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Amalia Mesa-Bains and the Archive: An Interview with the Artist

Amalia Mesa-Bains and Madison Treece

The following is an interview between editorial board member Madison Treece and celebrated Chicana artist Amalia Mesa-Bains. Treece has worked as Mesa-Bains's archivist since 2017. For this issue on "document/ary," Treece asked Mesa-Bains about the function of the archive as document, its contributions to Chicana art history, and its more personal implications. The interview took place on March 9, 2021, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Madison Treece: This issue of *Refract* is titled "Document/ary." Having worked with you and your archive, I see it as comprising both documents and a process of documenting. I'm wondering if you could reflect a little on the archive as documentary, and if the archival process has made you think differently or more deeply about the role of the "document" in documentation.

Amalia Mesa-Bains: Well, I have to say, definitely, because prior to this I just collected material, because I never wanted to throw anything away. Some part of me thought, well, this might be useful someday, so I would continue. And, in my own process as an artist, I make these books, not even drawing books, but they're like books that record what I'm looking for. So, if I did an interview, if I found an article in the newspaper, if I found a little image, I'd tape it in [the book] and then it would build up until I figured out what I was going to be doing. Then the focus would come. And then eventually the making process.

I would say that I'm very language-based as an artist—I always have been. I'm not like, and I always give my friend Carmen Lomas Garza as an example, or Rupert Garcia. They all begin with images. I do not. I begin with words. The words usually come out of some irritation that I have about something that's going on, and I begin to look for things about it. And then those words become part of the document that eventually turns into the direction toward the image and the image making.

Looking at the UCLA Fowler project, *New World Wunderkammer*, is a perfect example. I had altogether, I think, five or six visits to them over a two-year period to select the objects that would be in the cabinet of curiosity. Each time I would go there and get interested in certain objects they would give me books on them. I ended up with like twenty or thirty books. Then, I would go through and tab little notes and that whole process helped me to finally select the objects. Once I selected the objects, then the language came out of that, whether it was violence or genocide or slavery or reconciliation, whatever it was that was happening because of the objects and the people whose objects they were. That became the language of the piece.

I think I've been slightly documenting everything since I was probably a teenager. I have all kinds of things that ended up in the archive. I didn't know anything about archiving when it began. Absolutely nothing. I remember my formal archive started because I went to a class at Stanford with Yvonne Yarbrow-Bejarano and she asked me after, did I have an archive? I said, "I don't think so."

She said, "But you've saved your stuff."

I replied, "Yeah, I save everything."

She said, "Well, you know, Stanford acquires archives. Maybe you should start talking about it."

So she arranged a visit for us to go to the Stanford library. Then she arranged that first two summers for her students to be my archivists. And then there was an interruption, so it kept getting prolonged over time, and you were the last generation—there were two in between who were archiving. But none of them were seriously archiving, they were just organizing materials. I didn't realize what the process was like, except that I got a PhD, so clearly, I liked documents, or I wouldn't have done that. I would've just gone on being an artist.

My degree is in clinical psychology, but that was not really the emphasis. The emphasis was about artists and how artists work, and what they think, and how they develop. So that whole process, which was from '77 to '83 or '84, involved me interviewing all these other artists over years and years. Those documents became part of my life too. My life has been transformed by not just

the process of documentation but the formality of archiving and what that turned out to mean, which I had no idea when I started. Absolutely no idea.

MT: It seems you've been collecting and maintaining a record of your life for a very long time. You've mentioned this, and I've looked in your archive; there are objects, images, and drawings, from your childhood and family records from before that, photographs in particular. You say you didn't make a conscious decision to collect until your friends suggested that you already had an archive on your hands, but maybe reflect a little bit on the process of collecting and how that developed once you came to the realization that you were going to create a more official archive as it exists now. Having had people work on it, did you make any conscious decisions about what would be included or removed?

AMB: I think that there's something that precedes all of it. Precedes documentation, archiving, collecting all of it, and that is memory. My upbringing, my cultural disposition, is one of memory. I've written about it. I talk about it. I've curated shows about memory. It's because I grew up in an ethnic community that doesn't really have a complete racial standing. You're not black, you're not white, you're not indigenous. You're just sort of there, made up of all those things. Your history is never really present anywhere except as a footnote of colonization, or as a footnote of American or western expansion. It's just not there. At the heart of the early Chicano Movement was this kind of cultural reclamation, which is a practice of remembering.

