



Prima Materia

Blanka Amezkua
Esperanza Cortés
Anthony Carlos Molden

ROWAN UNIVERSITY
ART GALLERY & MUSEUM

curated by
Anabelle Rodríguez-González

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Exhibition on view
November 7, 2024 - January 4, 2025

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Anabelle Rodríguez-González is an arts practitioner, anthropologist, and educator from Puerto Rico based in Philadelphia. Her formal education includes dual undergraduate degrees in the visual arts and the history of art and architecture from Brown in consortium with RISD. After kicking off a peripatetic career as the inaugural director of the Museo de Arte de Ponce's education programs and curator of exhibitions for cultural institutions in Philadelphia and New York City, she also completed additional master's degrees in visual anthropology and the history of art and architecture focused on critical heritage studies. Her artwork has been exhibited in Austin, Philadelphia, Puerto Rico, and New York City, and *Globenesia* – a 2022-23 site-specific mixed-media installation dedicated to climate change – was recently featured at PBS.org. Anabelle's curatorial praxis is constituted as a collaborative extension of her creative work, with dozens of exhibitions staged between the East Coast and Europe. Her most recent curatorial collaboration is *Desde San Juan Bautista...*, an official collateral event in this year's 60th Venice Art Biennial and the first exhibition of contemporary art from Puerto Rico in the history of *La Biennale* as the oldest and most prestigious event of its kind in the world.

Prima Materia brings together new and recent works by Blanka Amezkua, Esperanza Cortés, and Anthony Carlos Molden, three interdisciplinary artists working across a dynamic range of expressive forms, including but not limited to sculpture, painting, ceramics, musical and theatrical collaborations, performative actions, curatorial work, community interventions, site-specific installations, and public art commissions.

All three artists are experienced makers actively creating provocative artworks that relate to materials and techniques associated with crafts such as embroidery, beadwork, decorative paper folding and cutting, and elements from the scenic arts. Their efforts consistently yield marvelous results, including novel sculptural objects, sumptuously detailed and evocative two-dimensional works, and challenging mixed-media installations that appeal to the senses through their impressive individual and collective visuality.

Whether anchored on the wall or displayed in the round, the works selected for *Prima Materia* generate visual and spatial synergies imbued with a powerful combination of subtle yet vibrant energies and symbolic archetypes. Not unlike living entities, these works exert their agency upon us, in a sense “arresting” our sensorial attention through their ability to convey something tangible and concrete about the ephemeral and transcendental nature of the creative impulse.

Engaging with the alchemy of creativity through expertly crafted artworks, *Prima Materia* is essentially visionary in scope. Subsumed within the effervescent flow of macro and micro historical trends that have shifted the definition and reproduction of fine art worlds into supporting the creation and display of art that can be technically described as “craft-oriented” and vice versa, *Prima Materia* contributes to ongoing discourses around creative interdisciplinarity as a means to push and expand the collective vision of contemporary art in 2024. Each of the three artists has striven to diversify what art is and what it can be made of, into unique forms bounded by expressive materiality.

Anabelle Rodríguez-González
Guest Curator



Blanka Amezkua

A fervent justice seeker, community activist, experimenter, and traveler, Amezkua's trajectory rightfully aims for the stars. For *Prima Materia*, Amezkua has accepted a commission to create a reflective in situ installation in the form of a large ofrenda—an offering that honors her Mexican ancestry and expands the living vernacular tradition of altarmaking that dates back millennia. The origins of these ofrendas predate the arrival of Europeans, and archaeological investigations continue to reveal evidence of complex devotional practices, including sacrificial objects meant to appeal to and placate deities and ancestors, depending on the context. The dedicatory ofrenda is brightly colored by the ubiquitous presence of toys, yet its purpose is grim: it supplicates—it begs us to consider the current state of crisis and loss of innocence through the massacring of children, and the collective trauma resulting from the lack of laws supporting gun control in the United States, the only country where such events occur regularly. The bright, shiny surfaces of the toys used to construct the ofrenda pose a troubled duality: they are meant to reflect and promote innocent play, yet that same strident shine somehow manages to expose a dehumanizing support for a social crisis rooted in a lack of compassion and common sense.

