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Gala Porras-Kim: Out of an instance of expiration comes a perennial showing

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Cover image:

Gala Porras-Kim: Out of an instance of expiration comes a perennial showing

by Marv Recinto • 09.03.2022

Since its rise during The Enlightenment, the encyclopaedic museum has endeavoured to preserve and display artefacts from different cultures in order to construct a singular 'global' history of art. However, modern and contemporary critics have demanded a re-examination of this model's colonial heritage and universal ideology. While some institutions have acquiesced, many larger ones have tended to evade or rebuff these decolonising efforts. For example, James Cuno, the outgoing President and CEO of the J. Paul Getty Trust, Los Angeles, insists that 'the world's cultural achievements belong to everyone', echoing archaic arguments for the initial establishment of such institutions.¹ The artist Gala Porras-Kim (b.1984) contributes to this ongoing debate with the solo exhibition *Out of an instance of expiration comes a perennial showing* at Gasworks, London. Porras-Kim's first exhibition in the United Kingdom stems from research conducted by the artist during a 2020 residency at the Delfina Foundation, London. Adopting a position in the intervening space between the two opposing perspectives of pro-repatriation and anti-repatriation, Porras-Kim offers unorthodox and unexpected proposals for institutional critique through her multi-disciplinary practice, which improve upon conditions of display, consider the agency of human remains and explore methods of extraction.

On entering the exhibition, one is immediately confronted by a to-scale replica of an Egyptian sarcophagus in the collection of the British Museum, London **FIG.1**. Whereas the museum – owner of the largest collection of Egyptian artefacts outside of the country – has displayed the 4,500-year-old sarcophagus in a position parallel to the walls of the British Museum gallery, Porras-Kim rotates her iteration so that the hypothetical occupant faces the rising sun in the east to comply with Egyptian burial traditions. The artist has also drawn a makeshift compass dial on the floor to illustrate that the museum need only rotate the tomb twenty-five degrees in consideration of the object rather than of the museum spectator. In *Sights beyond the grave* **FIG.2**, Porras-Kim uses graphite and coloured pencil to create an intricate desert landscape drawing designed to wrap around the glass vitrine of one of the British Museum's funerary statues of Nenkhefta **FIG.3**. This exercise locates the Old Kingdom nobleman – whose statue acts as a vessel for his spirit – within his homeland in an effort to encourage 'caretakers

of objects' to reframe these sacral artefacts in accordance with their respective traditions.² These two works of art appeal for the institution's recognition and integration of the cultural traditions these objects were removed from, rather than to the process of deaccessioning.

In an attempt to further evaluate the post-life preferences of the human remains that are instituted into these encyclopaedic collections, Porras-Kim consults them directly. Whereas the aforementioned works rely on ethnographic research, *A terminal escape from the place that binds us* FIG.4 consults the dead through encromancy – an early form of ink divination that Porras-Kim has adapted to the process of paper marbling. While ink floated on top of a pool of water, Porras-Kim asked the skeletal remains of a person from Sinchang-dong, now 'residing' in the Gwangju National Museum, to move the ink and reveal their preferred resting place. The resulting imagery functions as an intricate map or landscape, albeit one that is indecipherable to Porras-Kim.³ In this shamanistic act the artist recognises the humanity and agency of the remains, now reduced and also, paradoxically, elevated to the status of artefact.



Fig. 1 *Sunrise for 5th-Dynasty Sarcophagus from Giza at the British Museum*, by Gala Porras-Kim. 2022. 106 by 228 by 89 cm. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Andy Keate; exh. Gasworks, London).

Porras-Kim expands upon existing deaccessioning methods through unbureaucratic channels with *Leaving the institution through cremation is easier than as a result of a deaccession policy* FIG.5. Here, the artist frames a tissue with a black handprint, made of ash remains of Luzia, a twelve-thousand-year-old human artefact in the National Museum of Brazil's collection. Following a devastating fire in 2018, which destroyed many of the museum's

twenty million artefacts, eighty per cent of Luzia was salvaged, and Porras-Kim was able to work with her remains. In an accompanying letter addressed to the Museum Director, Alexander Kellner, the artist wrote 'since many of these remains got burned, they are no longer able to exist primarily as historical objects [...] but now as ashes of cremated remains'. Given this transformation, Porras-Kim encourages Kellner to cease the reconstruction and further preservation of Luzia, suggesting instead that the museum burn the remains to allow her spirit to finally rest: 'because when you let go of the shape you think she should be as an object, she will return to her life as a corpse again'. In the same letter, however, Porras-Kim acknowledges the improbability of Kellner enacting this request, admitting that this tissue 'might be the closest thing to a cinerary urn'.



Fig. 2 *Sights beyond the grave*, by Gala Porras-Kim. 2022. Graphite and coloured pencil on paper, 150 by 277.5 cm., and document. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Andy Keate; exh. Gasworks, London).

