



Art

Gala Porras-Kim Explores the Institutional Afterlife of Artifacts and Ancient Human Remains

• Veena McCool Mar 8, 2022 3:29pm



Gala Porras-Kim, installation view of "Out of an instance of expiration comes a perennial showing" at Gasworks, 2022. Photo by Andy Keate. Courtesy of Gasworks, London.

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Mold spores, a granite sarcophagus, and the contents of a vacuum cleaner bag can all be found in [Gala Porras-Kim's](#) debut solo exhibition in the U.K. Titled "Out of an instance of expiration comes a perennial showing" and on view through March 27th at Gasworks in London, the show explores the fluid boundaries between a living thing and an object. Porras-Kim interrogates the circumstances in which human remains become museum artifacts, and invites viewers to question how the designation of "historical object" can interfere with the spiritual purpose of ancient remains that find themselves in museums.

During Porras-Kim's 2020 residency at Delfina Foundation in London, the Bogotá-born, Los Angeles-based artist used the [British Museum's](#) sprawling Egypt collection as a basis for her six pieces commissioned by Gasworks. The subsequent works pit the ancient culture's reverence for the afterlife against modern institutional efforts to control, preserve, and collect objects and remains, prompting uncomfortable questions around authenticity and agency.





Gala Porras-Kim, installation view of "Out of an instance of expiration comes a perennial showing" at Gasworks, 2022. Photo by Andy Keate. Courtesy of Gasworks, London.

Through imaginative yet practical suggestions put forward in the exhibition display, "Out of an instance of expiration comes a perennial showing" is a playfully literal contribution to the discourse around ancient artifacts. The result is a probing body of work—accompanied by letters to museum directors outlining concrete yet tongue-in-cheek alternatives to current policies—that at once manipulates and pays respect to the human remains and peripheral residues in globally renowned collections.

Upon entering the exhibition, the viewer encounters a replica of a fifth-dynasty sarcophagus from Giza currently held in the British Museum. A compass dial on the floor suggests a simple reorientation for the deceased to face east towards the rising sun, in reverence to the customs of Egyptian burial outlined in the museum label but not accounted for in the British Museum's display. "It's almost intentionally naïve to take something so literal like a museum label and make it challenging, humorous, and unexpected," Gasworks curator Sabel Gavalton told Artsy.



Gala Porras-Kim, *Out of an instance of expiration comes a perennial showing*, 2022. Photo by Andy Keate. Courtesy of Gasworks, London.

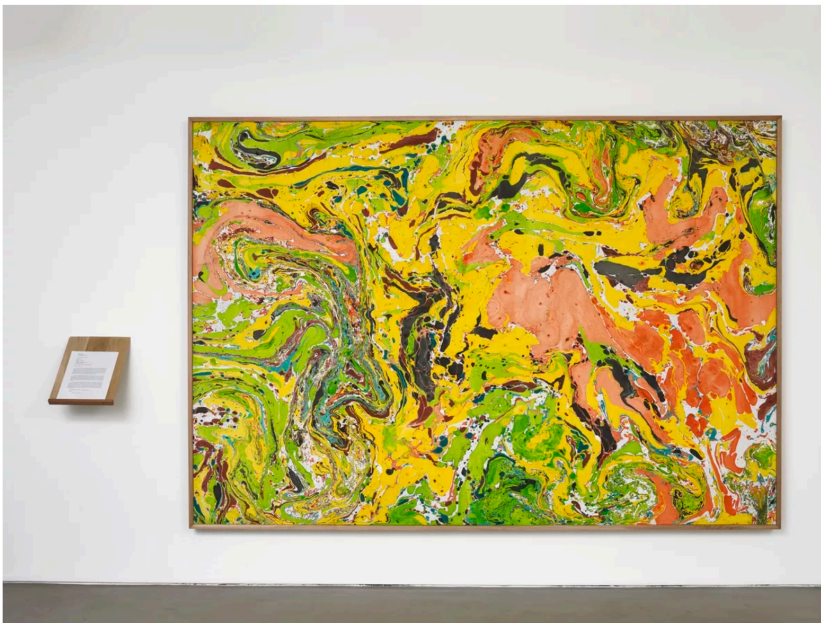


Gala Porras-Kim, *The Michael C. Rockefeller Wing at the Met 1982-2021 fragment*, 2022. Photo by Andy Keate. Courtesy of Gasworks, London.