Anabelle Rodríguez-González
Guest Curator

In 1959, the UN General Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which defines children's rights to protection, education, health care, shelter, and good nutrition. The Declaration served as a foundational document in the development of international law related to children's rights. It has influenced national legislation and policies around the world, guiding efforts to protect and promote the rights of children in diverse contexts. It is considered a precursor to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In 1989, world leaders made a historic commitment to the world's children by adopting the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention explains who children are, all their rights, and the responsibilities of governments. All the rights are connected, they are all equally important and they cannot be taken away from children.

This being the first invitation to create an altar and having been raised by a family from the state of Michoacán in Mexico, where Día de los Muertos holds deep significance, I accepted the opportunity with joy and a deep sense of responsibility. Altars, or ofrendas, are created to honor and remember those who have passed away. When set up inside a home, they are often dedicated to deceased family members and friends. These altars are a central element of Día de los Muertos, both in Mexico and within Mexican-American communities. They serve multiple purposes, such as honoring, welcoming, guiding, and nourishing the spirits of the departed.

According to a John Hopkins study called *Gun Violence in the United States 2022: Examining the Burden Among Children and Teens*, firearms were the leading cause of death for children and teens ages 1-17, prematurely taking the lives of 2,526 young people in 2022. We've lost too many children to gun violence, here and everywhere else. Recently the wars abroad show how callous we can be to life, to a child's life. If we fail to protect them, what future are we shaping for us all? My altar, or ofrenda, is dedicated to the children of Sandy Hook and Robb Elementary Schools. It honors their memory while seeking to raise awareness of the tragic injustice inflicted on these children, their families, loved ones, and friends.

Blanka Amezkua
Artist





Blanka Amezkua is an interdisciplinary artist, cultural promoter, educator, and project creator. Amezkua was born in Mexico City and earned her B.A. from California State University at Fresno.

Amezkua's art focuses on identity and she draws heavily on her background as a Mexican-American artist. Themes that pop up frequently in her work include gender, race, power, and privilege. Space also plays an important role in her art; she has created several spaces to display art, including her own bedroom and living room.

While navigating a difficult period in her life, including the loss of her 9-year-old nephew Sebastian, Amezkua traveled frequently between New York City and Athens, Greece. During this period, Amezkua initiated an artist-run space in Athens named Fokianou 24/7, now Fokianou Art Space.

Amezkua has been featured in many exhibits including MoMA PS1 Contemporary Art Center, the Bronx Museum of the Arts, Queens Museum, El Museo del Barrio, the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, San Diego Art Institute, Wave Hill Public Garden & Cultural Center, the Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts, and Art Base, Brussels among others.

She currently resides and works in New York City where she continues to work towards reshaping the ways museums and artists interact with one another, and how artists can re-indiginize their practices. She is an active member of Running for Ayotzinapa 43.





Esperanza Cortés

Esperanza Cortés develops multiple works in a series, moving between them over time. Depending on her evolving relationships with these works, this period of time can extend over years. To demonstrate this, the prolific and meticulous artist has graciously agreed to the loan of a significant number of works that represent this process. In particular, a group of smaller mixed-media works—including glass beadwork, encaustic, ceramic elements, and personal embroidery—are based on the meditative nature of repetition and a personal sense of internal rhythm, no doubt influenced by her talent for dancing. Her embodied experiences as a mother, dancer, and educator inform the lush complexity and sensuous character of her work. A triad of larger-format installations speaks to her interest in exploring the histories and devastating legacy of colonialism in the Global South, and in her native Colombia in particular (*Gold Rush* and *Río Rojo*). With Cortés as an active collaborator, *Prima Materia* exhorts its audience to contemplate the rampant degradation of the environment as ecocide and to share responsibility for mitigating the loss of our Indigenous ancestry resulting from the ongoing destruction of the cultural landscape of Abya Yala.