In another unconventional act of deaccessioning, Porras-Kim retrieved the contents of a vacuum cleaner belonging to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. This apparatus was used to clean the debris following the museum's 2021 rehang of the department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas, which had previously remained untouched since 1982. Titled *The Michael C. Rockefeller Wing at the Met 1982-2021 fragment* **FIG. 6** the compacted 9.5-centimetre cube consolidates forty years of dust, wood fragments from artefacts and the bodily detritus of museum-goers, predominantly skin and hair. Not only does this sculpture carry traces of exhibits out of the museum in a deaccessioning act, it also converts the unwitting attendee into an ethnographic object in a manner that parallels the decisions of

encyclopaedic collections to put the remains of ancient humans on display.

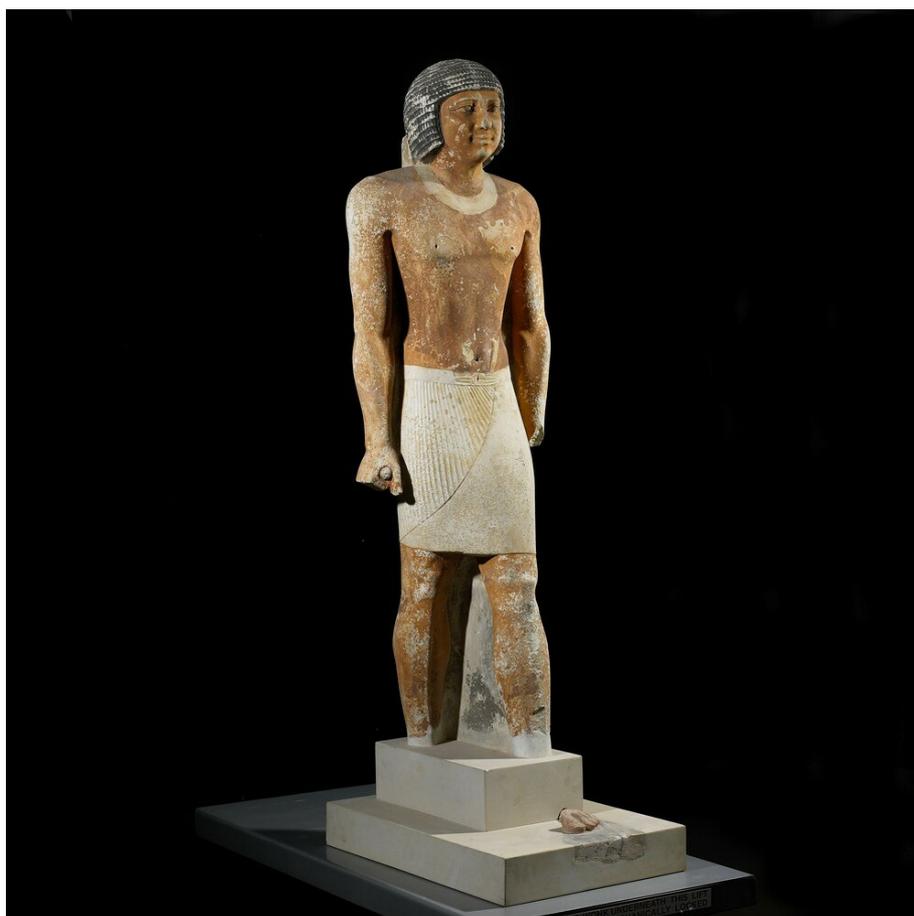


Fig. 3 Painted limestone statue of Nenkheftka. c.2450 BC. Limestone, height 134 cm. (British Museum, London; © Trustees of the British Museum).

Lastly, for the large-scale work *Mould extraction* FIG.7, Porras-Kim has collected mould spores from the British Museum's storage and propagates them on an agar-soaked cloth. Hanging in a box frame on the wall, it burgeons with brown, green and ochre spores, which continue to grow as the exhibition continues FIG.8. Porras-Kim imagines that the original mould consumed particles of the stored artefacts, and through her act of transporting these mould cultures out of the museum, she has also removed microscopic parts of the exhibits.⁴ This unexpected removal method undermines the British Museum's sustained insistence upon their facilities as superior to those of other institutions that seek to reclaim their stolen artefacts, such as the case of the Parthenon Frieze.⁵ Beyond presenting technical evidence against the museum's amenities, *Mould extraction* brings Porras-Kim's project full circle, presenting the ways in which microbes consume dead and inanimate objects to reproduce life anew.

