

NEWS NOW ... ART REVIEW: 'Alchemy of the Soul' by Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons at Peabody Essex Museum

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Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, a Cuban native but now a longterm Boston-area resident, revisits her own heritage as well as the complex history of the sugar trade in an understated, reflective exhibition, "Alchemy of the Soul," on view through April 3 at the Peabody Essex Museum. Campos-Pons' persona...

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'Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits (unit 1)' by Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons at the Peabody Essex Museum. COURTESY PHOTO / Peter Vanderwarker

By Keith Powers / capeann@wickedlocal.com

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SALEM
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SALEM

If you go...

WHAT: Alchemy of the Soul: Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons

WHERE: Peabody Essex Museum, East India Square, Salem

WHEN: Through April 3

TICKETS: Free with museum admission. Visit www.pem.org or call 978-745-9500.

One of the last exotic destinations, Cuba remains an enigma to Americans. And, in some ways, to Cubans as well.

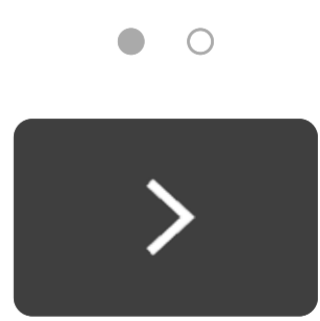
Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, a Cuban native but now a longterm Boston-area resident, revisits



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'Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits (unit 1)' by Mariavictoria Campos-Pons. The distillation of her experience mirrors the distillation process itself — transformations of raw materials into something refined and, at least superficially, pleasant.



large works on paper from earlier periods, as well as a brief artist statement video. Of particular interest in this room is the correlation between one glass structure, "Elixir for the Spirits," and its inspiration, an oil painting by Remedios Varo, "Creacion de las Aves." Visitors ride up to the galleries in the freight elevator, itself fit up with an audio installation and decorated with sacks of sugar cane.

"Magda doesn't like to hit anyone over the head with things," says exhibition curator Josh Besseches, deputy director at PEM, discussing the subtlety on the surface of "Alchemy of the Soul."

"She uses wonderful blown glass figures to ask what is fragile and what is permanent," he says. "You can enjoy these as beautiful pieces, but when you see the videos you understand what went into it. She's comfortable asking questions, but if people don't want to hear those questions that's okay too."

Campos-Pons has made a splash in contemporary art circles in recent years. Solo shows at MoMA in New York and elsewhere have provided context for her work, which ranges from works on paper to sculpture to installations, many with sound and video accompaniment from Leonard. A personal appearance at the 2013 Venice Biennale, where she paraded in a bizarre "traditional" costume, shook up those proceedings.

This exhibition states its case quietly. Both galleries have ambient soundscapes drawn from local (to Cuba) recordings. In one gallery, a PEM commission, the large, linked glass structures imitate the rum-making process — one gurgles with amber fluid, its subtle aroma flavoring the visitor experience.

The second gallery also displays one of the glass commissions, but is largely given over to extensive works on paper — formidable examples of Campos-Pons' past work. Both galleries have video explorations of Campos-Pons' Cuban roots and her ideas.

her own heritage as well as the complex history of the sugar trade in an understated, reflective exhibition, "Alchemy of the Soul," on view through April 3 at the Peabody Essex Museum.

Campos-Pons' personal story — an artist in her homeland, then an exile in the United States because of her views, and now, given the political changes, able to travel back to her home — works as the foreground for this installation of blown glass, audio and video accompaniment, and works on paper.

Looming in the background, the dark and seductive sugar trade — long Cuba's financial lifeline to the world — lurks. Campos-Pons grew up surrounded by the sugar trade, in the "barricadas" ("barracks"), and her ancestors worked the fields. The distillation of her experience mirrors the distillation process itself — transformations of raw materials into something refined and, at least superficially, pleasant.

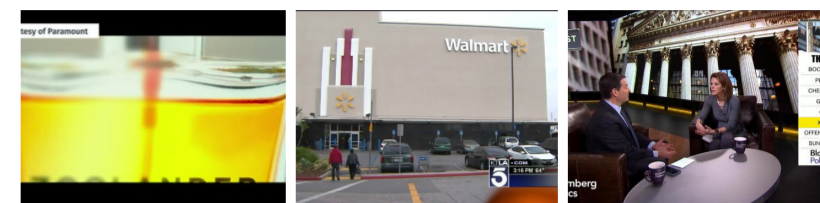
Like sugar, source of sweetness, and rum, source of exhilarating intoxication, the exhibition has a surface appeal. But because of the slave and underpaid labor that make both sugar and rum a possibility, there is much anguish to explore as well.

The exhibition is divided into two main galleries. One holds commissioned work, large glass assemblages that mimic the shapes of the industrial structures involved in the sugar process. Audio accompaniment, created by Campos-Pons' frequent collaborator, composer/performer Neil Leonard, fills the room. A video experience details a recent visit by the artist to her hometown, La Vega in Mazantas province.

A separate second gallery predominantly shows



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"We're particularly interested in the issues related to contemporary art and exchange at PEM," Basseches says. "And Cuba is particularly relevant in our day. This is the first solo show of a Latin American artist that we've done."

"For Americans, going to Cuba is a mysterious experience. But we have to remember that Americans were the only people who haven't been able to go to Cuba. There is a nostalgic quality to this exhibition, but we're really looking at a provocative, contemporary Cuban artist asking substantial questions in a way that is beautiful."

"Alchemy of the Soul: Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons" runs through April 3 at the Peabody Essex Museum. The exhibition is free with museum admission. For information visit www.pem.org or call 978-745-9500.

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