Anabelle Rodríguez-González
Guest Curator

My birthplace, Colombia, profoundly impacts my artistic practice. It drives my interest and investigation of the art traditions, material culture, rituals, music, dance, medicine and lands of the Americas.

As a former Afro-Latin dancer and teacher, physicality informs my practice through body memory. My work seeks to underscore and use sacred space and the patterns of dance and percussion. I use music and fragments of histories as departure points to investigate and build the structure and space of the work.

My practice draws inspiration from my dance experience, and acts as a call and response to place, people, cultures, and histories. At the same time breaking down boundaries between painting, sculpture and installation, while addressing social justice, labor, cultural heritage, and environmental issues. Through the inclusion of ceramics, chains, glass beads, encaustic, embroidery and textiles, I reveal forgotten histories crucial to the understanding of the Americas. My work employs sculpture, painting, relief, installation, site-specific work, and video. I utilize a wide variety of materials and techniques, often in combination with reworked found objects impregnated with cultural symbols that act as sites of memory.

I highlight the cultural encounters that endlessly shape resistance while exploring the complexities of identity in the face of enduring colonization. My work aims to create an intimate repository for collective memory and implements the human body as a symbol and expression of nature, vulnerability, and power. My works are intricately crafted to encourage the viewer to reconsider social and historical narratives, especially when dealing with colonialism and raising critical questions about the politics of erasure and exclusion. Esperanza (hope) is a guiding force in the making of my work, which are improvisational constructions, infused with hope and renewal.

Esperanza Cortés
Artist





Esperanza Cortés is a Colombian-born multidisciplinary artist based in New York City. Cortés' inspiration for her art comes from the ebbs and flows of America and the American population, which encompasses traditional American folk tales as well as the transcultural experiences shared by minorities and immigrants. Cortés' works encourage viewers to reconsider traditional narratives, especially when considering colonialism and its lasting effects, and to openly grapple with critical questions about the politics of erasure and exclusion.

Her art has been featured in exhibits across New York and abroad, including the Bronx Museum of Art, Queens Museum, El Museo del Barrio, MoMA PS1, and Socrates Sculpture Park in New York City. National exhibitions include Buffalo AKG Museum, Ogden Contemporary Arts, Turchin Center for the Visual Arts, Jonathan Ferrara Gallery, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Neuberger Museum of Art, and Cleveland Art Museum.

Cortés has received numerous awards and fellowships, including the New York State Council on the Arts Project Grant, Shortlist 2022 Creative Capital, John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, Hispanic Society Museum and Library Artist Research Fellowship, BRIC Media Arts Fellowship, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council Grant, Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters & Sculptors Grant, Puffin Foundation Grant, New York State Biennial, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, New York Foundation for the Arts, and the Sustained Achievement in the Visual Arts Award.





Anthony Carlos Molden

This exhibition reaches across time and space to the Italian modernists who brought the use of discarded common materials into the refined, elitist spaces of modern art. *Prima Materia* acknowledges the international legacy of the arte povera movement in the experimental character of Anthony Carlos Molden's lighted sculptures. Molden's body of work will forever be associated with his deep appreciation of music, including but not limited to genres with deep African American roots like jazz, funk, soul, house, and hip-hop. The material abundance provided by collecting discarded objects allows Molden to recombine their unique materialities like DNA, sampling them into novel assemblages. In this way, the sculptor has developed a sustainable artistic practice that supports his creative experimentation and practical versatility. His interest in a playful yet environmentally conscious praxis elicits a compassionate awareness that captivates the senses through enchanting and surprising permutations of light, texture, and color. While often encoding sobering themes and empowering concepts grounded in personal experience, his kinetic color assemblages delight, dazzle, and heal.

Anabelle Rodríguez-González
Guest Curator

I make a holistic and literally regenerative art, symbolic in this by my repurposing of discarded materials, brought to new heights of appreciation when merged with paint and light.

