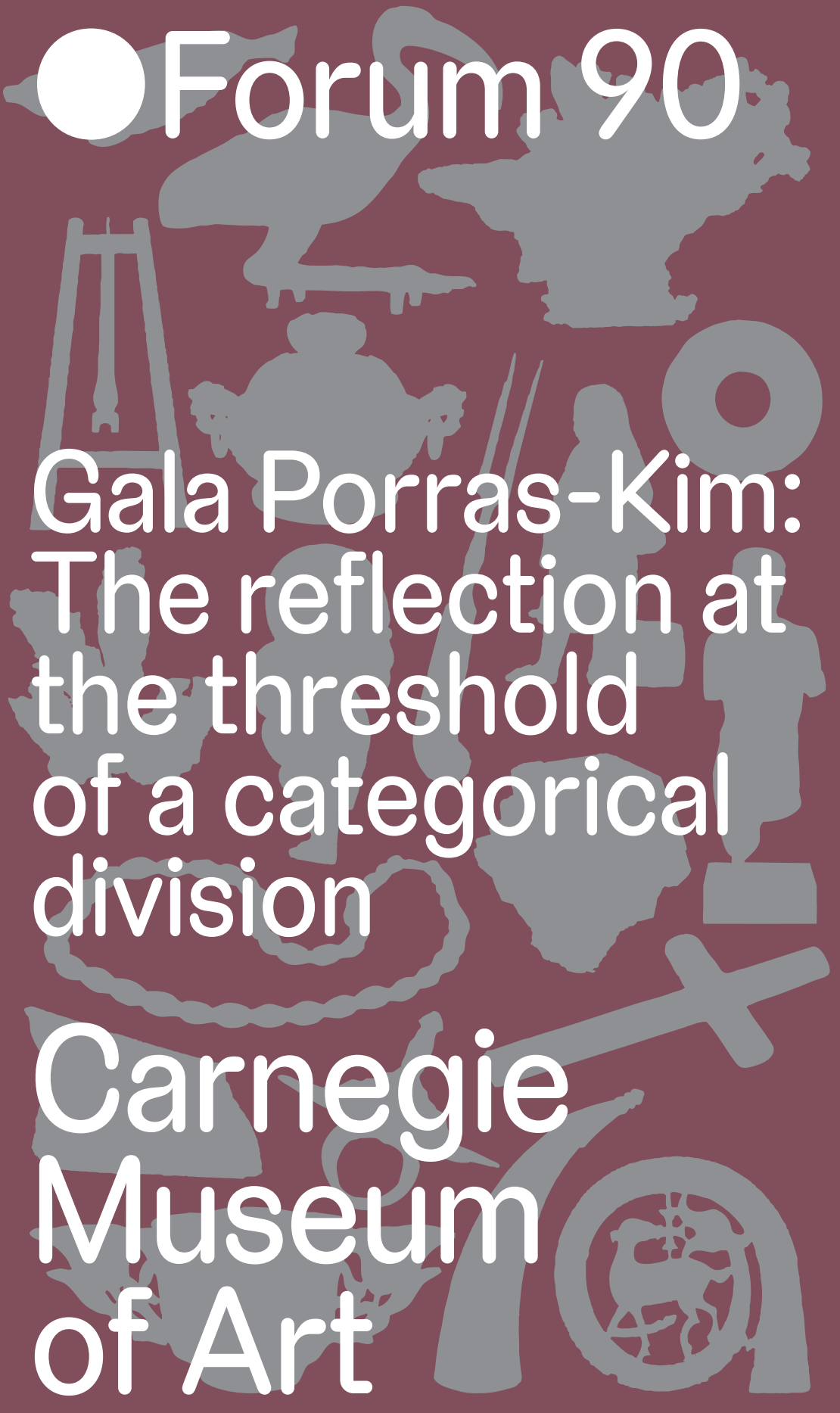
Forum 90

Gala Porras-Kim: The reflection at the threshold of a categorical division

Carnegie Museum of Art



Gala Porras-Kim (born 1984, Bogotá, Colombia; lives in Los Angeles, CA, and London, United Kingdom) makes work about the social and political contexts that influence how intangible things, such as sounds, language, and history, have been framed through the fields of linguistics, history, and conservation. Her work considers the way institutions shape inherited codes and forms and, conversely, how objects can shape the contexts in which they are placed. As part of her work, Porras-Kim frequently writes letters to museum directors and curators to ask questions, share her perspective, and suggest methods of care that primarily consider the objects' original use and intention.

