

Forgotten Forms

EDRA SOTO AND YHELENA HALL // CHICAGO CULTURAL CENTER

By Susan Snodgrass

[THE SEEN]

“Memory’s architecture is neither palatial nor theatrical but soft,”¹ writes Lisa Robertson. In her manifesto of “soft architecture,” Robertson rejects the “structural deepness” of architecture, embracing instead the surfaces and materials of the city with its textures of the everyday. The exhibition *Forgotten Forms* at the Chicago Cultural Center pairs the works of Edra Soto and Yhelena Hall, whose transformations of architectural elements of the everyday interrogate narratives of place to configure new urban landscapes marked by traces of memory. Working with abstract vocabularies that are distinct and personally derived, Soto’s immersive installations draw on decorative motifs that embellish the vernacular architecture of her native Puerto Rico, while Hall’s sculptural assemblages are crafted from remnants of concrete found in the

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environs of Chicago. These disparate spatial and cultural legacies mark shifting dimensions of absence and presence, a dialectic that also plays out within each artist’s individual body of work. —————
————— *Graft* (2018), the most

recent version of Soto’s ongoing series of architectural interventions, transforms the Cultural Center’s lower-level gallery into a site for active viewing and engagement, which is keeping with both the civic institution’s public mission and the artist’s commitment to social practice. The central component is a continuous wood screen that runs the length of the gallery’s street-side windows, obscuring our view of the outside world. Instead, the viewer’s gaze is directed to the screen inside, painted a vibrant monochrome coral and punctuated with a rhythmic pattern of geometric cut outs. Architectural in its own right, Soto’s construction (measuring 10 feet tall by 38 feet wide) is based upon the ironwork grills that function as ventilation and protective barriers for homes throughout Puerto Rico. Known as *rejas*, their European and Afro-Caribbean sources are varied, originating from the dwellings of African slaves, then appropriated by the Spanish during colonial rule, and later found on Creole-style houses that populate San Juan’s working-class neighborhoods. —————
————— Soto’s excavations of these histories are central to the political efficacy of *Graft* and its various iterations, which since 2013 the artist has adapted to other cultural spaces and public sites.

While responding to the specifics of each location, this evolving and itinerant installation reveals how the metaphoric significance of one site might represent another site, akin to Robert Smithson’s notion of non-site. To graft, as the title implies, is both to implant and to acquire unfairly. Thus, Soto’s interventions perform a kind of reverse appropriation: by grafting a cultural marker of the island’s domestic life into Western architectural spaces, she upends legacies of territorial subjugation and privileges the varied range of Puerto Rican identities. These identities, including her own, are given further visibility in several photographic images observed through fifty small viewfinders implanted within the patterned wall. Revealed are everyday street scenes, private interiors, and palm trees, as well as images of Soto’s other works, including previous versions of *Graft*. However, their diminutive scale and placement just below eye level challenge one’s ability to access the images—a conceit that is intentional, positioning the viewer as an outsider or voyeur, at the same time creating a portrait of Puerto Rico that is at once intimate and remote. —————
————— Despite being a US territory, for many Americans, Puerto Rico remains a fictive other, but one whose very real identity has become





indelibly linked, and changed, with the devastation of Hurricane Maria. Just as information is central to our understanding of the political realities of this Caribbean island, so too are the commissioned texts in the form of printed newspapers, handouts, and downloadable PDFs that accompany each installment of *Graft*. To this end, the artist has installed two large shelters at either end of the gallery that provide benches for viewers to pause and read. Similarly painted in bright coral and fabricated using the *rejas* design, these shelters resemble bus stops: public spaces that denote passage and waiting, states of in-between

one might equate with the political and economic conditions that have defined Puerto Rico post-Maria. But to wait is also to share time and space with others. And like Soto's related projects (including her inaugural installation and programming of The Commons, a community space at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago), the *Graft* shelters additionally become hubs for gathering and the exchange of ideas.

Whereas *Graft* offers an expanded field of interaction, the five sculptural works of Ukrainian-born artist Hall present moments of curiosity. Her materials

are residual artifacts of Chicago's buildings, sidewalks and streets—pieces of broken curb, slabs of drywall, and concrete that are subtly polished and mounted onto steel supports. Displayed either directly on the floor, or in the case of *Column 2* (2016) on a traditional white pedestal, Hall's found artifacts are presented as *objets d'art*, a mainly Duchampian exercise of ironical gesture and objecthood. Later works from 2018 are titled by the street address where each remnant was discovered, tangibly situating the artist's intervention. However, Hall's project primarily resides in the artist's fascination for the crumbling

infrastructure of the contemporary urban landscape, and in concrete as the city's foundational material—a quasi-nostalgic “ruin gaze” that forgoes deeper, more complex social and economic histories of urban decay.

As the recent “archeological turn” in art reminds us, objects are never neutral, but rather carriers of meaning that “serve as traces of authentic experience.”² Architecture also embodies lived experience—one that transcends mere physical structure and static form to become a spatial environment where the public and private are negotiated.



For Robertson, “Architectural skin, with its varieties of ornament . . . express[es] gorgeous corporal transience.”³ Whether through individual experience or personal encounter, ornamental motif or material fragment, *Forgotten Forms* recuperates lost or forgotten architectural histories in discrete forms that remap the spaces they inhabit.

Forgotten Forms at the Chicago Cultural Center ran from February 2—April 9, 2019.

- 1 Lisa Robertson, *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture* (Canada: Coach House Books, third edition 2011), p. 13.
- 2 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 135.
- 3 Robertson, p. 129.

TITLE PAGE:

Forgotten Forms, installation view, Chicago Cultural Center. *Graft* (wall), 2019 by Edra Soto

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Edra Soto, Detail of *Graft* (wall) with photograph, 2019.

PREVIOUS SPREAD:

Forgotten Forms, installation view, Chicago Cultural Center. *Graft* (wall), 2019 by Edra Soto

OPPOSITE:

Edra Soto, Detail of *Graft* (wall) with photograph, 2019.

BELOW:

Forgotten Forms, installation view, Chicago Cultural Center. *Graft* (wall), 2019 by Edra Soto

