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Permission to Return Home: Clarissa Tossin Interviewed by Mariana Fernández

An immersive film reclaims Mayan cultural motifs in modernist architecture.

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Still from Clarissa Tossin's *Mojo'q che b'ixan ri ixkanulab' / Antes de que los Volcanes Canten / Before the Volcanoes Sing*, 2022, color digital video, sound. Image courtesy of the artist and EMPAC / Rensselaer.

Moving between installation and video, Los Angeles–based artist Clarissa Tossin's work traces alternative narratives of place that excavate the past and reimagine the future. Her latest film, *Mojo'q che b'ixan ri ixkanulab' / Antes de que los Volcanes Canten / Before the Volcanoes Sing* (2022), continues her exploration of appropriated Indigenous cultural motifs in modernist architecture by looking to Frank Lloyd Wright's Sowden House in Los Angeles, built in 1926 at the height of the Mayan Revival style. Through a combination of documentary filmmaking and video-performance strategies, the film uses language, dance, and music to resignify the house within a Pre-Columbian architectural lineage.

Clarissa has been working on this project for the past four years, and from the script editing and translation work I collaborated with her on a few years ago, it has been fascinating to see the film morph and evolve as a result of her many collaborations. The contributions of contemporary Mayan artists Tohil Fidel Brito and Rosa Chávez reinscribe the house within the present Maya community, while the film's incredibly complex score—developed with 3-D–printed replicas of Mayan wind instruments held in US and Guatemalan museums—reflects on what Pre-Columbian ritual objects can offer us despite numerous processes of displacement and translation.

—Mariana Fernández

Mariana Fernández

Let's start at the beginning. Can you talk about the poem from which the film takes its title?

Clarissa Tossin

The initial working title for this film was *21st Century Wisdom: Healing Frank Lloyd Wright's Cement Block Houses*. In many ways, the project builds on my previous work with the co-opted Maya iconography that characterizes the Mayan Revival style of many buildings in Los Angeles, returning now to locate in these buildings a potential space of reclamation and agency where the Maya diaspora and its colonial histories can be restaged and reckoned with and where contemporary Maya artists can affirm a revitalized sense of identity while excavating their own cultural erasure.

In the process of researching poet Rosa Chávez's work, I found a line from the poem "Dame Permiso Espíritu del Camino" ("Grant Me Permission, Spirit of the Journey") which synthesizes this urge, but in a metaphorical way. It became the title of the film: *Mojo'q che b'ixan ri ixkanulab' / Antes de que los Volcanes Canten / Before the Volcanoes Sing* in the sequence of K'iche', Spanish, and English. In my view, this poem describes an embodied struggle dealing with intense emotions while moving through a landscape animated by sound and appealing to the surroundings for permission to return home. In a sense, her poem gave me permission to work with such complicated material, as both the Mayan Revival houses and the archeological wind instruments are material remains of cultural trauma.



Still from Clarissa Tossin's *Mojo'q che b'ixan ri ixkanulab' / Antes de que los Volcanes Canten / Before the Volcanoes Sing*, 2022, color digital video, sound. Image courtesy of the artist and EMPAC / Rensselaer.

MF

Permission seems to me a big theme in the film. Can you talk about how you yourself approached this question in the research and filming process, particularly in relation to language and to all these forms of Indigenous knowledge that we were learning about for the first time?

CT

I'm interested in exploring alternate narratives that come to define a place while also trying to preserve evidence of cultural difference, resistance, and transformation. My research on Mayan Revival architecture has included scholarly texts; conversations with academics and Maya community leaders in Los Angeles; visits to Maya art festivals in Los Angeles and to the Maya holdings in collections of museums like the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Fowler Museum, Denver Art Museum, and Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. At some point in my research, I started asking myself "with whom" I wanted to think about and process the material I had researched, and from which perspective. Learning about Maya culture became a pursuit that could somehow counteract the systemic erasure of nondominant cultures, in this case enacted through a specific architectonic style narrative.

MF

How did the collaboration with Rosa Chávez and Tohil Bernal come about?