Liz Park, Richard Armstrong Curator of Contemporary Art, writes a letter to Porras-Kim to reflect on questions that have come up in the numerous conversations she has had with the artist over the course of the past two years. Cynthia Stucki, curatorial assistant, narrates the evolution of Carnegie Museum of Art and how the institutional changes have informed the way museum staff organizes information and understands the collection. Porras-Kim shares the letter she wrote and circulated to museum workers to solicit responses to a provocative question: "What, in your opinion, is a work from your collection that is least likely to be on view?"

Re: The reflection at the threshold of a categorical division
January 19, 2025

Dear Gala,

I agree with you when you say that art is a flexible category that changes over time, and that this evolution is at odds with how museums strive to keep their collection as static materials in perpetuity. As a curator of contemporary art, I have long admired how your research uncovers the intention of those who created, owned, and used the objects prior to entering a collection, and I hear you asking urgent, irresolvable questions: What if an object was never considered a work of art by its creator? What if the rightful owner of the object does not wish it to be preserved in a museum?

One of your projects that spoke to me deeply is a 2021 work based on your research of excavated offerings at a sacred site in Chichén Itzá, in Mexico, now held in the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University. You wrote a letter to the director of the museum with demands on behalf of who you described as the rightful owner of the objects: Chaac, the Mayan rain god. You wrote, “It is clear from documents regarding the provenance of these objects that human laws were used to displace them from their intended place to their current location at the Peabody. Their owner,

the rain, is still around."[1] You proposed that instead of keeping the objects, which were originally submerged in a pool of water, in dry museum storage, they should be reunited with the rain and the owner be recorded as Chaac in the object catalogue. I appreciated your capacious insight and conception of the lives of objects beyond the present-day constraints of a museum.

Knowing you would bring an invaluable perspective to Carnegie Museum of Art's collection, I invited you to look through our database, storage, and archive. When you first visited the museum and toured the art storage two years ago, you marveled not at the paintings on racks but at everyday objects that have been acquired as exceptional examples of design and decorative arts: a portable radio, salt and pepper shakers, and tableware, to name a few things. What distinguishes these objects from their commonly available replicas? When you walked through our museum building, which houses both Carnegie Museums of Art and Natural History, you exclaimed how the arts of Indigenous peoples in the anthropology display of the natural history museum resemble something you would see at an international art biennial. Why are these works

1 Gala Porras-Kim to Jane Pickering, Director, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, November 20, 2021, https://radcliffe-harvard-edu-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/9d9a8993-246b-4a5b-b5d8-80ffd04e2e49/GalaPorrasKimCurricularGuideFINAL.pdf.

classified as objects of natural history instead of art? Your practice consists of asking questions, difficult and complex ones, that point to the colonial foundation of the museum as a Western institution. As a curator, I think through these questions alongside you, with care and rigor.

From the very first conversation we had, you expressed an interest in being able to access the museum's collection database and to understand the cataloguing system. You browsed our collection and learned about how the art and natural history museums and a public library were founded in 1895 as part of the Carnegie Institute. Having gathered your search results, you arrived at making a series of drawings depicting objects in the collections of both museums and the library. The items you selected to represent in your work share common traits, yet have been categorized by the institutions as art, artifacts of natural history, or documents. Additionally, you ask, "Why should we take these categories for granted? When does an object become art? When does art cease to be one? If a library gives an art museum a photograph, does it change the object from being a document to being a work of art? If the art museum decides to give back the photograph, does it cease to be art?" You point to the objects you have drawn in your work as evidence of the unfixed and unstable nature of these categories.

