



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Gala Porras-Kim,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Gala Porras-Kim on August 20, 2020. The interview took place in Porras-Kim's car in Los Angeles, California, and was conducted by Josh Franco for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Pandemic Oral History Project.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay. This is Josh T. Franco interviewing Gala Porras-Kim, in her car, in Los Angeles—

[They laugh.]

—on August 20, 2020, for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. Gala, thanks for taking some time to talk to me for the Archives and for the record. And we really are just starting with how have you been doing since March? And maybe say a little bit about who you are.

GALA PORRAS-KIM: Uh, well, thank you for inviting me to participate in this project. I think it's been the most intense time ever for many of us. Uh, and it's really great to be able to be collecting sort of a record of how it has really affected the way that our production is made here. But at least for me, my life in February and now is so different that I hope that, when things might ever get back to normal, I'm not such a different person altogether that it's irrecognizable all the way, you know.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GALA PORRAS-KIM: I think that it has definitely been—I mean now we're in August. And it's so hard to even think about life in February anymore.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Well, let's start with, um, what things have been canceled or postponed. That's [inaudible].

GALA PORRAS-KIM: My God. So I actually was doing, um, a fellowship at Harvard—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right.

GALA PORRAS-KIM: —during the time. So I had been there since September because it was a year-long sort of project that I was working on there, um, with the Peabody and their collection. They have Chichen Itza artifacts from the Sacred Cenote. And for me, you know, the way that I usually make work is, like, maybe if it was a nine-month period, you know, six-and-a-half of those months is researching the project. And then the last two is, like, production. So actually, in February, I had met with the director of the Peabody because part of the project was to, um, you know, request the Sacred Cenote objects to be deaccessioned from the museum so then we could put them back in the Sacred Cenote because they belong to Chaac, the rain god. And so there, in a sense, is this legal project that is, like, through the law, um, litigate on behalf of the deity to get his stuff back, no.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

GALA PORRAS-KIM: So the way that happened was that in February, I met with the director. And then, of course, in March, when we were about to start, um, you know, I was going to start the production part of the project which is really the end bits; it's pretty much done, minus the fabrication. Then it just had to stop. And so then I think that in March—I mean I was working on really, literally, seven projects for—I think it's four museum shows and then other institutions at the time, like, São Paulo Biennial, Gwangju Biennial, like, show in New York. All of these things just got shoved. And, you know, that weird week in March when you thought it was going to last for only, like, a month or so.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right.

GALA PORRAS-KIM: So I really spent my time, like, I would say, March 13th, like, that week when they closed the school. They sent the students home. But there was still the chance of us actually staying there as fellows. So I, like, tried to get a barn to move my studio there. And then, like—then when it was, like, that moment where it was, like, you can't really drive outside, then I thought, "Okay." I moved my studio into my apartment on the second floor. And so then—you know, and it's also during that time when it was so freaky that I didn't hire anybody to, like, help me move the stuff. So—and I make very large drawings.

So it was such an intense, like, shuffle of like, studio stuff that I was like, I will never in the—you know, never had planned to not be able to manage the scale of my studio alone, no, because I think that maybe the pandemic part was just that it had made me become—you know, because, like, my studio production is large enough that I do have a lot of help. But to be able to manage it alone is not possible. And so I think that that, at least in March, was the big thing, that my project at Harvard got postponed indefinitely. You know, I was working on a show at the Rose Museum, which now, because of budget cuts, it first moved to a smaller room. And then I don't even know if it will actually happen altogether. My show in April in New York got moved, TBD, and now it's, like, you know, the frames are getting made in Boston. The drawings remain here. The show is in New York. So it's, like, a logistic nightmare, no.

[00:05:00]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. So how—

GALA PORRAS-KIM: And of course, the two biennials that were supposed to be in September, then one got shoved to February. And now we're just waiting to see what—how it will, you know.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Well, there you're dealing with two different countries also.

