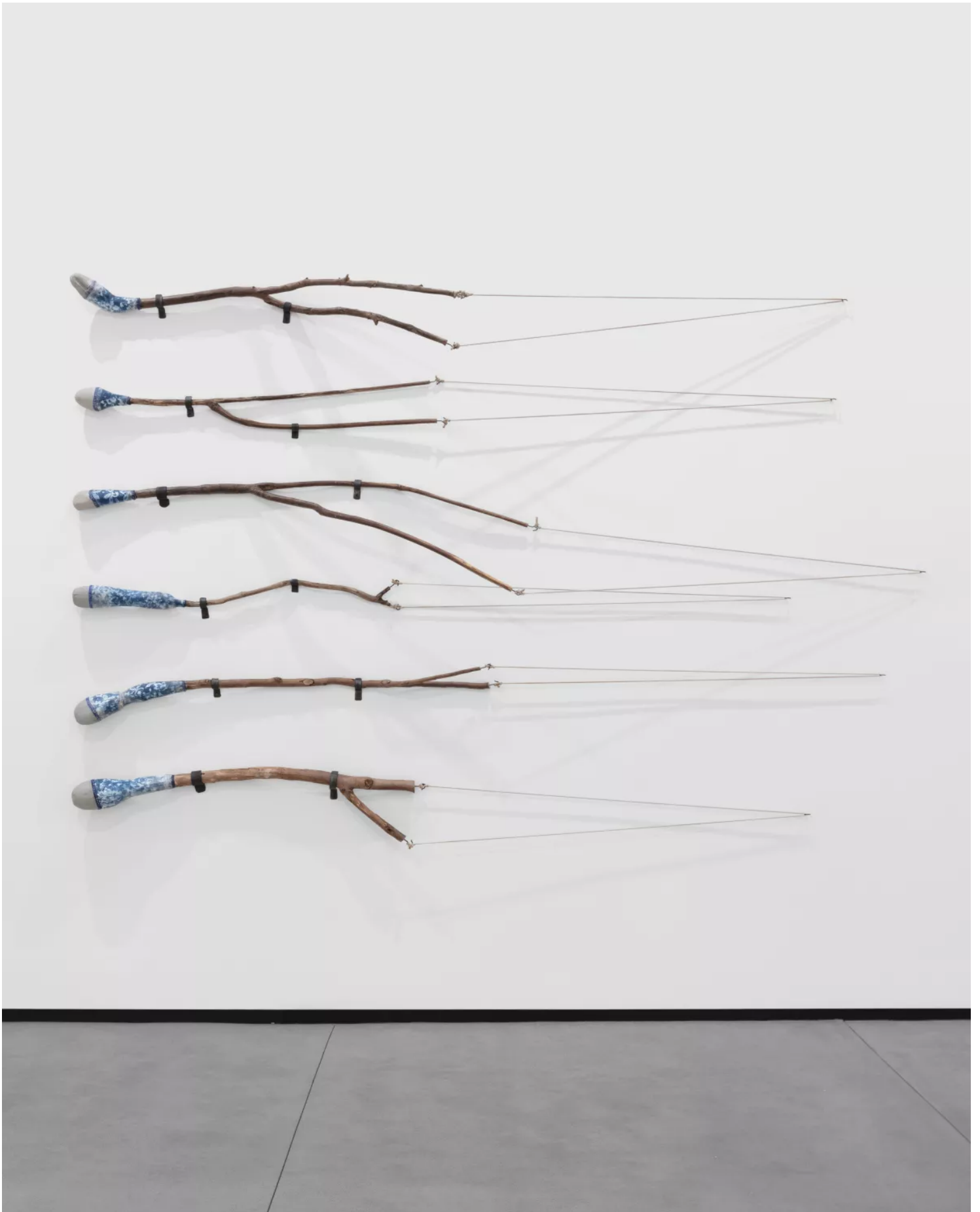
ways — historical narratives of conquest and colonization.



Griselda Rosas, “El punto es que lo intrincado organiza sus fronteras,” 2022, a work of embroidery on paper and watercolor. (Griselda Rosas / Quint Gallery)

Some of the more fanciful motifs were, in part, generated by her son. (Rosas has borrowed from his drawings for her own work, as she told [KPBS](#).) Others are drawn from the historical record: a Nahuatl warrior in a jaguar suit, a cactus inspired by early botanical drawings, images of the Virgen de Guadalupe materializing in a grotto crafted from hundreds of tiny stitches. These scenes read like a feverish reimagining of the crude drawings that often accompanied colonial chronicles.

Truly remarkable are her sculptures: large-scale pieces made from wood and cement that resemble giant slingshots. Look again and they could also be needles and seam rippers — the artist’s tools as weapons.



Griselda Rosas, "Cabeza de Vaca," 2022. (Daniel Lang)

Together, both shows reveal artists engaging the border without literal depictions of fences or walls. Instead, you'll find mordant takes on what it means, culturally and artistically, to inhabit two worlds.

*“Celia Álvarez Muñoz: Breaking the Binding” and “Griselda Rosas: Yo te cuido” are on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego through Sunday; 700 Prospect St., La Jolla; [mcasd.org](http://mcasd.org).*

**Getting there:** Can't stomach the drive to San Diego? May I highly recommend the Amtrak Surfliner to Old Town San Diego, followed by an easy transfer to the MTS 30 bus, to the Pearl Street and Draper Avenue stop, which will deposit you just a few blocks from the museum.