You have also been thinking about the objects NOT shown. Museums, including Carnegie Museum of Art, tend to have far more objects in their collection than they have room to display in their galleries. You say that museums have a hoarding problem. Indeed, there are many artworks in museum storage that do not see the light of day. You call them the "dredges of the collection" in your letter to museum workers from multiple institutions, soliciting anonymous, individual responses about items that are "least likely to be on view."[2] I see you trying to outline what a museum is through what is not said. What are museums unable or unwilling to prioritize? What do they consider unworthy or unexemplary or even uninteresting? I am reminded of what scholar Carol Duncan described in her field-defining 1995 book *Civilizing Rituals*: "What happens in the space between what museums say they do and what they do without saying."[3] I hope you have received many illuminating replies that will inform your new work, *Least likely to be on view*.

A museum is more than its physical building and the objects it holds. It is a system of values and ideas—of art, history, science, etc.—maintained by a group of individuals operating with a set of rules, regulations, and limitations of resources despite the grandness of a museum's vision and ambitions. I often remind myself that museums as civic and cultural institutions have been around for only a few centuries while humans have made objects as a creative endeavor for millennia. I am certain that our future selves will continue to create what we call art today even if museums as we know them may not exist. Gala, your research and work at Carnegie Museum of Art proposes a radical thought experiment along this line. If art is indeed an unfixed category, will what you have made and presented as art, someday, be considered something else in addition to art? Your inquiry encourages me to envision new and different ways to value and care for objects of aesthetic contemplation and creative ingenuity outside of how institutions define them. Thank you for having me as a thinking partner on this journey. I look forward to asking more questions with you in the days to come.

Sincerely,

Liz Park
Richard Armstrong Curator of Contemporary Art
Carnegie Museum of Art

2 See letter by Gala Porras-Kim, *Re: Least likely to be on view*, on page 15.
3 Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (Routledge, 1995), 4.

The Changing Museum

Cynthia Stucki, curatorial assistant, Carnegie Museum of Art

Since its founding in 1895, Carnegie Institute has undergone major transformations that shaped how Carnegie Museum of Art, Carnegie Museum of Natural History, and the main branch of Carnegie Library have developed into what they are today. Gala Porras-Kim questions how transitions in the museum's sections, departments, and collection areas have informed value judgments and therefore changing institutional practices with art and cultural objects. She considers how an object's movement and cataloguing influences how it may be interpreted by museum professionals and the public. A major transformation occurred in 1907 with the addition of the Hall of Sculpture, Hall of Architecture, Hall of Dinosaurs, and more to accommodate growing collections of art, natural history, and the library. With an expanding collection, Carnegie Institute established new organizational structures and language to create an evolving framework for how these objects are cared for, researched, and presented. For instance, the "useful and decorative arts" section became the Department of Decorative Arts in 1953. In establishing this collection area, over 2,000 ceramic objects, containers, textiles, carvings of wood

and ivory, and works in metals and graphic arts were physically moved, along with their internal records. Since this initial transfer, objects that bear similar classifications have continued to move between the art museum and natural history museum. For example, Porras-Kim's drawing *202 ivory objects at Carnegie Museum of Art or at Carnegie Museum of Natural History* includes a representation of a Japanese sculpture, *Fisherman and Child Catching an Eel* (ca. 1902). This object, whose original maker is unknown, was initially recatalogued into the Department of Decorative Arts, then deaccessioned in 1969 and transferred back to the natural history museum. There is no apparent record in the museum of art's archive as to why this move took place.