GALA PORRAS-KIM: Totally. Yeah. And it was really interesting seeing both of them because they were both supposed to open, like, one week apart in September. And then, of course, one in Korea and one in São Paulo. And just, you know, of course, when Korea was, like, really high in the beginning, it was like, no way it's going to happen. And they're so good with the COVID. And they moved it really, uh, soon. And then São Paulo was not moving. And it was just, like, what is happening? And it's just—you know, that it's coming. So it's this wave of feeling where it's, like, there's no motivation for me to actually spend the energy fabricating this work when all of these other things are on fire when I know that it will get postponed. And now it's next September as far I know. And so then, in a sense, it was just, like, hedging your bets and where to focus the energy.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

GALA PORRAS-KIM: And it was so funny because there was one point where, you know, I have a small show at the Harvard—uh, at the Radcliffe gallery, which is a very small venue. And in a sense, there was one point where all of my big, giant shows were so unstable that the only stable one was the small gallery. And I was talking to Meg, the director, and I was like, she might end up with my biennial project in this very small gallery because it's the only one that might actually be open or something, you know [laughs].

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Oh, my God. Incredible. What was the move, like, from East Coast to West Coast, in the middle? Did you drive everything? Is stuff still back in Boston or Cambridge?

GALA PORRAS-KIM: No. So the other thing was that, you know, I had four student assistants that got sent home first. So I actually ended up with a lot of their stuff because I thought I was going to be able to store it. And so then I actually—I was there, you know, when I went there I moved with my partner and kid, and so they were actually in LA. So first I sent—when they canceled school, I shipped my kid back. And then it was just, um, you know, I got two of these giant pods or something.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

GALA PORRAS-KIM: And then, like, one was for my studio; one was for all of this house—I had this, like, three-person, full house there. And then they got shipped back. And then I drove back across the country with my dog. And it was literally, like, four days of driving. I did it so fast, and then just, like, planning on staying in, like, you know, hotels that hadn't been with some person

for at least a couple of days or so. But, you know, now when I think about it, now in August, it's, like, that number was so small compared to now and how, like, you know, how the amount of paranoia, and stress, and anxiety at the time compared to the number—I'm, like, I don't even know how I'm even outside now because the number is, like, 5 million. And in California, it's insane. And to be able to be, like, oh, I'm actually getting in touch with some really weird survival animal sense where it's overriding my brain. You know, what I mean?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Wow. So say more about that. That's interesting. Like, just the choices—

GALA PORRAS-KIM: Yeah. Because, you know, of course, you're a logical person. And you're like, "Okay. I can see that the number makes it so scary." You know what I mean? But it's like—and I'm a very, very, very responsible person. You know, the first—when I drove back, I actually, uh, ended up quarantining in my studio for the first, uh, couple of weeks. And then my studio was actually in construction while I was gone in the studio. So I landed in the middle of construction, like, everything was packed up. And then also a side note, that I also, like, was separating from my partner at the time. So in a sense, it was just, like, compounded by the fact that I'm, like, "Why do I have to, like, overachieve in timeline of crisis time?" You know, like, it's not only corona; my projects are moving; like, my fucking relationship is done; everything [laughs].

JOSH T. FRANCO: Wow. So what's the—what is the studio situation in LA? Is it separate from their home? Can you access it? Obviously, you can access it.

GALA PORRAS-KIM: Yeah. So I actually have a studio that's separate from my living spot. But because also, you know, I separated from my partner, like, he ended up with my house. And I ended up with the studio. Logically, it was, like, by default I was going to end up with the studio. And so I actually do have a small—you know, it's functional for living. But it was during construction. It was such an intense time because it was, you know, cleaning—I spent all of—I landed here April 1st, and then I spent all of April cleaning the studio because it was so dusty. And of course, the crew was not working anymore. And then of course, it's a really great space for making art because the light—there's no natural light, so the light is consistent the whole time. But for living, it was making me crazy because you can't, you know, like—I was, like, I thought I was a vampire, but I actually need sunlight. And so I spent, like, end of April and May, like, opening up all of the existing windows that used to be boarded up. And so then I—you know, without going to Home Depot because I was, like, "Oh, no. I have—you know, I can't go outside." So literally, April and May I did not go outside, only to the grocery store, like, once a month.

