

ADA EXHIBITION TEXT  
**LARGE TYPE**

**Amalia**  
**Mesa-Bains**  
Archaeology  
of Memory

Please drop off at exit

# Introduction

Amalia Mesa-Bains belongs to a groundbreaking generation of Chicana/o/x artists who came of age during the 1960s and 1970s and who, with that generation of artists of color, have led the critique of Eurocentric, sexist, and classist art histories, visual cultural studies, and museum practices in the Americas. Born in 1943 in Santa Clara, California, Mesa-Bains creates artwork that focuses on colonialism's legacies of violence, repression, and erasure. Her work as a Chicana feminist educator and artist—examining spiritual and psychological healing and reclaiming and honoring feminist heroines and Indigenous and African diasporic ancestors—is deeply rooted in her

experience of growing up in an undocumented immigrant Mexican family.

This exhibition explores two abiding threads in the artist's oeuvre: the life-sustaining work of remembering, and the archaeological effort required to recapture and reconstruct memories central to individual and social well-being, particularly against dominant cultural erasures. It underscores Mesa-Bains's interventions into history, psychology, art history, and the museum itself, which center non-European ways of knowing and demystify dominant, Eurocentric histories, exposing what they attempt to erase.

While Mesa-Bains's early works of the 1970s responded to the cultural reclamation of spiritual traditions, Mesa-Bains, guided by Oaxaqueña Chicana artist, Yolanda Garfias Woo, brought aspects of altars and *ofrendas* into historical homages to women. The innovation of these earlier forms produced a new work of installation utilizing strategies related to libraries, laboratories, gardens, and landscapes directed at historical moments in Chicana/o/x and Latinx culture within the United States. Mesa-Bains's examination of pivotal historical moments for Latinx people focuses attention on the racialized and gendered politics of space, particularly under the legacies of colonization. By reclaiming everyday

found objects, personal items, and the seeming waste of bygone eras in her installations, she activates memory in a broader critique of the historical erasure of Chicanos/as/xs and the Indigenous peoples of California.

This exhibition, the first retrospective of Mesa-Bains's work—a fifty year trajectory—brings long-overdue recognition, public access, and scholarship to her art, which stands at the juncture of cultural diversity, environmentally centered spirituality, and intersectional feminism. The organization of this retrospective reflects the spiral of Mesa-Bains's own practice, in which she returns repeatedly throughout her work to the reuse of particularly significant objects. Included is also a new short

film, “*Amalia Mesa-Bains: In Her Own Worlds*,” by filmmakers Ray Telles and Daniel Telles.

*Amalia Mesa-Bains: Archaeology of Memory* is organized by the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive in collaboration with the Latinx Research Center (LRC) at UC Berkeley. The exhibition is guest curated by María Esther Fernández, artistic director of The Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art & Culture of the Riverside Art Museum, and Dr. Laura E. Pérez, professor and chair of the LRC.

The exhibition is made possible by generous lead support from the Henry Luce Foundation and The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. Major funding is provided by Margarita Gandia and Diana Campoamor, Marta Thoma Hall, Pamela and David Hornik, and the UC Berkeley Latinx Research Center. Additional support was provided by a College of Letters and Sciences Dean’s Faculty Excellence Program project grant, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

***Venus Envy***  
***Chapters I-IV***



The Chicana/o art practice of altar building emerged in the 1970s, during the Chicana/o Movement, as artists sought to investigate and reclaim Indigenous ancestral and family traditions—first honoring the dead and then honoring and recuperating historical figures—in the face of ongoing racism and Eurocentrism. Originally staged as part of the community celebrations of Día de los Muertos, the altars and other artwork by feminist Chicana artists reflected their study of Mesoamerican pantheons, national legacies, and art histories. The altars offered up gender-defying creator-destroyer goddesses, such as Coatlicue, and protofeminist foremothers, such as Frida Kahlo. Chicana artists mapped

their own feminist journeys to decolonizing self-love, community justice, and self-determination against dehumanizing, patriarchal, colonial, and religious depictions of women of color. Mesa-Bains's *ofrendas* and installations from the 1970s, foundational to the conceptual evolution of the *Venus Envy* series, were made up of ephemera; they exist today only in documentation.