Anthony Carlos Molden
Artist





Anthony Carlos Molden, born 1968 in Cedar Rapids Iowa and raised in Los Angeles, California, is a mixed-media painter/sculptor. He currently resides and creates in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Molden is mostly self-taught, but in order to supplement self-learning, he has taken courses at both the Pasadena College of Art & Design and the University of Iowa. Molden has been drawing since age three and vigorously painting with acrylic and oil since age twelve. In his twenties, he started working as a scenic designer on movie, video and theater sets. While living in New York City for 25 years, Molden has also had a career in construction as well as creation/restoration of decorative architecture.

All of the aforementioned experiences lent to the development of Molden's current painting style. Molden's work is a mix of sculptural relief with a repurposing of found objects and recycled materials. All of his paintings are made with 90-100% recycled materials, including paint and surfaces. Molden's twenty year goal was to "make something of value out of the piles of refuse around us everyday."

Molden's work has been exhibited at reputable galleries such as Kenny Schacter Contemporary, and La Mama La Galleria both in New York City, and in Philadelphia at the Painted Bride Art Center, Tiberino Museum, and Rush Arts Gallery. Mr. Molden has also become a master at live painting and has done it several times... from the renowned Leaf Art & Music Festival in Asheville, North Carolina to the Kimmel Center in Philadelphia.





Exhibition Checklist

Blanka Amezkua

¿Dónde están? nuestros hijos, ¿dónde están?

Altar dedicated to the children lost to gun violence
Sandy Hook & Robb Elementary Schools

Ofrenda, 2024

Mixed media
Variable dimensions

Esperanza Cortés

Breathless, 2022

Clay sculpture, glass beads, crystals, silk embroidery, acrylic on wood
24 x 24 x 2.5 inches

The Blossoming, 2020

Glazed ceramic sculpture, glass beads, embroidery, acrylic on wood
16 x 20 x 3 inches

Corazóncito, 2023

Ceramic sculpture, crystal beads, vintage crystals, personal embroidery, encaustic on wood
15 x 15 x 2.5 inches

Corazón Taíno, 2023

Ceramic sculpture, chains, glass beads, painted embroidery, leather on board
16 x 16 x 2 inches

Corazón Sagrado, 2022

Ceramic sculpture, vintage glass beads, painted embroidery, encaustic on wood
14.5 x 14 x 2 inches

Corazón Volante, 2022

Ceramic sculpture, vintage glass beads, embroidery, encaustic on wood
14 x 14 x 2 inches

De las Aguas, 2024

Acrylic, embroidery on handmade paper
16 x 16 inches

El Árbol de la Vida, 2023

Ceramic sculpture, crystal beads, cotton embroidery, encaustic on wood
31.5 x 23.5 x 3 inches

El Grito de Las Flores, 2020

Glass beads, embroidery, encaustic on wood
23 inches diameter

Forced Bloom, 2020

Clay sculpture, encaustic, glass beads, crystal, personal embroidery on board
16 inches diameter

Granada, 2023

Glass beads, embroidery, vintage glass pieces, on wood
30 inches diameter

Golden, 2024

Acrylic, embroidery on handmade paper
16 x 16 inches

Gold Rush, 2024

Civil War era chair, found metal, metal ball beads, necklace, ball chain, handmade ceramic eyes, bull hide, mule leather, gold paint
60 x 40 inches

The Inheritance, 2022

Clay sculpture, vintage glass beads, faceted crystals, silk embroidery, acrylic on wood
30 x 24 x 3 inches

La Amazona, 2024

Glazed ceramic sculpture, vintage glass beads, embroidery, acrylic on wood
16 x 20 x 3 inches

La Guajira, 2024

Encaustic, glass beads, clay ceramic, personal embroidery.
16 x 20 x 3 inches

Metamorphosis, 2024

Crystal beads, crystals, personal embroidery and acrylic on wooden panel
24 x 24 x 2.5 inches

Radiant Heart, 2023

Ceramic sculpture, crystal beads, painted embroidery, encaustic on wood
16 x 20 x 3 inches

Red Flower, 2024

Acrylic, embroidery on handmade paper
16 x 16 inches

Río Rojo, 2024

40 lbs. strung glass beads, brass beads, brass chandelier, boxes with five plaster and wire mesh flowers, silk flowers, cotton blooms
156 x 48 inches

