

FINANCIAL TIMES

November 15, 2021
By Jonathan Griffin

Sculptor Beatriz Cortez: ‘Imagining is already optimistic’

The El Salvador-born, LA-based artist melds indigenous culture into her vision of the future for AIB’s Washington DC exhibition



© Greg Kahn

The Arts and Industries Building, built in 1881 by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC, began life as a place to house artefacts from the 1876 World’s Fair in Philadelphia. It became the US’s first national museum. Over the years, its purpose was rejigged as new Smithsonian museums spawned around it, and it accrued various nicknames from “the Mother of Museums” to “the Palace of Invention”.

In 2004, it closed for a much-needed renovation — lasting 10 years and costing \$55m. Rachel Goslins, director of the AIB since 2016, tells me she is fond of all its nicknames. They have played into discussions over what this “beautiful, riotous, monumental” exhibition hall could, or should, contain.

Meanwhile, to mark the AIB’s public reopening and to celebrate the Smithsonian’s 175-year anniversary, Goslins has organised an exhibition worthy of her institution’s bold, forward-facing tradition. FUTURES will combine artefacts from the Smithsonian’s collections with interactive displays and some newly commissioned artworks, all themed around visions of the future based in collective humanity, inspiration, pragmatism and hope.

One of those commissioned artists is Beatriz Cortez, sculptor and academic born in El Salvador and based in Los Angeles. “We chose artists who had a practice of future-thinking already embedded in their work,” Goslins says. In recent years, Cortez has gained increasing attention for artworks that combine science fiction with ancient, indigenous knowledge and spiritual belief.



Detail of 'Chultún El Semillero', a space-time capsule inspired by ancient Mayan culture, filled with living plants, seeds and tools © Greg Kahn

Her studio is off a gated compound near downtown Los Angeles, arrayed with shipping containers, caravans and a bus tricked out for the annual arts event Burning Man. Cortez invites me through heavy plastic-strip curtains. Still wearing protective glasses and a thick Kevlar welding sleeve, she warns me not to touch a steel armature she has been welding “in case it’s still hot”.

Cortez learnt to weld in 2016, during an artist’s residency at the auto body shop of Cerritos College in Norwalk — a working-class city south-east of Los Angeles that is about 70 per cent Hispanic. “I see my work as a homage to immigrant workers who are improvising, doing things they were not trained to do,” she says.

In the centre of the crowded studio sits her unfinished sculpture for FUTURES. About five feet high, the steel structure calls to mind both a space capsule and a bulbous asteroid. Its framework lends it a rugged functionality, while its hammered, rounded panels were inspired, Cortez says, both by the shells of sea urchins and by dresses sewn by her grandmother.

When finished, “Chultún El Semillero” will consist of two such capsules, connected by a narrow tunnel. In one, plants will grow under lamps. The other will store seeds and carry, at its centre, a welded steel boulder inscribed with a formula for the future distribution of the seeds, developed in collaboration with Cortez’s mathematician brother and written in Mayan symbols. The title is a reference to pre-Columbian Mayan chultúns — huge storage vessels carved into the rocky ground, used as cisterns for drinking water, or food cellars — “all the things that are precious and preserve life”, Cortez says.

I ask her how legible her formula for the survival of life on Earth would be. “Some people will read it, because they understand Mayan signs,” she replies. “Some people won’t be able to read it, so they will have to look it up.” It’s an uncompromising response from someone weary of being told that her culture, or the cultures she studies, are marginal, obscure, unimportant.

Cortez attempts, through her work, “to be a time traveller”. While the engine of her art is her contemplation of the future, its fuel is the ancient knowledge of indigenous peoples. And in her recent academic work in the fields of posthumanism and speculative philosophy, Cortez has been asking “will plants remember humans when we’re gone?” She has researched the migration of plants in the Americas via the powerful United Fruit Company, as well as the agricultural explorer programme initiated by the US Department of Agriculture in the early 20th century.



Detail of 'Chultún El Semillero' © Greg Kahn

I ask Cortez if she traces her own lineage to indigenous people. “I’m a mutt! I’m not anything!” she laughs. “I refuse to be defined, because I think everything is about the future and not about the past.”

“My work is not about me,” she continues. “I worry that people will read my work based on my biography and think it’s about identity politics when it’s about something deeper.”

Nevertheless, Cortez tells me her immigrant story: how, before her birth in 1970, Cortez’s parents lived in New York, frugally but joyously, before they returned to El Salvador to raise their family; how they endured a decade of violent civil war until, one night in 1989, they told their daughter she must leave the country. Two hours later, Cortez was on her way to join her older brother in Arizona.

She hated Arizona. “I was coming from the tropics. I ended up in a place that was red like Mars. It felt like there were no plants.” But once enrolled at Mesa Community College, studying art, she found a place that “gave me calm and made me survive the trauma of migration”.

She has a PhD in literature and cultural studies from Arizona State university and has taught Central American and transborder studies since 2000 at California State, Northridge, where about half of students are Hispanic or Latino. “I’m surrounded by students who’ve had similar experiences of migration as I did. They inspire and inform my work.”

Before I leave, I ask her the question at the centre of the FUTURES exhibition: “What do you think of when you think of the future?” Is she an optimist or a pessimist? “Well, it’s interesting,” she replies. “My work is very much about optimism, about the survival of different peoples and their travels in the cosmos. But it’s also about doom, and about imagining the end of the Anthropocene.”

For a scholar committed to debunking western, colonialist systems of thought, the end of humankind might not be such a bad thing. “I don’t think the ideas about the end of the Anthropocene are apocalyptic; I think they are about imagining the world from other perspectives,” she says. “If I imagine being a rock, I don’t become a rock, I just am imagining being something else. I am trying to decolonise my desires.”

“Imagining is already optimistic,” she says. “You’re already creating another thing.”

November 20 to July 6 2022, aib.si.edu