*Venus Envy I, II, and III*—installed throughout the 1990s in different parts of the United States—and *Venus Envy IV*, which appeared in 2008, are “chapters” investigating the history of women’s empowerment amidst patriarchy. In these works, Mesa-Bains powerfully synthesized and deepened her previous work with

Mexican, Indigenous, religious, and popular culture imagery and symbols while subverting the sexist Freudian assumption that women suffer from “penis envy.” Instead, the artist explored the legacy of irrepressible women, larger than the smaller lives to which patriarchal cultures wish to consign them. In each “chapter” of the series, the artist rendered the vanity table, desk, enclosed garden and armoire, and laboratory table as sacred and empowering for women under—and in spite of—patriarchal oppression. Glittering like hidden codes across time, the surfaces and drawers of these installations feature perfume bottles and telescopes, photographs and books, jewels and natural objects, mirrors and letters,

and an assortment of other found objects as artifacts of lives richly lived. Throughout her artistic career, Mesa-Bains has recycled and reused objects in her installations, presenting a unique challenge in the creation of this exhibition, in which all the work is shown together for the first time.

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# **Venus Envy Chapter I: First Holy Communion, Moments before the End**

1993/2022

Mixed-media installation including fabric, photographs, clothing, found objects, mementos, mirrors, found furniture, sand, dried petals, candles, laser prints on wall, pearls, and found images

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art,  
courtesy of the artist and Rena Bransten Gallery,  
San Francisco

*Venus Envy Chapter I* closely reexamines Mesa-Bains's personal and family history within the larger cultural and historical context of

the Catholic Church, investigating how the convent and the rituals of First Holy Communion and marriage limit the roles available to Catholic Mexican girls. First exhibited in 1993 at the Whitney Museum's Philip Morris branch, *Venus Envy Chapter I* consists of the "Boudoir Chapel," "Hall of Mirrors," and "Museum of Self." Each section is devoted to exploring the archetypes of bride, nun, and virgin. The artist explored ideas about family, the church, women, feminism, precolonial, and colonial legacies. The vanity is the focal point of the installation and features Coatlicue, the Mexica ("Aztec") deity of creative and destructive forces, emerging from the mirror.

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# **The Library of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz**

1994/2021

From *Venus Envy Chapter II:  
The Harem and Other Enclosures*  
Multimedia installation with chair,  
mirrors, artist's book,  
and photographs

Williams College Museum of Art, museum  
purchase, Kathryn Hurd Fund

In *Venus Envy Chapter II*, Mesa-Bains continued her investigation into gendered, enclosed spaces—particularly, the convent, the enclosed garden, and the harem—uncovering the complex, rich social worlds that arose in female-centered spaces. Here

the artist referenced Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's famed library, scientific laboratory, and musical and poetry salon. The Mexican nun was a polymath, theologian, and celebrated writer who penned *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz* (*Reply to Sister Filotea of the Cross*), considered the first proto-feminist manifesto of the colonial Americas. Under pressure from the Catholic Church to renounce her intellectual and creative pursuits, she eventually gave up her library of over four thousand books; she died soon after, tending to others during an epidemic.

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# The Virgin's Garden

1994/2022

From *Venus Envy Chapter II: The Harem and Other Enclosures*

Mixed-media installation including mirrors, moss, handpainted armoire, handmade book with painted images, clothing, found objects, and capes by Christiane Parker

Courtesy of the artist and Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco

Inspired by the painting *Paradiesgärtlein (The Little Garden of Paradise)* by the Upper Rhenish Master (1410–20), and the tradition of the hortus conclusus, the Virgin Mary as the enclosed garden, Mesa-Bains

created an intimate space, exploring this idea by transforming an armoire into the garden of Earth. Imagining Earth as an armoire or closet, the artist playfully wondered what a goddess might wear; the artist's mother sewed most of the original garments in this installation.

