

Pia Camil

A Pot
for a
Latch

January 13–April 17, 2016
New Museum Lobby Gallery

Foreword

The New Museum is pleased to present “Pia Camil: A Pot for a Latch,” the first New York museum presentation of the work of this Mexico City–based artist. Through a variety of mediums, including sculpture, performance, and installation, Camil exposes the inherent problems as well as the latent potential within urban ruin, drawing inspiration from the inner-city landscape of her native Mexico City as well as from the history of modernism. Her exhibition features a new participatory sculptural installation that was made specifically for the New Museum Lobby Gallery and was inspired by the modular display systems used by vendors that are ubiquitous in the downtown area of Mexico City. Camil presents gridwall panels of her own design, which form a volumetric drawing within the space of the gallery and reference cheap commercial constructions as well as the serial patterning in paintings and sculptures made by Minimalist artists such as Sol LeWitt and Agnes Martin. During designated exchange days, Camil invites the public to participate in the ongoing creation of her piece by encouraging visitors to swap their own unique items for others in the installation. The composition on the grid

panels is thereby in flux and is repeatedly altered throughout the course of the exhibition. In this way, the Lobby Gallery is transformed into a shop of sorts, in which the monetary value of an object is supplanted by its personal history and significance.

I would like to thank Margot Norton, Associate Curator, for initiating this project and working closely with Camil to realize this dynamic exhibition. Massimiliano Gioni, Artistic Director, supported the exhibition throughout, as did Sam Rauch, Director of Exhibitions Management; Walsh Hansen, Chief Preparator; Kelsey Womack, Exhibitions Associate; Jillian Clark, Production Technician and Preparator; and Melisa Lujan, Registrar; all of whom brought patience and skill to the exhibition planning. Kerry Cox and Ryann Slauson facilitated the exchange days and the ongoing installation on the grid panels throughout the run of the exhibition. I am grateful to the entire Museum staff and, in particular, to Karen Wong, Deputy Director; Dennis Szakacs, Associate Director, Institutional Advancement; Annie Sultan, Director of Marketing and Community Networks; Jeanne Goswami, Editor and Publications Coordinator; Olivia Casa, Associate

Editor; and Sean Kuhnke, Senior Graphic Designer.

We gratefully acknowledge the generous support of the Mexican Agency for International Development Cooperation, the Consulate General of Mexico in New York, the Mexican Cultural Institute, and the Mexico Tourism Board. Additional support is provided by the Toby Devan Lewis Emerging Artists Exhibitions Fund, the Neeson / Edlis Artist Commissions Fund, and the Producers Council of the New Museum. This publication is made possible, in part, by the J. McSweeney and G. Mills Publications Fund at the New Museum. I would also like to extend our special thanks to Blum & Poe and Galería OMR for their support and valuable contributions throughout the planning of the show, as well as to Sofia Broid, Francisco Cordero-Oceguera, Gabriela Jauregui, Mateo Riestra, and Lorena Vega, who collaborated with the artist on many aspects of the presentation.

Above all, the exhibition would not have been possible without Pia Camil’s hard work and inspired vision.

Lisa Phillips
Toby Devan Lewis Director



Left and right: “Pia Camil:
A Pot for a Latch,”
2016. Exhibition views:
New Museum. Photos:
Maris Hutchinson

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Interview with Pia Camil

by Margot Norton

Margot Norton: What was the initial inspiration behind your work for the New Museum, *A Pot for a Latch* [2016], and how did the ideas for it develop?

Pia Camil: It came from my visits to downtown Mexico City and the dense areas of display structures that I would encounter, which form a kind of universal system for a specific type of low-end commerce. At first, my interest in their surfaces—the slat walls and grid-paneling—was purely formal, and I began to find linkages or possible relationships between them and Minimalist art, like between slat walls and works by Frank Stella from his *Copper Paintings* [1960–61] or *Black Paintings* [1958–60] series. With the grids, the first and most obvious art reference in my head was Sol LeWitt and his volumetric cubes that are repeated. I noticed that when standing at one point in the markets downtown, I would see multiple layers and complex volumes generated by the improvisational method of hanging merchandise. You see one stand next to the other, next to the other—and one has hats, the other has T-shirts, etc. In my head, I thought that this composition could work well spatially because it creates a kind of moiré pattern.