[00:10:09]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

GALA PORRAS-KIM: And then, um, once May happened, was just trying to, like, really get a hold of these projects, you know, because I was, like, okay, April and May people will—you know, institutions will be, like, sorting their thing out. Nobody knows what it's happening. It has to settle down a little bit and, like, for people to get a grounding on how to even not be anxious. It's just, like, bare minimum, surviving first, and then practical things like work. Like, what is work, you know.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah [laughs].

GALA PORRAS-KIM: Um, and so then in May, it's just, like, reshuffling all the projects. And I had to change pretty much most of the projects that I'd been working on because now I don't have the production capability to make all of the way—the way that it was planned, you know. I cannot by myself. I hired one assistant now because my studio is big enough that we can be on either corner.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

GALA PORRAS-KIM: But with the two of us, there's no way to fill all of the space. So what it ended up happening was that I'm trying—I don't know if it will work, but I'm proposing to switch the catalog budget with the exhibition budget and make a book sculpture that will be, like, an edition work that will contain all of the information and, uh, literally embody the exhibition in a way that might not—people might not actually have to go see the work. And the—and the works in the physical space would be, like, a supplement to this book. So opposite style, no.

JOSH T. FRANCO: It's interesting that you're going for a book and not taking advantage of the

virtual thing that we've all been thrust onto.

GALA PORRAS-KIM: Yeah. I mean I've never been a very technologically, you know—I mean I do work with a lot of, like, you know, archaeological technology and thinking about those terms. But, like, I literally had my assistant in Harvard, like, set up my Google Drive because I didn't know how to do it. Know what I mean [laughs]?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, yeah.

GALA PORRAS-KIM: And the idea—you know, like, I do have some works, like, you know, sound works or, you know, old video works. I'm not closed to that idea. But in a sense to be able to—you know, to me, the venue, which would be the internet, would have to actually be part of that work. And I don't know, conceptually how to frame being online as part of the content of the work, no.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. That's an, um—yeah, that's an interesting pause in the process that most people seem to be rushing into. Like, we have this, so we use this.

GALA PORRAS-KIM: No. And it's also—in April and May, I got—you know, I could tell that something—everybody was freaking out. I got so many requests to do stuff online. You know, like, the fair moved online, everything. So you—and, you know, it's also, for me at least, it was very interesting just to see and also very sad in a way because, you know, it's obviously not going to be the same as looking at art the same way. And so in a sense, it's almost looking at all of these institutions just, like, set up to fail, you know what I mean, because the first time is never going to be, like, the same. So it's always going to be a failure, you know.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

GALA PORRAS-KIM: So it's, like, okay, online platform, by default, it's failed. You know what I mean?

[They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

GALA PORRAS-KIM: But then, at some point, it's, like, I don't know what's going to happen, you know.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Um, another reason I wanted to include you in this project too is because you're an artist who thinks in very long geologic timelines.

GALA PORRAS-KIM: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: But there's a lot of acute historical things happening in 2020. So, you know, our secretary, Lonnie Bunch, has identified two pandemics: COVID-19 and racism.

GALA PORRAS-KIM: Of course. Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Uh, mainly anti-Black racism. And I wonder how you're thinking about that, what you're seeing as an Angeleno and your city as responses to it?

GALA PORRAS-KIM: Yeah. I mean it was incredible to see the amount and I think—of social movement. During a pandemic too, it was just, like, can you imagine how much risk there was, even in addition to, like, of course, regular police violence, brutality, and everything, but at least to be able to, like, consciously put yourself at risk of a disease for the thing that you actually can see that is a very big problem.