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# Cihuateotl with Mirror

2018

From *Private Landscapes and Public Territories Cihuateotl* and The Amazona's Mirror originally appeared in *Venus Envy Chapter III: Cihuatlampa, the Place of the Giant Women*, 1997 Mixed-media installation including mirror, woven rug, and moss-covered Styrofoam figure

Courtesy of the artist and Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco

Women who exceed the narrow strictures that patriarchal cultures attempt to impose on them are given form in *Venus Envy Chapter III*. The moss-covered figure, *Cihuateotl*,

embodies the land as a sacred, feminine landscape, inscribed with Mexica (“Aztec”) glyphs of fertility. She gazes into a giant hand mirror from beneath whose scraped surface appears a Black Madonna. In some scholarship, dark Virgins recall an enigmatic tradition of ancient pre-Christian goddesses, only some of whose attributes survive in the Christian Virgin Mary. In European art, the reclining figure can represent status, power, and privilege, and as a nude, the gendered object of the artist’s desire. Mesa-Bains represented Cihuateotl in the Nahuatl tradition of the Cihuāteotē, women who died in childbirth and were deified as warriors and transformed into stars in the afterlife.

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FROM LEFT TO RIGHT

## **Guadalupe Twins**

2023

## **Marina in the Moon**

2023

## **Mariana with Mesoamerican Figures**

1997

## **Teotihuacan Twins**

1997

## **Amazona Azteca**

1997

## **Monja Coronada**

2023

# Sleeping Nun

1997

From Venus Envy Chapter III:  
Cihuatlampa, the Place of the Giant  
Women Giclée prints

Courtesy of the artist and Rena Bransten Gallery,  
San Francisco

Based on the theme of Cihuatlampa, the heavenly place where women warriors are immortalized in Nahua tradition, these prints depict women who defied the lives into which they were born. In *Teotihuacan Twins* and *Guadalupe Twins*, Mesa-Bains cut away the figures' body cavities to reveal enmeshed stories of the genius and spiritual power that women

have “birthed.” *Marina in the Moon* enthrones the artist’s mother, a gifted seamstress, seated on the moon,

accompanied by famed designer Coco Chanel. *Sleeping Nun* and *Monja Coronada* resignify the Catholic tradition of the nun whose chastity is crowned in flowers; in the latter print, the artist enclosed an image of herself as a child at her First Holy Communion in the protective folds of the habit of the formidable intellectual and artist Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.

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FROM LEFT TO RIGHT

## **Vestment of Copper**

1997

Copper and wire mesh, jewels,  
and painted faux branches

## **Vestment of Feathers**

1997

Feathered cape

*From Venus Envy Chapter III: Cihuatlampa,  
the Place of the Giant Women*

Courtesy of the artist and Rena Bransten Gallery,  
San Francisco

Measuring over ten feet tall, these garments, created for *Venus Envy Chapter III*, visualize the might of powerful, larger-than-patriarchal-life women, goddesses, and the Earth itself.



# **The Harem**

1997

Giclée print

# **The Harem Book**

1994

Hand-made book with painted images

# **Harem Mirrors**

1994

Mirrors, colored scarves, vinyl  
(Photo: Williams College)

*From Venus Envy Chapter II: The  
Harem and Other Enclosures*

Courtesy of the artist and Rena Bransten Gallery,  
San Francisco

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# **Venus Envy Chapter IV: The Curandera's Botanica, The Road to Paris and Its Aftermath**

2008/23

Mixed-media installation including medicine cabinet, two-tiered metal table, family mementos, perfume bottle, ex-voto on tin, photographs, light box, chemistry beakers, hand-printed book, found objects, dried plants, rattlesnake skin, candles, dried lavender, oil painting, glass jars, faux pine branches, vinyl print by Arthur Simon, and wall painting by Normi Burke

Courtesy of the artist and Rena Bransten Gallery,  
San Francisco

After a near-fatal accident in 2008, the artist created *Venus Envy Chapter IV*, in which she turned to familial and ancestral traditions of holistic spiritual healing practices during the long, slow process of her recovery. The installation features a steel autopsy-like table and hospital cabinet, filled with bottles, amulets, and personal mementos, among them the artist's own medical paraphernalia from various procedures. This installation includes the final addition to *Venus Envy Chapter IV*, an anteroom for *Curandera's Botanica*, which features an abstract image of the wrecked vehicle and what resembles a lightning bolt falling on the Arc de Triomphe. In the foreground is a blue agave, representing healing and

good health, and at the print's base is crushed glass.