In 1963, the Department of Fine Arts was renamed the Museum of Art and two decades later, Carnegie Museum of Art. The next major museum transformation took place in 1974, with the construction of the Sarah Scaife Galleries. In 1977, Carnegie Museum of Natural History under-went a similar name change to create further distinction to the museum of art. Following these and other developments to the museums, the library of the museum legally separated in 1984 to become the main branch of the public Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh system. Between 1982 and 1992, the library gifted Carnegie Museum of Art around 1,761 photographs along with several drawings and prints held in their archives. Many of the photographs are part of the Pittsburgh Photographic Library Collection, taken by photographers who were hired from 1950 to 1954 by the Allegheny Conference on Community Development to document the city's ongoing urban renewal initiatives. Around 18,000 negatives from this project remain in the library's care and are available for public use.

These interconnected histories manifest in each institution's physical collections, archival object files, and digital databases. Credit lines, accession numbers, medium, and classifications are some of the systems of organization that reveal an object's history and the dominant system in which they are being catalogued. For example, the photographs donated by the library include the credit line "Gift of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh." While some of this information is readily available to the public on artwork labels, classifications, for instance, contribute to an internal organization and description of objects. Previously, the ivory sculpture featuring the fisherman and child was classified as "organic material," while today we would use "sculpture" to prioritize its form and function rather than its material makeup. From these object-specific descriptors to the way a museum presents objects to the public, museums are continuously informed by changing practices and shifting cultural attitudes.

Re: Least likely to be on view
November 4, 2024

Dear Museum worker,

I am writing to you today for your perspective as a museum professional who has worked with an institutional collection. As most institutions have amultitude of reasons to feature works in their exhibition spaces, I am making a work to try and understand the dredges of the collection. To do so, I am reaching out to ask if you can describe an object that in your opinion is least likely to be on view.

I would be grateful if you could take a moment to formally describe the work with enough characteristics that I might be able to produce drawings from your description, without revealing the original author, as this is not the focus of my work (if the author is the reason why it is not on view, please describe them anonymously). I would also like to know why the work would not likely be placed on display, and the circumstances of how it became a part of the collection, if this information is available. These drawings will be included in an exhibition at Carnegie Museum of Art next spring.

A variety of reasons include but are not limited to:

- Condition: The object may be too damaged or delicate for public exhibition
- Size: It might be too large or cumbersome to display safely

●Content: The object is deemed too controversial or disturbing for public viewing
●Acquisition: The object's legal status or lack of provenance makes it unsuitable for display
●Cost: It would cost too much to display

I am particularly interested in understanding:

●The object itself: A formal description of the object to make drawings from
●Why wouldn't it be shown: Is it due to conservation concerns, size limitations, thematic incompatibility with current exhibits, or some other reason?
●How did it get here: What were the circumstances of it becoming part of the collection (assuming that when it was made and accessioned, it was meant to have an audience)?

Feel free to share any additional thoughts or experiences you have with these objects, and I will treat your responses with discretion. Please forward this letter to any of your colleagues that might be interested in participating. Thank you for your time, and I look forward to hearing from you!

Sincerely,

Gala Porras-Kim

Exhibition Checklist

All works by Gala Porras-Kim

***Sun barrier*, 2025**
exterior glass window from the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing at The Metropolitan Museum of Art and aluminum frame
52 × 153 × 64 in. (132.1 × 388.6 × 162.6 cm)
Courtesy of the artist

***Least likely to be on view*, 2025**
text, 20 graphite and colored pencil drawings on paper, and document
overall dimensions variable; drawing: 11 × 14 in. (27.9 × 35.6 cm) each
Courtesy of the artist

***202 ivory objects at Carnegie Museum of Art or at Carnegie Museum of Natural History*, 2025**
colored pencil and Flashe on paper; diptych
48 × 96 in. (121.9 × 243.8 cm) each sheet
Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles

***147 photographs at Carnegie Museum of Art or at Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh*, 2025**
graphite on paper; diptych
96 × 72 in. (243.8 × 182.9 cm) each sheet
Courtesy of the artist

***75 snuff containers at Carnegie Museum of Art or at Carnegie Museum of Natural History*, 2025**
colored pencil and Flashe on paper; diptych
36 × 24 in. (91.4 × 61 cm) each sheet
Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles

***202 mineral objects at Carnegie Museum of Art or at Carnegie Museum of Natural History*, 2025**
colored pencil and Flashe on paper; diptych
96 × 72 in. (243.8 × 182.9 cm) each sheet
Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles

Programming

Opening Celebration
Thursday, February 27, 6–8 p.m.
●Forum Gallery
Celebrate the opening of the exhibition with a toast to the artist. Remarks begin at 6:30 p.m.

