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Edra Soto

Hyde Park Art Center

By Susan Snodgrass
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Edra Soto, *Destination/El Destino*, 2023, aluminum foil, aluminum, Sintra, wood, plastic, concrete, ink-jet prints, latex paint, 12 × 60 × 12'. Photo: Eugene Tang.

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For Chicago-based, Puerto Rican–born artist Edra Soto, home is a psychic, geographic place as well as a locus for gathering and community. It is also a political space that defines who we are as civic and social beings. The complex relationships between citizenship and migration, displacement and belonging, inform the impressive suite of sculptural installations comprising “Destination/El Destino: A Decade of GRAFT,” an unconventional survey celebrating ten years of this ongoing project by Soto.

Her series of nomadic installations transposes vernacular design elements derived from Puerto Rico onto the existing architecture of a museum or gallery and within various outdoor public sites to create large-scale, immersive environments that redefine what constitutes home and homeland. The works’ abstract ornamental motifs are based on the *rejas* (wrought-iron grilles) and *quebrasaes* (concrete-block screens) that provide protection and ventilation for the island’s houses (the structures’ Afro-Caribbean origins can be traced to the African slave trade during Spanish colonial rule). These objects are employed by the artist as symbolic markers of her birthplace’s culture and history. As the title suggests, Soto’s interventions invoke both the medical and horticultural meanings of graft—to transplant organic tissue onto another life-form in order to heal it or make it whole—as metaphors for migration that also challenge established definitions of site specificity. Each iterative installation responds to the spatial conditions of its location. Grafting markers of the island’s domestic life onto seemingly neutral settings creates counternarratives to known architectural histories, symbolically upending centuries of territorial subjugation to assert Puerto Rico’s diverse cultural identity.



The Hyde Park Art Center (HPAC) offered a fitting tribute to Soto’s interventionist project, which the artist originally developed while a participant in this venerable institution’s studio-critique program in 2013. The resultant *Graft* (1), a decorative screen of painted white wood created for Terrain Exhibitions in Oak Park, Illinois, in 2013, encased the front porch of a house, while *Graft* (2), 2013–19, the artist’s first interior installation, occupied the glass walls and windows of HPAC’s library and meeting room. The exhibition shunned any strict chronology while highlighting *Graft*’s many formal and conceptual developments over time, via fifteen sculptural fragments interwoven throughout the space in dialogue with each other. For example, the hard-edge geometry of earlier works gave way to more sinuous, organic patterns in various recent installations; shifts in palette (including Caribbean corals and greens) and explorations of various materials (ranging from wood to steel to concrete) reinforced *Graft*’s seemingly endless array of permutations and possibilities. Small viewfinders embedded within these fragments revealed miniature photographs of the original location where each work was installed. Previous versions depicted family portraits and images of Puerto Rico’s architecture and rich landscape. Also included were artifacts from several related public-art pieces, including the gazebo-like *Screenhouse*, 2019–23, currently on view in Chicago’s Millennium Park.

Graft’s most recent evolution culminated in the exhibition’s central titular installation, *Destination/El Destino*, 2023, a monumental open-frame dwelling whose exposed infrastructure of interlocking aluminum tubing is repurposed from a previous public work, *Casa-Isla/House-Island*, 2022, formerly installed in a lagoon of the Chicago Botanic Garden. *Graft*’s many themes of cultural memory and resiliency were reimagined here through a shimmering facade of more than five hundred hand-tooled aluminum stars that take their inspiration from the Akan people of Ghana. Soto reinterprets this Adinkra symbol, still found throughout Puerto Rico, in alternating patterns of silver, copper, and gold stars that sheath her freestanding shelter in a luminous glow.

True to other installments of *Graft*, various performances and events, as well as a domino table for game playing (created by Soto and her partner, Dan Sullivan) were included in the show, offering a destination for communion—or a kind of “third place,” as sociologist Ray Oldenburg termed spaces for informal public life. Transcending dimensions private and public, personal and political, *Graft* imagines home across multiple spaces and time, a project that has proven both generative and generous.

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