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# Susto the Moment of Life

## Curando

2008/23

From *Venus Envy Chapter IV:*  
*The Road to Paris and Its Aftermath,*  
*the Curandera's Botanica* Giclée prints

Courtesy of the artist and Rena Bransten Gallery,  
San Francisco

These prints recall the artist's near-fatal car accident, her trauma (*susto*), and the subsequent healing of her massive injuries through both conventional and ancestral medicine. *Curando* recalls her grandmother's pine bough and snakeskin remedies, which helped heal her father's lung troubles. In *Susto the Moment of Life*,

an abstract image of the wrecked car appears in the background, while images of her broken spinal column's C1 disc repeat across the top of the print. Refusing neck surgery, the artist explored the traditions of healing within her own family. These prints reflect her personal struggles with health and serve as companion pieces to *Venus Envy Chapter IV*.

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***Other  
Installations:  
Ancestors,  
Borders, Migration***

This exhibition also features installations created outside of the *Venus Envy* series. They incorporate the armoire as a site of investigation to be opened, searched, and sorted through in order to glimpse beyond the surface of received narratives and begin recuperating personal and national histories. These works reclaim an ancestry of rebellious women from ancient times to the present, focusing on issues of justice through land, migration, and labor. Mesa-Bains's more recent, garden-based multimedia installations excavate ancestral agricultural and plant-based medicinal knowledge and explore the continent's long history of migration, which predates anti-Mexican and anti-immigrant sentiment. The artist's



# Circle of Ancestors

1995

Mixed-media installation including candles and seven hand-painted chairs with mirrors and jewels

Courtesy of the artist and Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco

Arranged in a circle of power, each chair in this installation is an altar to a rebellious woman: the goddess Coyolxauhqui, who battled with her brother; Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, who defended the rights of women to be thinkers and artists in the Colonial Age; Mariana Escobeda Meza, the artist's grandmother, who came of age during the Mexican Revolution (1910–18) and migrated

to the United States as a widow; a female farmworker; Marina and Amalia, the artist's mother and grandmother; Chicana artist Judy Baca; and the artist herself as child during her First Holy Communion. The accompanying wall text comes from Mesa-Bains's essay "Mundo Femenino: Chicana Artists of the Movement—A Commentary on Production" (1991), which explores more than twenty-five years of Chicana cultural production. This installation recognizes Mesa-Bains's groundbreaking intellectual work as a feminist art writer and curator.

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# **Private Landscapes and Public Territories**

1996–2011/2018

Mixed-media installation including hand-painted and mirrored armoire, found objects, moss, dried flowers, faux topiaries, family photographs, miniature jeweled trees, and painted wooden hedges

Courtesy of the artist and Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco

This installation was first created in 1996 as a response to the sesquicentennial of the 1848 annexation of Mexico and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The artist looked at the geography of her family's movement during that time,

as they migrated across Mexico and the United States. This work marks these family journeys and sites of memory in a gardenlike setting. In the past, it was installed with a French garden parterre, which references the French intervention in Mexico and the artist's family history: her great-uncle Mariano Escobedo took the sword from the Emperor Maximilian in 1867. Here a natural *ofrenda* honors the family history of migration through memento mori.

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# **Family Agricultural Book**

2011

Hand-painted artist's book with mixedmedia collage and printed photographs

Courtesy of the artist and Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco

# **Ancient History Book**

2011

Hand-painted artist's book with writing and drawings

Courtesy of the artist and Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco

Books are central to Mesa-Bains's artwork. Her artistic process begins with text from readings and interviews.