CT

For a while I was looking for contemporary Maya artists whose practices intersected with my interests to collaborate with toward this film. In my work, I use video, installation, sculpture, and collaborative research—hence all the collaborators involved in this project!—to engage the suppressed counternarratives implicit in the built environment. Working with Tohil and Rosa opened up a space to process this material from different perspectives. I know that neither of them knew about the Mayan Revival style before I approached them, but the centrality of language and translation in both of their practices was very exciting to me. Seeing them excavating ancestor knowledge and rearticulating it in their own works informed a narrative thread throughout the film.



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MF

At the center of the film is this tension between the natural world and the built environment. Ecology is central to all of your practice, but this film provides an especially intimate take on issues of displacement and extraction. What made you navigate toward practices like language, dance, and music to tell this story instead of a more research-based approach?

CT

The project began in 2018 when I met American anthropologist / archaeologist Jared Katz who for the past five years has documented ancient Pre-Columbian musical instruments housed in archeological sites and museums throughout Mesoamerica and the US. He has developed a method for 3-D scanning and printing playable replicas of the instruments that sound nearly identical to the original objects. I worked closely with Katz to source a selection of flutes and ocarinas from his digital archives and to make two new scans for the project from instruments held at the Denver Art Museum.

In the fall of 2019, I was in residence at the Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center (EMPAC) at Rensselaer, and invited composer Michelle Agnes Magalhães and flautist Alethia Lozano Birrueta for a weeklong session of musical exploration with the ceramic replicas. Michelle, whose background is in classical music, had an insight very early in the process that “the music is in the flutes; we just have to find it.” By that, she meant that imposing a score following modern European conventions was not the right approach to bring these instruments to life. With no recordings as reference to how these instruments were originally played, nor with any ambition to present an ethnographic sound study, we instead proposed a space where contemporary experimental music can happen by engaging with Pre-Columbian instruments in the present, all while being attentive to colonial epistemologies and their complicated histories.

That's a long way to say that the making of this film has actually been a research-based process throughout. What is different this time around is the amount of collaborators involved in each stage of this long process. Through music, poetry, and performance, this multifaceted production

links archaeological and architectural displacements with the movements of people—processes that both connect cultures and constantly transform them.

MF

There is a beautiful contrast between the sparse, earth-toned backdrop of the scenes shot with Rosa in Guatemala and the more theatrical lighting of the pool scenes in which Alethia is walking barefoot. To me, the latter provide moments of quietness and reflection, but they are also sort of otherworldly. Do you see it that way?

CT

The sections filmed in Guatemala with Rosa follow a more documentary filmmaking approach to locate K'iche' cultural memory within its historical lands. The sections with Alethia in a more theatrical environment were shot at EMPAC and focus on her musical performance and the flutes as characters or entities in the narrative. The flutes were filmed by themselves in a dark studio with projections of time-lapses of stars, the Milky Way, clouds, and the moon in order to contextualize them in relationship to the cosmos as a way to acknowledge the role these instruments play in Maya cosmology, which goes far beyond their musical capabilities. I see the sections of Alethia in the reflective pool as moments of connection with other realms. It was a way to make the underworld and the cosmos, according to Maya spiritual traditions, have a different atmosphere and visual presence in the film.



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MF

What other filmic strategies are you using to explore Mayan cosmology?

CT

Image and sound were superimposed and altered in the editing process to create an immersive cinematic space that goes beyond straightforward performance documentation in video. The resonance chambers inside of the flutes were filmed in a way that parallels the interior-exterior relationships found in the Maya Revival buildings that surround the performances. And I am also exploring camera movements and post-production effects that fuse the immateriality of sound traveling through space-time with the physicality of the architecture. These strategies are an attempt to offer not just a critical history or case study of a building but a wider-ranging meditation on materials and their fraught inheritance as well as the potential for new possibilities of configuration between past and present through interaction, collaboration, and communication.

Clarissa Tossin's [Mojo'q che b'ixan ri ixkanulab' / Antes de que los Volcanes Canten / Before the Volcanoes Sing](#) premieres at the Experimental Media and Performing Art Center in Troy, New York, on September 9.

performance and video art. Her writing appears in frieze, X-TRA, and Brooklyn Rail, among other publications.

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