And so in a sense, I think that it's, like, maybe COVID has actually helped, uh, put things more black and white. Where it's, like, I will take less because the borders are so much clearly defined that, like, when George Floyd thing happened was, like, no way. That there's no grey anymore. It has to be just, like, yes or no. And there's a no. No? But I do think that, in terms of my own work, in relationship to the social movement that is happening, it has been so amazing because now, you know, all of these institutions are rethinking their collection and the history of colonialism, and how these collections are built. I love Yesomi Umolu's, like, "15 Points of Knowledge and Care" that was printed, you know, because I was, like, this is basically what I'm building all of my projects about, you know.

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But for me, it has been, like, so much, like, softer touch because I do know that, you know, when I worked with other collections before, I'm not trying to come in as, like, "You're doing something wrong," like, "You have to fix it," like, "It's your responsibility," this very aggressive thing, but more, like, "Here's an opportunity so for us to, like, talk about it," because obviously people who work in collections and institutions now are bound by the existing system. And, you know, they're inheriting, like, these older point of views that now, you know, is not there, like, paid, job to do, and they might get fired. Or it's, like, you know, the institution is such a dinosaur—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

GALA PORRAS-KIM: —slow-moving thing that, like, many of the ways that the collections are being thought is, like, '70s style or older. And now this has, like, put a flame on that institutional ass, you know, to, like, get your shit together, or even just talk about it. And so in a sense, I have actually thought that, you know, because I have edited the way that I have presented those words before not to come so confrontational because I don't want to, like—I want the—you know, when I think about those projects, I think of the people working in the institution as the primary audience because they're the ones who will actually have to think through the project together, through conversations, and might actually change the way things are. The secondary viewer is the audience who might see this whole system and, like, see what is happening in there.

But to me, um, you know, with these questions of the social movement that is happening now, I think that it has provided, like, uh, you know, an opportunity to, like—really for my benefit, I don't even have to really say anymore. Before, I was, like, I have to give a lot of convincing and being, like, "No, it's not that I'm saying this thing." And now by default it's, like, now it has become very, like I said, more black and white, where people are actually even considering deaccessioning, which was not considered before. You know, deaccessioning was something that you cannot even bring up at all. And now it's actually a possibility because of, you know, really more black and white questioning about collections, knowing how things got there and how people in the institution can actually, you know, have a position that is more aligned to the social climate of today and not, you know, ancient institutional practice that were inherited.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, yeah. Smithsonian turns 175 next year [laughs]. But speaking—

GALA PORRAS-KIM: Abuelitos.

[They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Abuelitos [laughing]. To that point though of deaccession being talked about and continuing to work with these collections, so to go back to the beginning a little bit, does it look, like, Chaac will get his Cocijos back?

GALA PORRAS-KIM: I don't know. You know, the thing for me is not that, like—I can just provide a sort of system if the institute—but it's just setting up a way for somebody else to actually produce the work. You know what I mean? Like, I myself cannot return those things. It has to be voluntary. You know what I mean? Like, I'm just feeling, like, a lawyer, like, here, I'm presenting a point. But I cannot take these. Like, the director has to do it. You know what I mean? So in a sense, I mean my focus with Chaac—and I'm also doing these projects with, like, dead people, dead bodies and collections—is because it's differentiating between the types of archaeology where it's, like, there are some objects that are ritual objects and, like, afterlife objects and, you know, of course, body parts and mummies, that their function doesn't stop with death. You know what I mean?

Like, the afterlife is forever. Like, rituals are forever. Like, spiritual world is forever. So in a sense, those objects still are doing the original function that they were meant to do. Like, those objects will forever be, um, you know, um, offerings to Chaac. Chaac never will disappear. You know what I mean? So in a sense, the original function is still happening, and the institutional sort of reframing that I'm proposing, is, like, who's perspective will you value? You know what I mean? Of course, there's, like, a Western collecting thing where we have to view, and collect, and all these things. But, like, what about Chaac? Like, when did he ever go away? And why is he not a priority?