I also grew up in a household where stories were told and nobody was ever forgotten. It didn't matter if they died. It didn't matter if they left. It didn't matter if they never wanted to see us again, we never forgot them. The remembering is part of a practice of living: it helps you to survive. It gives depth to your life because when you're a child, you haven't had enough life yet, but the memories of your parents and your grandparents are infused in the way you look at the world. Your attributes are sometimes recognized because they're like someone who came before. My father's favorite thing when he got angry at me was to say, "You're just like your grandmother." Which, to me, was just the biggest compliment in the world. And I would get all puffed up and happy. What he really meant is that I was kind of ornery and difficult to control, but I didn't get that part. I just thought it was really great.

Memory has guided me since the beginning. I kept letters from middle school, high school, family photos, and eventually it became the basis for a large part of my art making. As I made my way through the [Chicano] Movement

everybody [in my family] took a role in it somehow. I think this probably had to do with my mentor Yolanda Garfias Woo.

She was probably the first person, at least in the Bay Area, to make the Day of the Dead apparent. She did the first show at the de Young Museum in the early seventies. She was close friends with Ralph Maradiaga, who, with René Yañez, ran the Galería de la Raza. I think her presence in my life contributed to the layer that had already been built by my parents and my grandparents. That was another way of finding my role in the Movement, which was largely connected to making altars, and then later *ofrendas*, home altars. I mean, all of it. That is the core. The documentation, that comes later. The memory and the process of memory, that's how it becomes an art practice. Then later, once I'm thoroughly ensconced in altars and *ofrendas*, I start expanding into other sacred forums like *descansos*, roadside shrines, the little chapels, then eventually into historical moments and memory.

When I got the chance to do the *New World Wunderkammer* at Fowler, one of the great moments was when we were in the collections, which are just beyond any comprehension. I was so stunned. The walls open up, and every wall has roughly ten drawers, is ten feet high, and runs probably seven sections to the wall. All filled with objects. Then, they would pull out the drawers and they would have, arrowheads, various weaponry, milagros—the amulets. I got really attracted to the drawers, and the museum said to me, “If you want, we can build a drawer or a casing for the drawer into the cabinets.”

The first time we slid the door open from the cabinet, it was like a miracle. It is a living archive of a moment. That was when I realized I'm staging something that already exists, because I am taking what others might call an “archive,” or a “collection,” and I'm placing it in my own context. I would say the *Wunderkammer* was the most advanced aspect of my collecting and archival tendencies as an artist. And this was while I was doing the archive with you. So, there was some overlap.

MT: Your archive is, then, very much related to your personal history and your artistic practice. But then there's a lot that is work-related, some of the mundane aspects of working at Galería de la Raza, for example: meeting notes, formal correspondence, lots of emails. Why did you feel it was important to keep those documents as well? Is it still coming out of an artistic impulse, or was it just for the sake of formality?

AMB: I never thought my archive was really just about me. I never thought that. I knew it was important because I'm a cross-disciplinary person. I'm a scholar, an activist, a writer, an artist, and an organizer. And I knew that I held on to materials

that didn't exist anymore, anywhere else, from the Galería de la Raza, from Self Help Graphics, from SPARC, even so far as the Caribbean Cultural Center. All those years that I traveled for the shows that were in Europe.

I think it was a conscious effort to establish a social historical record that included all of those things. For example, the (Re)generation Project or, in 1992, I helped oversee the quincentennial project at the Galería. I did a series of exhibitions of Caribbean artists, Central American artists, Latin American artists, and Chicanos in the US. I knew that it would be important because very few other people were doing that. I needed to keep those things. The same thing with the letters and the meeting notes. I don't think you can really understand an organization unless you do that.

At the Galería we gave our records to a project at UC Santa Barbara back in the nineties, perhaps the late eighties, and it all went away. Different directors came in, and every time they threw everything out and started again. I knew in the back of my head; they're going to lose all of that history. I thought, "I'm going to keep everything." Same thing with the Caribbean Culture Center, which was our counterresponse to mainstream organizations, which were trying to do the "diversity thing"—but it was so superficial.