In Conversation: Navigating Classifications
Thursday, May 1, 6–7 p.m.
●Carnegie Museum of Art, Theater
Please join us for a conversation with Gala Porras-Kim; Elizabeth Tufts Brown, manager of registration and archives; and Travis Snyder, collections information manager and database administrator; moderated by Cynthia Stucki, curatorial assistant. Their dialogue will invite us to consider how systems of organization in museums, like classifications and cataloguing, change over time to impact how objects are brought into new contexts and methods of interpretation.

Opening Celebration and *In Conversation: Navigating Classifications* are supported by The Heinz Awards program of the Heinz Family Foundation.

This gallery brochure is published on the occasion of *Gala Porras-Kim: The reflection at the threshold of a categorical division,* organized by Liz Park, Richard Armstrong Curator of Contemporary Art, and Cynthia Stucki, curatorial assistant, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, March 1 through July 27, 2025.

Published by Carnegie Museum of Art
4400 Forbes Avenue
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15213

Erin Barnhart, Design and Publishing Studio Manager
Hannah Lesser, Junior Designer
Shaheen Qureshi, Associate Editor
Brette Richmond, Senior Designer
Zachary Riggleman, Photography Manager

This exhibition is the result of a collaboration among the staff of Carnegie Museums of Art and Natural History. Thank you to Erin Barnhart, Will Bergmann, Dana Bishop-Root, Jordan Bohannon, Elizabeth Tufts Brown, Ramon Camacho, Eric Crosby, Marie-Stéphanie Delamaire, Rachel Delphia, Alana Embry, Sergi Espinales, Melanie Groves, Jon Irving, Phoebe Irwin, Theodossis Issaias, Bill Kindelan, Dan Leers, Hannah Lesser, Ethan Marks, Akemi May, Amberly Meli, Chris Michaels, Stefanie Cedro Mohr, Clarissa Morales, Jim Nestor, Shaheen Qureshi, Brette Richmond, Zachary Riggleman, Raymund Ryan, Katie D. Scarano, Blaine Siegel, Travis Snyder, Stephanie Taylor, Sophie Thompson, Han Vincent, Shawn Watrous, and Mary Wilcop from Carnegie Museum of Art; Jessica Keister; Gretchen Baker, Kristina Gaugler, Kathy Hollis, and Debra Wilson from Carnegie Museum of Natural History; Gilbert Pietrzak from Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh; and Patrick Camut. Thank you to our colleagues in the field who have contributed to *Least likely to be on view*.

Forum Gallery presents the work of living artists in an ongoing series that invites them to expand their practice through a commission or new presentation of existing works. Initiated in 1990, and with 90 projects to date, the Forum series is an opportunity for artists to deepen their relationship to and understanding of the museum.

Major support for Carnegie Museum of Art's Forum series is provided by the Juliet Lea Hillman Simonds Foundation.

Additional support for this exhibition is provided by the Ruth Levine Memorial Fund.

Carnegie Museum of Art's exhibition program is supported by the Carnegie Museum of Art Exhibition Fund, The Fellows of Carnegie Museum of Art, and the Carnegie Collective.

Carnegie Museum of Art is supported by The Heinz Endowments and Allegheny Regional Asset District. Carnegie Museum of Art receives state arts funding support through a grant from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, a state agency funded by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Premier Partners

PNC

bfa BILL FEW ASSOCIATES WEALTH MANAGEMENT