On a nearby plinth sits a diminutive cube, the compressed contents of a vacuum-cleaner bag containing over 40 years of dust and residue gathered from the cabinets of a decommissioned wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Across the room, mold spores collected from the British Museum and propagated with gelatinous agar are in full bloom on a cloth.

In a recent interview with Artsy, Porras-Kim inquired about what the work looked like now, laughing as she reminds me that the piece has continued to morph and grow as propagation continues—signs of life amidst examinations of the dead.

Two large, contrasting works on paper reveal opposing approaches for empathizing with those in eternal rest. *Mastaba scene* (2022), a graphite drawing of enveloping darkness, imagines the inside of an Egyptian tomb from the perspective of the dead lying within. On the adjacent wall, a vivid colorscape of swirling hues represents a form of ink divination—a chance to initiate a conversation with the spirits, as Porras-Kim described. Titled *A terminal escape from the place that binds us* (2022), the work focuses on the remains held in South Korea's Gwangju National Museum, giving voice to the deceased and allowing them to intimate where their preferred resting place is.



Gala Porras-Kim, installation view of *Mastaba scene*, 2022, in "Out of an instance of expiration comes a perennial showing" at Gasworks, 2022. Photo by Andy Keate. Courtesy of Gasworks, London.

A gentle tune emanates periodically from the concluding piece, a drawing of an ancient Egyptian stela carved with a depiction of twin brothers Hor and Suty (alternatively interpreted as lovers) and hieroglyphic inscriptions of a hymn that celebrates their bond. To bring the musical accompaniment of this work to life, Egyptologist Heidi Köpp-Junk used replicas of ancient instruments, adopting Porras-Kim's approach of remaining faithful to source materials.

The works in "Out of an instance of expiration comes a perennial showing" are solution-oriented but expansive in their reasoning, encouraging viewers and curators alike to acknowledge the former agency of preserved remains. Porras-Kim invites us to recognize the "third stakeholder" that's often ignored in conversations between museum collections and audiences.



Gala Porras-Kim, installation view of *Leaving the institution through cremation is easier than as a result of a deaccession policy*, 2021, in "Out of an instance of expiration comes a perennial showing" at Gasworks, 2022. Photo by Andy Keate. Courtesy of Gasworks, London.

On the topic of deaccessioning, Porras-Kim highlighted the importance of thinking about accessioning first. "To deaccession something, you can't simply put it back the same way it came through the system," the artist explained. "You have to see what the object needs, because 'putting it back' looks different for each object, and it can't be filtered back through the same methodology of museums." This is reflected in *Leaving the institution through cremation is easier than as a result of a deaccession policy* (2021), also on view at Gasworks. Featuring a tissue marked with a handprint made of ashes collected from the 2018 fire at the National Museum of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro, the work represents the cremation and freeing of Luzia, the oldest human fossil found in Latin America, from the collections.

What the artist will never claim to have are answers. She's torn, because she loves museums and the history they can teach us, but recognizes that institutions' historical perspective on objects excludes other constructive ways of thinking about—and respecting—artifacts that were once alive. "I don't think we can answer these questions," she said. "What interests me is being able to ask them." •

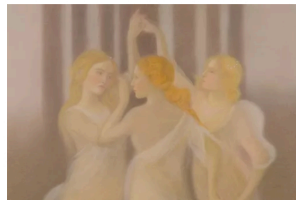
Veena McCooles

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