All of our gatherings brought together some of the most important thinkers from diverse backgrounds—Native American, African American, Asian American—we had think tanks in different places over the world. I'm not going to lose that. It is really important for people to see that in the period of the eighties and nineties, there was a movement of multiculturalism across this country and that it was networked together by different organizations and by different leaders. My work with Martha from Caribbean Cultural Center, with Maria Pinedo from Galería de la Raza, and Judy Baca from Social Public Art Resource Center, all of those people. I need to keep it together, because each individual entity might have one section, but I have a lot of the overlapping sections.

It was very conscious. And I didn't realize how much of it I had until we started archiving. Same thing with the residencies when I traveled abroad. I'd keep everything. I thought it was a record of a time, not so much an individual person, but a group of people.

I started thinking about the collective nature of Chicax and Latinx art, how long that has gone on from the very earliest collectives, the Mujeres Muralistas, the Royal Chicano Air Force, Los Four, ASCO, and contemporary ones . . . Slanguage. I think about a collective experience, a group functioning, a disposition toward collaboration. It is very Chicano. It is because we come from larger families, because people who are often low income must work together, whether you're a farmworker, or when I went with my mother to clean houses, or

when our family would contract an orchard and we'd all pile in the pickup trucks and there'd be four families to pick walnuts or whatever. The kids didn't do that much work, but you learn from the beginning that your life is also their life. That collective nature is embedded in my archive. It looks at a period of time, a group of people, a set of organizations, and in some way, underscores this notion of collectivity. I think that's important.

MT: Do you think your archival impulse, this accumulation and collecting is *rasquache*?

AMB: Oh, that was so easy. Or *domesticana*, but it is. I was thinking about it the other day when I saw your word *accumulation*. I thought, "Oh my God, that is a word I used for years to talk about my own work." When other people couldn't understand it. The feminists would call it *bricolage*. And I'd think, "No, no, no, no, no, no." That's much more organized, more formal. I just acquire things and I accumulate them. I do it in every part of my life.

My work has a basis of accumulation and display such that all of it had to be shown. That was the way it came about. In the beginning I didn't make drawings. I didn't have diagrams. I had no measurements. I would show up with bags full of objects in the trunk of my car. They would give me a few pedestals at the Galería or someplace else, and I would move things around and eventually that would turn into an installation. It wasn't until the mid-1980s that I started to be more "professional" as an artist.

So, it has always been quite *rasquache*. That impulse to accumulate and collect is very *rasquache*. It's making the most from the least, which is the phenomenon. It's also *domesticana*, in the sense that as a woman, I accumulate different things than a man probably would. There's not a ribbon, or a piece of lace, or a little paper flower that doesn't make me want to have it and put it in my little box just in case I might need it, and never throw it away.

When I redo these pieces, it gives me a chance to do them differently than I did the first time. I'm very excited about the possibility of redoing these pieces. The joke I've had for years is that I could never have a retrospective because I've used the same fifty objects for over almost fifty years in various combinations in various installations. If I ever had to do any of those installations at the same time, in the same place, what would I do? Run around moving the thing every day? No, I'd have to duplicate them.

MT: That's really interesting that you're thinking about duplicating the objects for the installation.

AMB: Which in some ways is a little bit eerie because the reason they have power is that they've been with me through all those spaces. We were in Istanbul for the Third Biennial, and when we went home the first night, I had laid my materials out on the tables. When we came back in the morning, it had rained and the skylights leaked. There were two inches of water on the floor. The legs of the bureau from *Borders* absorbed the water and swelled up. The sides popped out. All the stuff on the table . . . they'd hurriedly swept the water off and covered it with plastic, but it was too much. Now some of my fifty objects are a little crinkly looking, but they have that memory.

They've been all over the world. They've been through moments of hysterical fits, fights with other artists, whatever it is. To duplicate them is really kind of weird, but I don't know what else to do. I can't start all over and live those moments again because those days are gone. The best I can do is find something that's close, or make something that's similar, but they'll be symbolic.