I have always loved downtown Mexico City—it’s just so incredibly insane. I love how chaotic it is but, at the same time, how naturally things occur there because there’s no hierarchy between good and bad, and there’s no real concept of high and low. I have always been interested in how to generate aesthetics from contexts that seem to be on the fringes of society.

MN: Does this tie in to your interest in what you have described as the “aestheticization of failure”?

PC: Totally. There is a sense of being aware of things that would normally be seen as failures—and seeing the aesthetic potential that could be there. The phrase “aestheticization of failure” came up after thinking about my

specific approach to art-making and how, while I make very formal work, I want “good taste” to be flipped on its head. Creativity in Mexico is tied to ingenuity; it involves a particular way of thinking and working around obstacles in an improvisational manner. This approach to making or constructing things often gives way to wacky and unexpected results that aren’t necessarily informed by good taste—and that’s what I like about it.

For my *Highway Follies* [2011] and *Espectaculares* series [2012–ongoing], I started looking at my archive of images, including abandoned billboards, unfinished houses, and the strange things that I saw downtown. I became obsessed with the topics that I was exploring, and they opened up questions as varied as what my role as a woman is, what it means to be saturated with images and by-products of commercial culture, what the economic and sociopolitical context that I exist in is, and what the broader effects of capitalist society are. The *Espectaculares* series became an essay about the spectacle of the billboard and understanding it through personal terms.

MN: In the *Espectaculares* works, you are taking the structure of the commercial billboard and reinventing it through craft techniques and the very tactile material of hand-dyed and salvaged fabrics. There is an interesting tension here between the mass-produced and the hand-made. You take something that is so fast-paced and easily consumed by the general public, such as a billboard, and transform it by using techniques that take time and are coveted to some degree.

PC: When I first started the *Espectaculares* series, I’d never sewn or hand-dyed anything in my life. However, it involved a very conscious choice of medium and technique. I thought that if I wanted to discuss failures of capitalist economy and the devastating effects and environmental impact that industry has, then I should create work that is time-consuming and craft-based, which was a very

different way of producing work for me. I also collaborated with a local seamstress on the creation of these works and drove out of the city to the ranch where she lived. For this series and a later work, *Wearing-Watching* [2015] for Frieze Projects, I knew that I didn’t want to create large-scale curtains and eight hundred ponchos in factories with five thousand workers and pay them two cents each—I wanted to hire a team of really talented women seamstresses.

MN: You mentioned that the *Espectaculares* and *Highway Follies* works were informed by your archive of images of things that you saw in Mexico City. Were the display structures that you saw downtown, which initially inspired *A Pot for a Latch*, an ongoing interest of yours and part of this image collection you described? Or did you think about the project knowing about the particular space you were showing in—the New Museum Lobby Gallery?

PC: It was both. It was part of my archive of things that I’ve been wanting to realize—to work with the display structures. Every work that I’ve made is very much influenced by the characteristics of a specific space. In the case of the New Museum Lobby Gallery, it reminds me of a shop window or a space for commercial display. I didn’t want to create a work that was isolated and not take advantage of those qualities. I love working with spaces because they generate specific circumstances that you have to work around, which become part of the piece in the end.

MN: I thought of your work specifically for the Lobby Gallery when I proposed the show because of the way that you have responded to interesting architectural spaces in the past. Even with your project *Wearing-Watching* for Frieze, for which you gave away eight hundred handmade ponchos to the public, you were responding to the context of an art fair and how the viewing of your work changes depending

on the environment where it’s shown. The Lobby Gallery is a very specific space. It has a fishbowl quality to it because one wall of the space is made entirely of glass. The people who are eating in the café, or even walking by on the street, are in dialogue with what is going on in that space.

PC: Because the shop and café are there, and people are hanging out in the Lobby around the gallery, the viewers’ attention spans are different than when they’re surrounded by white walls—perhaps they are more relaxed and have a feeling of just passing by. I became interested in how that relates to the dynamic of the showcase. The idea started with the grids, which begged the question of what to put on them. Then we discussed it on the phone, and I thought that a simple installation was too rigid or stale for such a highly visited and dynamic space—I wanted it to have some level of interaction or participation. It also came out of a direct response to *Wearing-Watching*, where I began to really value the extra element of the public’s participation in the work. I didn’t want the work to just involve a passive experience limited to looking at the art. I thought about what you said, in terms of the space having multiple viewing perspectives, and imagined myself sitting in the café looking in. It is a simple gesture that you do a lot in New York. The ground floor of New York is pretty much a shop window—it’s all commercial space—and looking in forms a huge part of your day.

