

Art in America

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MÓNICA PALMA

Ortega y Gasset Projects

The eleven works on paper in Mónica Palma's first solo show are pared-down abstractions that reflect, almost paradoxically, the dizzying entanglements of contemporary life. Palma's slow, repetitive process results in much-handled drawings whose cloudy monochrome fields are interspersed with sudden disruptions. Creases and folds crisscross the paper, and small stones have been glued onto several of the pieces. Selected from four large bodies of work made between 2011 and 2016, the drawings appeared to float on the walls, seemingly without mounting hardware, curving gently where they had been crumpled and smoothed out.

In an artist's statement, Palma describes her work as "syncretism experienced as synesthesia," and it is this alchemy—her many experiences channeled through a multisensory physical practice—that loads each drawing with a charge far greater than could be expected from its reduced formal means. For a performance during the show's opening, Palma sat on a tiny blue stool chewing on and spitting out shiny rocks of black obsidian onto a large drawing placed on a low table set before her. Obsidian is quickly cooled lava, and it has long been used in this way by Mexican shaman in divination rituals. Instead of leaving the stones where they landed and interpreting the pattern, as would be traditional in such rituals, Palma put them back in her mouth and spit them out again, denying fate's conclusive power. Several of the works that hung on the walls likewise incorporate obsidian stones and convey such a denial. In *Four Draws* (2016), Palma glued the stones onto a yellow-and-black sponge-painted sheet of paper; pulled them off, creating rips in the surface (some of which she left the buff color of the raw paper, while others she painted greenish gray or ultramarine); and then reglued the stones elsewhere on the composition.

Palma sometimes incorporates into her work carved obsidian amulets—discs, hearts, and stars—that can be considered equal parts tourist tchotchkes and links to a sacred tradition. This duality echoes her larger concern with amalgamating various identities into one. The surface of *Mexican Souvenir* (2014) is almost entirely covered by short strokes of oil stick that mass together into two large areas of pinkish purple separated by a gray "C" shape.



Mónica Palma, *Mexican Souvenir*, 2014, oil stick on paper, 60 by 44 inches; at Ortega y Gasset Projects.

The sneer implicit in the title (what artist wants her work described as a souvenir?) is at odds with the incandescence of the piece. It's a conscious homage, with its short repeating marks and glowing color, to the textile weavers in her family.

In a 2014 interview published in the online journal *Temporary Art Review*, Palma talks about the challenges of being a female Mexican artist of indigenous descent working in the predominantly white New York art world. Her compositions, which combine references to craft traditions and spiritual practices with a formal vocabulary that recalls that of R.H. Quaytman or Jennie C. Jones, capture the tension of negotiating multiple identities. In the interview, Palma also discusses the eeriness pervading Julio Cortázar's stories, and such a mood suffuses several of the pieces. In *Small Forest* (2012), finger-width streaks on an inky accumulation of gray washes conjure wild branches seen against a night sky. The drawing's support is shaped like an elongated octagon, its perimeter emphasized by thin concentric lines running parallel to the edges. The work feels like a fairy-tale mirror one gazes into only to find a darker world on the other side.

- Julian Kreimer