In some ways Porras-Kim's endeavours to navigate institutional critique seem absurd: rotating the sarcophagus would clash with the surrounding objects; adding a drawing would obscure three-

quarters of Nenkhefta's funerary statue; the dead cannot talk; and cremating Luzia would destroy its educational ability. However, such observations are entrenched in the very Enlightenment ideals of universality that decolonial studies and Porras-Kim seek to undermine. Instead, the artist has developed sympathetic solutions, which foreground the local traditions that the encyclopaedic museums are aware of but often refuse to act upon. The exhibition demonstrates Porras-Kim's subversive approach to a complex topic, and the artist is compassionate towards both the artefacts she engages with and the people who work with them. Indeed, she has demonstrated a refreshingly dialogical approach to institutional critique while maintaining respect for multiple perspectives. After all, as she has said of her practice, 'it is a question of care'.⁶

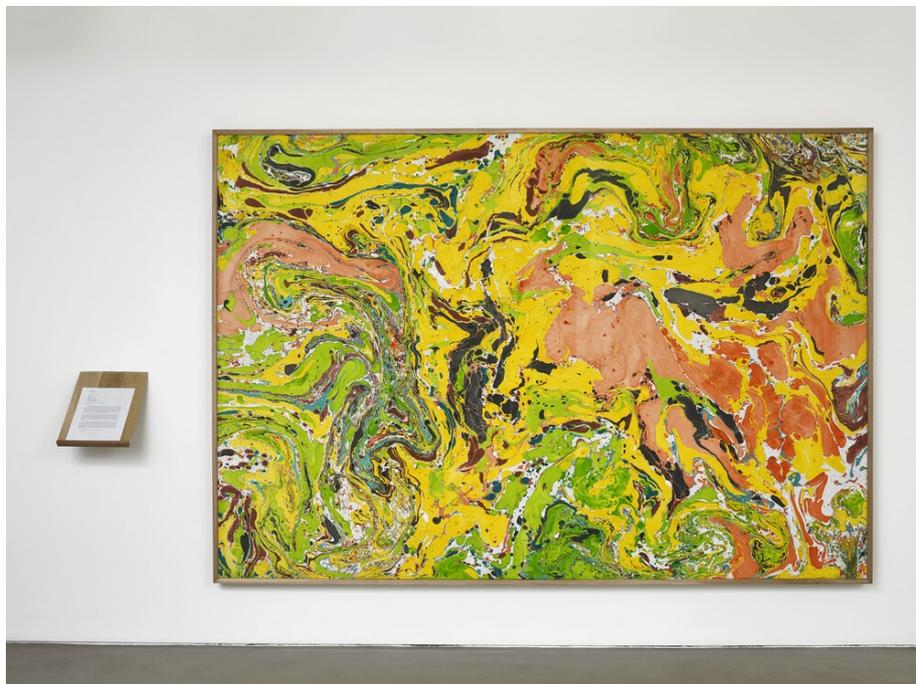


Fig. 4 *A terminal escape from the place that binds us*, by Gala Porras-Kim. 2021. Ink on paper, 185.5 by 267 cm., and document. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Andy Keate; exh. Gasworks, London).



Fig. 5 *Leaving the institution through cremation is easier than as a result of a deaccession policy*, by Gala Porrás-Kim. 2021. Ashes, tissue, 37.5 by 37 cm., and document. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Andy Keate; exh. Gasworks, London).



Fig. 6 *The Michael C. Rockefeller Wing at the Met 1982–2021 fragment*, by Gala Porras-Kim. 2022. Residue collected from the deinstall of the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and binder, 9.5 by 9.5 by 9.5 cm. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Andy Keate; exh. Gasworks, London).



Fig. 7 *Mould extraction*, by Gala Porras-Kim. 2022. Propagated spores from the British Museum, London, and potato dextrose agar on muslin, 172 by 300.5 cm. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Andy Keate; exh. Gasworks, London).



Fig. 8 *Mould extraction*, by Gala Porras-Kim. 2022. Propagated spores from the British Museum, London, and potato dextrose agar on muslin, 172 by 300.5 cm. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Andy Keate; exh. Gasworks, London).

Exhibition details Gala Porras-Kim: Out of an instance of expiration comes a perennial showing
Gasworks, London
27th January–27th March 2022

Footnotes

- 1** See J. Cuno: *Museums Matter: In Praise of the Encyclopedic Museum*, Chicago 2011, p.96.
- 2** See G. Porras-Kim: 'On the afterlife and happiness of objects', 13th Gwangju Biennale (2021), available at 13thgwangjubienale.org/minds-rising/porras-kim/, accessed 6th March 2022.
- 3** See O. Basciano: 'Gala Porras-Kim: why museums need spiritual caretakers', *ArtReview* (2nd March 2022), available at www.artreview.com/gala-porras-kim-wellbeing-of-artefacts, accessed 3rd March 2022.
- 4** See 'Interview with Gala Porras-Kim', Gasworks (February 2022), available at vimeo.com/678811346, accessed 1st March 2022.
- 5** See J. Angouri, M. Paraskevaudi and R. Wodak: 'Discourses of cultural heritage in times of crisis: the case of the Parthenon Marbles', *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 21 no.2 (April 2017), onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/josl.12232.
- 6** Interview, *op. cit.* (note 4).

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