You know, I'm not a very spiritual, like, mystical, believer person. But I do think that it's, like, somebody who deposited that object in that hole really believed it. And so in a sense, why are we saying that, like, the objective of the museum or collection is more important than the

original feeling that that person had? And how can we actually compromise where both functions might be able to exist somehow? You know what I mean? Not that one has to take place over the other. I'm not also proposing, like, some sort of weird, like, repatriation or, like, essentialism, or whatever, but more, like, an additive function instead of, uh, you know, like, one or the other, no?

[00:20:04]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Well, human donors are acknowledged on wall text. Why is Chaac not acknowledged as the giver of the object?

GALA PORRAS-KIM: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

GALA PORRAS-KIM: And it's also, for example, like, many of the—you know, many of the body parts or, like, mummies or things that are in collections. Those people never thought that they would be on display or on view. And so, you know, what I think about is also there are so many things that we know about, like, you know, our bodies, ourselves. Like, I have agency over my physical body. I am my own person. I can decide the rights over my body, et cetera, while you're alive is. It's like, why should that stop when you die? Like, it's your physical body too. And so I think a lot of these subjects are in relationship to, like, you know, prolife people, you know, they're talking about, like, embryos. And so I'm thinking, "Okay, embryo's kind of also an in between category, whereas, like, is it human; is it not?" Like, it still—it's just a mass and an object. And so then, in a sense, it's like your body, after you die, is a similar category, where it's, like, it's not fully human anymore, but it's still this mass that is on the—like, who does it belong to? And can you, yourself, have agency to say what you want done with it, no? Or how can you project, like, you know, 1,000 years ago what this person might have wanted, no?

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's incredible. Okay, last question. So this is the record for the future. What do you think a researcher or artist in 100 years needs to know about being an artist in the U.S. in 2020?

GALA PORRAS-KIM: Uh, well, that's amazing. I love this thing because I love thinking of making projects for people who the audience will be, like, exactly when I'm—like, not audience of now but planting these sort of seeds. And I do think that the moment today, you know, has made me feel so much, so nimble, you know what I mean. Where it's, like, you know, I think that most artists who, once you start getting traction, you sort of get settled into, like, the practicality of making work, and you get sort of atrophied in a sense, where it's, like you just do this thing, then you have to, like, sell work, and produce for shows and exhibitions. And now, that it's all out the window, it feels like I'm back in grad school when there was no money, no studio, no nothing. And those were the times when the best work was actually made because there wasn't some practical thing attaching your practice to be, like, how can it actually be produced? And so to be able to just focus on the intentional, you know, like, the best-case scenario for everything because nothing is possible. You know what I mean?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah [laughs].

GALA PORRAS-KIM: Like, I don't even know if any of these works that I'm making now will even be made at all. You know what I mean? Because I feel so much, like, more emboldened. Like, I said to you before I was proposing, like, this very sort of muted version of what I was thinking. And so now in the sense of, like, I don't care. Like, let's just say what we mean. You know what I mean?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

GALA PORRAS-KIM: And I know it's not practical at all. But, like, what is practicality now? Like, you know, when did you even think that you would ever be afraid of going into the grocery store? You know, like, getting milk is not practical right now. So like, any type of artwork that you might want to make—like, I feel so liberated in that sense, like, in my mind. Also because it helps me with anxiety for real life because it's, like, you know, real life is unmanageable. So in a sense, it's how are you going to, like, make your brain not, like, get overwhelmed with this anxiousness of the reality of things? And in a sense, I think that being able to, like, think through projects in these larger unachievable potential—you know, who knows? Maybe we'll see in 100 years they'll be, like, "And then it was done."

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Exactly. That's great.

[They laugh.]

GALA PORRAS-KIM: That would be so amazing.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I know. That we actually did something and they see it 100 years later. And we don't know when we're doing it.

GALA PORRAS-KIM: No, no, no. It's like before and after. Like, "Yes, we were making plans. And they're now logical." And they're like, "Yes, you did it," like years from now or whatever.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, yeah, well, let's make plans. Well, thank you so much for this.

GALA PORRAS-KIM: Of course. I can't wait—is it going to be possible to hear the other ones? Hello. Josh? Josh? I'm glad we got disconnected at the end.

[00:26:13]

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