The desire aspect is emphasized in *A Pot for a Latch* by the fact that people can participate and that they can realistically acquire the objects that they’re seeing. I am also thinking back to the values that surround art and the idea that there is good taste associated with how you relate to objects. I very much dislike the idea that the work has to be on an unreachable pedestal that the viewer moves around; I want instead for the viewer to have a sense that the work is flexible and moving.



Top: Pia Camil in collaboration with Guillermo Mora, *No A Trio A*, 2013. Inaugural performance, La Casa Encendida, Madrid. Courtesy the artist. Bottom: Pia Camil, *The little dog laughed*, 2014. Hand-dyed and stitched canvas, 106 ¼ x 330 ¾ in (270 x 840 cm). Courtesy the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles

MN: Getting back to what we were talking about before regarding Mexico City, I think that this idea that people creatively solve problems and circumvent obstacles relates to the gridwalls, which are used to set up shop at any location: you put them out on the street, and whether or not you have a permit, their structure forms a framework that somehow makes it official that you’re selling something.

PC: Yes, the gridwall systems are made to be incredibly temporary shows of display and ways to generate commerce while avoiding any kind of

permit. These grid structures are usually tied to pulley carts, and the merchandise sits at the front. The carts are typically small enough so that they can fit into the metro and the buses, and are easily transported. When they are put out on the street, they are unfolded very quickly into pre-assembled structures.

MN: With *A Pot for a Latch*, you’re tapping into this idea of exchange—not monetary exchange, but rather the exchange of an object for an object. Why did you decide to take money out of the equation with this work?

PC: When I started thinking about the possibility of establishing an exchange with the public I immediately thought of old systems of trade like the *tianguis* [markets that originated in pre-Hispanic Mexico] and the Native-American potlatch ceremony. I came across a book called *The Gift* by Marcel Mauss that uses “potlatch” as a general term to describe different systems of exchange and the power brought about by exchange. He describes the act of giving and receiving as involving a contract between two or more people

in which all sorts of political, spiritual, and social relations are established. The possibility of generating other types of relationships between the public and between the objects themselves in the absence of money interested me. In my work I have focused on failures of capitalist economies, and I thought this would be a good way to comment on alternative systems and relative values in relation to the art market and its way of operating. More and more, it seems like the experience of viewing an art object is directly linked to its

economic value, which limits our perception of it. Investing the artwork with personal histories and the possibility of participation seemed like a good way to bring some power back to it.

MN: Lately I have been thinking about the way that people interact with objects and how it has changed quite dramatically in recent years. Since the advent of the smartphone and social media, images and objects have become much more disposable—we consume them at such a rapid pace that they are nearly invisible. I think that, in response to this environment, many artists today are adopting techniques that force the viewer to engage with the work and spend time with it. This relates to what you were saying before about the relationship between the viewer and the art object, and I think that this is evident in how you reference a framework that typifies the rapid pace of commercial culture and highlight it, which forces us to examine these behaviors and slows them down.

PC: For *Wearing-Watching* I thought a lot about how we view, assess, and distribute work. I think that art fairs have done a great job at successfully marketing contemporary art, so much so that artists now produce work based on art fair agendas, which is a practice that never existed before. Since large numbers of people go to art fairs, the way that we learn to see and experience work is through social media, selfies, and Instagram: you see so many people in fairs snapping selfies with art behind them, and this becomes the experience of viewing art, which shortens your attention span to a second. In a fair, all of these artworks are brought together in a very synthetic environment where they're decontextualized—similar to how they would be seen on a smartphone or a computer. With *Wearing-Watching* I wanted to highlight those dynamics by drawing attention to the viewers and making them the center point of the work.



