

RENA BRANSTEN GALLERY

Amalia Mesa-Bains | Emblems of the Decade: Borders

March 4 – April 29, 2023

Reception for the Artist, March 4 | 4-6PM



Rena Bransten Gallery is pleased to present *Emblems of the Decade: Borders*, an installation by Bay-Area based artist Amalia Mesa-Bains. The exhibition is organized to coincide with the first major retrospective of Mesa-Bains' work, *Archaeology of Memory*, now on view at the Berkeley Art Museum through July 23, 2023.

Emblems of the Decade: Borders is an immersive presentation, including multiple elements which address concerns of displacement, deterritorialization, and immigration facing Latinx and Chicanx communities in the United States. Central to the installation is a dresser turned altar, based on a traditional Mexican home altar, a common element of Mesa-Bains' work. The altar serves as a type of cabinet of curiosities – a reliquary for deeply personal objects: family photographs and other mementos (both from the artist's family and the families of friends and her peers), sacred objects (the Caribbean Virgin of Caridad del Cobre, small statues of the Virgin of Guadalupe, saint's cards) and objects of healing (soaps, metal amulets). Fresh soil spills from the open dresser drawers onto the ground, a fusing of nature and memory – life and decay.

Since it was first exhibited at the Studio Museum in Harlem as part of *The Decade Show* (1990), iterations of *Borders* have been shown in museums and other venues, each installation including rotating elements reflective of the current moment. *Emblem of the Decade: Borders* was included in the Third International Biennial, Istanbul (1992), the opening of the new Caribbean Cultural Center, NYC (2016) and most recently it was exhibited in *Califas: El Arte de la Zona Fronteriza Mexico-Estados Unidos (Arts of the US-Mexico Borderlands)* at the Richmond Art Center, CA (2018). Through these multiple iterations, one unifying tenet persists: how does one create home while existing within politically constructed borders? From Mesa-Bains' early days as an activist, to the Trump era policies around DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), and the separation of families and caging of children at the US/Mexico border, *Borders* has been relevant for decades and is a work that the artist has revised over time in response to shifting realities around border politics.

Amalia Mesa-Bains (b. 1943 Santa Clara, CA) is an artist and cultural critic who has worked to define Chicanx and Latinx art in the United States and Latin America. A recipient of the MacArthur "Genius" Grant, her large-scale installations and interpretations of traditional Chicanx alters and ofrendas explore Mexican American women's spiritual practice addressing colonial and imperial histories, the recovery of cultural memory, and

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their roles in identity formation. She uses aesthetic strategies as ways to express experiences historically associated with Mexican American women and as sites for Chicana feminist reclamation.

Mesa-Bains' work has been shown at numerous venues nationally and internationally, including shows at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA; The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas; The Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, New York, NY; and the Studio Museum of Harlem, New York, NY. Her work is included in important public collections including SFMOMA, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and the Smithsonian American Art Museum. She currently lives and works in San Juan Bautista, CA.

Above image:

Amalia Mesa-Bains, *Emblems of the Decade: Borders*, 2015 (installation view from Caribbean Cultural Center, New York, NY, 2016), dresser, miscellaneous objects, constructed chair, wall and ceiling drapes, app. size: 10 x 15 x 6 feet