Once she builds a conceptual or narrative base, she extricates images, collects objects, and starts making the works. Mesa-Bains has also created artist's books as part of her installations. In *Family Agricultural Book*, she recalls her family's history working in the orchards and cotton fields of the Santa Clara and San Jose valleys. In *Ancient History Book*, the artist reflects on the botanical medicinal knowledge of the Mesoamerican people at the time of colonial invasion, recorded in the *Codex de la Cruz-Badiano*. Her *Badianus Botanical* print series (1991) also refers to the extensive ancestral knowledge that survived in the domestic healing practices of the family.

# What the River Gave to Me

2002

Mixed-media installation including hand-carved and painted sculptural landscape, LED lighting, crushed glass, hand-blown and engraved glass rocks made by Viviana Paredes, and candles

Courtesy of the artist and Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco

In *What the River Gave to Me*, the artist pictured the border between the United States and Mexico as a goddesslike, living landscape that recalls the sumptuous *Cihuateotl* sculpture of *Venus Envy Chapter III*, in which nature as the mother of all life is embodied. This installation

references the politics of the US-Mexico border and the land as a natural demarcation. The river remembers, as suggested by the names of those who made the perilous journey inscribed on the glass river rocks. This installation continues Mesa-Bains's work in referencing a geography of memory, the connectedness of families from each side of the border, and nature as a never-ending witness.

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# **Tohono O'odham Map**

## **Aguascalientes Map**

### **Borderlands**

2018

Giclée prints

Courtesy of the artist and Rena Bransten Gallery,  
San Francisco

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lesser-studied handmade books and layered prints are characterized by her signature archaeological aesthetic of layering and excavation—a methodology that enables a revival of the Indigenous and Mexican women’s stories that lie beneath the historical ruins of the present. Her archaeological inquiry into colonial erasures of Mexican, African American, Indigenous Californian, and women’s histories is remedied through “work sites” like the opened closets and drawers of armoires and handmade books.

The exhibition closes with recreations of Mesa-Bains’s few extant installations: *Queen of the Waters*; *Mother of the Land of the Dead*; *Homenaje a Tonantzin/Guadalupe*,

the first and only piece the artist created to honor the Virgen de Guadalupe, in the guise of the ancient creator-destroyer goddesses; and the final iteration of one of her earlier homages, *Ofrenda for Dolores del Rio*. One of the artist's most iconic installations, *Dolores del Rio* deploys a hyperfeminine aesthetic celebrating the life of one of Mexico's most famous screen sirens, *Dolores del Rio*.

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# **Raymond Telles**

United States, b. 1948

# **Daniel Telles**

United States, b. 1986

## **Amalia Mesa-Bains in Her Own Worlds**

2022

HD video; color, sound; 12 min.

Courtesy of the artist

This short documentary film, created during 2018–22, examines the influences of history, cultural memory, and spirituality on Mesa-Bains's life and work. It was directed by Raymond Telles, with cinematography by Daniel Telles, and produced by Raymond Telles and Laura E. Pérez.

# Transparent Migrations

2001

Mixed-media installation including mirrored armoire, sixteen glass leaves, wire armatures, small gauze dress, lace mantilla, assorted crystal miniatures, and shattered safety glass

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum purchase funded by the Latin Maecenas

*Transparent Migrations* explores North America's long history of migration, predating the present anti-Mexican and antiimmigrant sentiment. Originally created for the *Road to Aztlan* exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), this installation features a miniature replica of the fabled city

of Tenochtitlan, capital of the Mexica (“Aztecs”), whose ancestral homeland, Aztlan, ironically, lies in what is today the United States. This place of origin is suggested in the enduring nature of the maguey cactus. *Casta* paintings on the doors of the armoire—which holds the replica of Tenochtitlan, as well as a hand-sewn dress made of cheesecloth, and the artist’s own bridal mantilla—depict the tracking of identity through ethnic or “racial” mixture, place, and dress under Spanish rule. The installation offers a meditation on the place and displacement of the immigrant and the sustenance given by a spiritual landscape that lies partially hidden in the armoire.