Second Sight, 2018

Table, mirror, 20 glass and metal beaded sculptures on clay
44 x 54 x 20 inches

Anthony Carlos Molden

Dreamcatcher/Dreamgiver, 2022

Repurposed found materials
36 x 72 inches

Get Free Totem, 2022

Repurposed found materials
36 x 96 inches

Love Light in Flight, 2022

Repurposed found materials
24 x 96 inches

Ophir Ascending, 2022

Repurposed found materials
60 x 36 inches

Palmina, 2020

Repurposed found materials
13 x 15 inches



Acknowledgements

As the guest curator of *Prima Materia*, I would like to thank my fellow visual artists Blanka Amezkua, Esperanza Cortés, and Anthony Carlos Molden for trusting my process to create a collective exhibition that results in a seamless and fully integrated experience for visitors. Thanks also to the leadership and staff at RUAGM and in particular the professional art installers hired to collaborate with us and the student workers who make sure to receive visitors with warmth and congeniality. - ARG

I'd like to express my gratitude to BIMBO for their generous in-kind donation. To Nina, Kate + Paco, Oliver + Esteban, and Max + Felix, I say thank you for contributing their toys to the ofrenda! Without their contributions the altar would've been missing much of its soul. A heartfelt thank you to Leila Hewitt, talented student who created the four hanging flower and straw strands, and to the dedicated Jaylah Ross who crafted the papel picado strand at the center of the altar. Thank you to one of the most incredible curators I've ever worked with, Anabelle Rodríguez-González, for staying up late with me working, documenting, supporting the ofrenda process every step of the way, and even making sure I was well-fed! You're incredible! It has been a true honor to work with and learn from Mary Salvante and Kristin Qualls since the inception of this exhibition, muchas, muchas gracias Rowan University Art Gallery & Museum. - BA

My sincere gratitude to Anabelle Rodríguez González for her trust and belief in my work. So appreciative to Mary Salvante and Kristin Qualls for putting together this beautiful exhibition and catalog. It is wonderful to be showing with Blanka Amezkua and Anthony Carlos Molden. My deepest love to my husband Michael Pribich and daughter Maya El Amir for their continuous love and support. - EC

I would like to thank Anabelle, Mary and the whole staff at Rowan University Art Gallery and Museum for all of their help and comradery during the installation process and planning of this show. Thank you, Anabelle, for considering me amongst these other luminary and amazing artists. Also I would like to thank my lady and partner Ursula Rucker, my constant inspiration to keep going. - ACM

As Director of the Rowan University Art Gallery & Museum, I am honored to present this exhibition. We are deeply grateful to our guest curator for sharing her vision, extensive knowledge, and unparalleled insights in bringing together this extraordinary group of artists. It has been a privilege to collaborate with the artists and to gain a deeper appreciation of their work through this process.

The realization of a show of this scope and complexity requires the efforts of many, and I would like to particularly acknowledge the invaluable contributions of Gallery Coordinator Kristin Qualls. I am also thankful to our dedicated student workers—Rachel Hanan, Leila Hewitt, Fran Lombardo, Jaylah Ross, and Taha Shanbaz—for their assistance throughout this project.

Additional thanks to our talented art installers, CJ Stahl and Joe Krause, and to Dr. Andrew D. Hottle for his unwavering support. This exhibition would not have been possible without the collective effort of everyone involved. - MS

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Constance Mensh, except
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ROWAN UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY & MUSEUM
A Museum Destination for Contemporary Art

Rowan University Art Gallery & Museum serves as a vibrant cultural destination for South Jersey, the Rowan community, and surrounding region. We are committed to cultivating an accessible and just environment that encourages dialogue and collaboration between exhibiting artists, students, faculty, and the general public through the presentation of interdisciplinary art exhibitions, artist talks and other public programming. Our mission is to present diverse forms of contemporary art by professional artists with content that is thought provoking, relevant, and timely. With our exhibitions and programming, we seek to engender curiosity and a passion for contemporary art, enrich the quality of life for area residents, and create a welcoming and inclusive cultural destination at Rowan University.

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