Pia Camil, *Wearing-Watching*, 2015. Eight hundred ponchos made from leftover fabric and given out for free, dimensions variable. Courtesy Frieze Projects. Photo: Timothy Schenck

Hélio Oiticica's *Parangolés* series [1964–79] was a perfect reference point because the whole aim of Oiticica's piece was for you to become incredibly aware of the dynamic between yourself as spectator and the art object, and to even embody the work yourself. To Oiticica's example I added my perverse element of generating high desire and value, and the only way that you can do that in an art fair context is to give the work away for free. This very simple act of giving away something generated expectation and desire. It was interesting to witness and almost scary at some points because I hadn't realized the potential that it could have. It was overwhelming because it brought out the worst and the best behaviors: some people were very appreciative and thought it was a generous act and thanked me, and others went insane and broke social etiquette. With the New Museum piece, I have a similar interest in engaging the public to generate an added layer of meaning to the work. The public's participation contributes to the work to a certain degree, and both projects take away the monetary aspect in order to show the inner-workings of commerce more closely. The difference with the New Museum piece is that nothing will be given away for free; rather, it gives the responsibility to the public to

generate a good collection of objects without relying on the artist. But I like the fact that it is a toss in the air and requires having some faith—I provide the infrastructure, but the people make the piece.

MN: There's the unknown variable of how the public is going to respond and participate in the creation of the work.

PC: I think that participation is key to what you were saying before about slowing down the experience of viewing the work. Once there's an open invitation to participate, you're generating an experience rather than simply presenting something that would take a second to look at.

MN: The public becomes part of a piece that wouldn't even exist without them.

PC: This is where the fish tank effect of the Lobby Gallery is effective, because when someone goes inside the piece, they become part of the multilayered composition, and it becomes highly performative—the act of looking or shopping, to a certain degree, becomes a kind of performance. People who are seeing it from the outside become aware of how

people behave when they're looking at the objects on the grids, which exist somewhere between pieces of art in a museum and things that can be yours if you are participating in the exchange. The piece makes the experience of shopping in a store somehow equivalent to being in a museum. Both activities have the same aspects of voyeurism and desire, and I hope the piece can help us to understand and analyze how these dynamics work in different circumstances.

Like many of my works, *A Pot for a Latch* has art references, but the real inspiration for it came from the street, and with it I am merging both worlds. I've always liked to do this because it subverts both the art world and the public's experience, and levels them. Rather than conforming to a set of established values, the work turns things on their heads—it lets you see a different and unusual perspective that gives you the responsibility to generate a whole new system of valuation.



Pia Camil, *A Pot for a Latch* sweatshirt, 2015 (detail). Courtesy the artist



Documentation of Pia Camil's process for Frieze Projects, 2015. On the wall: Pia Camil, *Túnica para mujer* [Women's tunic], 2014. Hand-dyed and stitched fabric, 63 x 118 in (160 x 300 cm). Courtesy the artist

Pia Camil was born in 1980 in Mexico City, where she continues to live and work. She has exhibited internationally at venues including Frieze Projects, New York (2015); Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, Middlesbrough, England (2015); Saatchi Gallery, London (2015); Biennial of the Americas, Denver (2015); and Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León, Spain (2011). Her recent solo presentations include "The Little Dog Laughed," Blum & Poe, Los Angeles (2014); "Entrecortinas: Abre, Jala, Corre," Galería OMR, Mexico City (2014); "Espectacular Telón," Galerie Sultana, Paris (2013); and "Cuadrado Negro," Artium Basque Centre-Museum of Contemporary Art, Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain (2013). Camil's first solo exhibition in a United States museum, "Skins," was presented at the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati (2015–16).



"Pia Camil: A Pot for a Latch," 2016. Exhibition view: New Museum. Photo: Maris Hutchinson

Published by:
New Museum
235 Bowery, New York, NY 10002
On the occasion of
"Pia Camil: A Pot for a Latch"
January 13–April 17, 2016

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Printer: Linco Printing

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NEW
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NEW YORK NY
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"Pia Camil: A Pot for a Latch" is made possible by the generous support of:



Additional support is provided by the Toby Devan Lewis Emerging Artists Exhibitions Fund and the Neeson / Edlis Artist Commissions Fund.

The Producers Council of the New Museum is gratefully acknowledged.

Special thanks to Blum & Poe and Galería OMR.

This publication is made possible, in part, by the J. McSweeney and G. Mills Publications Fund at the New Museum.