# **Queen of the Waters, Mother of the Land of the Dead: Homenaje a Tonantzin/Guadalupe**

1992

Mixed-media installation including fabric drape, six jeweled clocks, mirror pedestals with grottos, *nicho* box, found objects, dried flowers, dried pomegranates, potpourri, drapery constructed by Mildred Howard

Courtesy of the artist and Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco

This work was commissioned for the *Ante America* exhibition that traveled in the United States and Latin America. It is the first and

only piece that Mesa-Bains created of the Virgin of Guadalupe. At a conference at Princeton University, the pre-Columbian scholar Miguel León Portilla reframed the Virgin of Guadalupe from a pre-invasion, Indigenous perspective as the Queen of the Waters, the Mother of the Land of the Dead. Mesa-Bains found the clocks included in the installation in the San Francisco Mission District, and she used Mesoamerican figures on the face of the clocks to suggest an ancient, precolonial time. The mirrored pedestals and wall jewels reference water and life-giving rain. Dedicated to the dead, the piece also looks to earlier Chicana/o images of Guadalupe.



# **Codex Goddesses, Virgins, and the Holy Communion**

1995

## **Codex Amalia**

1991

## **Codex Borders and Memories**

1995

Hand-painted books with mixed-media collage and photographic prints

Courtesy of the artist and Rena Bransten Gallery,  
San Francisco

The codex is an ancient Indigenous “book,” archive, or record-keeping form that was symbolically reappropriated

by artists to reintroduce Indigenous pictographic writing and the memory of the vast non-European knowledge that was actively repressed or destroyed during the colonial invasion. Mesa-Bains created *Codex Amalia* for the exhibition *The Chicano Codices* at The Mexican Museum in 1991, as part of the anti-quincentennial exhibitions of the time. This codex served as the initial conceptual exploration for the *Venus Envy* series. *Codex Borders and Memories* and *Codex Goddesses, Virgins, and the Holy Communion* are summations of earlier installations that referenced the border, First Holy Communion, and the installation *Queen of the Waters*. The artist considers them instruction manuals that teach people about Chicana/o history.

# **An Ofrenda for Dolores del Rio**

1983/91

Mixed-media installation including plywood, mirrors, fabric, framed photographs, found objects, and dried flowers

Smithsonian American Art Museum, museum purchase through the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program

This installation pays homage to the famous Mexican actress Dolores del Rio, who was featured in many films in Mexico and Hollywood for more than sixty years. Here Mesa- Bains secularized the altar by rendering it as a woman's vanity. She incorporated elements from del Rio's career—film canisters, movie stills flanking the

*nicho*, and dried flowers at the foot of the *ofrenda*. The first iteration of this installation was exhibited in 1983 at The Mexican Museum in San Francisco and incorporated personal images of del Rio from the museum's collection. Mesa-Bains re-created the precursor to this iteration for *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation*, using images of frames from del Rio's films to honor her. This final *ofrenda* is the only one that includes a photograph of the artist's mother, Marina.

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HALLWAY: FROM LEFT TO RIGHT

## **Nuestros Antepasados**

2013

Giclée print

Courtesy of the artist and Rena Bransten Gallery,  
San Francisco

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## **Tree of Life**

2011

Giclée print

Courtesy of the artist and Rena Bransten Gallery,  
San Francisco

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# **Aztlán Revisited**

2011

Giclée print

Courtesy of the artist and Rena Bransten Gallery,  
San Francisco

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# **Badianus Botanical I: Mariana**

1991

Giclée print

Courtesy of the artist and Rena Bransten Gallery,  
San Francisco

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# **Badianus Botanical II: Cempazuchitl**

1991

Giclée print

Courtesy of the artist and Rena Bransten Gallery,  
San Francisco

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# **Badianus Botanical III: Braceros**

1991

Giclée print

Courtesy of the artist and Rena Bransten Gallery,  
San Francisco

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# Strange Fruit

2010

Giclée print

Courtesy of the artist and Rena Bransten Gallery,  
San Francisco

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