MT: That's kind of uncanny; being so familiar with your work, I understand how important embodiment, both your physical presence and personal memory, is to the installations—it is what imbues the objects with meaning.

AMB: Yes. I used to have wonderful talks about the “valence” objects have when I taught installation. I would show students how, you take two objects and they're this far apart. Then you slowly, slowly, slowly move them to here, here, and what happens? Something totally different because they have valence. The objects have a radiant space around them. People always ask, “How do you know when you've got to the right place?” I would reply, “I can't explain it. It doesn't have a logic to it.” Only I know what that's supposed to mean. That's why I never liked anyone else to install for me. They can't possibly know. Your body, your size, your gesture, the length of your arm, your energy, everything determines how you place things.

When I went to see *Transparent Migrations* the first time the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, put it up (before COVID), I walked in and was shocked. It was already done. I thought they were going to do it while I was there. I sent [my friend] Gilbert to go look at it (during COVID) because he can travel and had his shots. I said, “I want you to tell me how far apart the doors are because when I saw it online, they look wide open.” One of the important aspects of the armoire is the space—how far the doors are open is an indication of intimacy, secretiveness, revelation, what you want to reveal, and what you don't. He called me from the lobby of the museum and says, “Oh my God, it's so far apart. So embarrassing.”

I said, “I know! I feel like my little dress is totally exposed.”

He said, “Do you want me to go tell him to close it?”

And I said, “I don’t think they’re going to listen to me.”

I learned that when I sold the first Dolores del Rio piece. The Smithsonian set up a component and said that it is not my piece anymore so I can’t go install it. Then I never sprayed the curtains gold like I was supposed to. To this day they’re bright pink and it irritates me. Once you sell the piece, you just have to make peace with the fact that someone else will decide how it looks and it won’t matter what you think.

MT: That makes me think, coming back to the conversation, that you can write the specs, but they only go so far—the document can’t ever fully replicate that valance or embodiment.

AMB: They’re just about how much space the whole thing is going to take up, but not for that one thing there. Where do you put that? You know, I arrange in the bottom of *Transparent Migrations* that little crystal city of Tenochtitlan with volcanoes, and chinampas, and all of that. With the door being slightly ajar, the light hits it, and they sparkle, but you’re not supposed to have them open enough for people to see everything, because then what’s the secret? What’s the story? You don’t want them to have it all.

MT: We talked about how the process of archiving and documenting contributed to your artistic practice, as well as why your work often documents your personal and your family’s history. In terms of remembering, memory, and how no one is forgotten—it’s a practice of the living. Did you want to elaborate on that a little bit before we move on?

AMB: It’s also a public political strategy. I want people to understand the history, not just of my family, but all those families, because when people look at my work, they will recognize themselves. I think all Chicano art in the early years was really a public strategy to bring the history of oppression and of cultural contribution out into the open. The other was to really counterbalance a racist history.

The memory and retelling of family stories is, on the one hand, my individual family, but it is all families. It is a universal quality of a political history within a narrative that, to this day, is still not accurate. We’ll keep having to do this for years to come. Like now, with the children [incarcerated at the border]. First, we get them out of the cages but where are they going to go? Will they get any school, any recreation, any health checks? We’re going to be telling these stories for years and years to come.

I also want to say something about the archive. First there's the memory, then there's the collecting, then there's the documentation. Eventually, we come to the conscious recognition of an archiving process that also happens to hit developmentally. I am aging, from my fifties to my seventies, I am doing this process. [The archive] is me taking stock of my life, recognizing what place I have in American history, more specifically in Chicanx and Latinx history, and what it's like having a place.

One of the challenges of aging is a sense of a loss of productivity, or a loss of status, or a loss of value. You fight really hard to feel like that is still part of you. Well, I was lucky because the archive gave it all back to me and I went, "Oh my God, I had no idea! No idea that I was ever that productive." I didn't even remember some of the things, and they were important. Not just the prizes and the recognition, but the people that I've met, the places I've been, the things that I was privy to listening to in discussions. I think that the archiving process has been very healthy for me. It's kind of revitalized my sense of well-being, and I've become the institutional memory for a lot of different people. [Archiving] is kind of a salvation in a way, a negotiation with the end.

MT: I think that's interesting and true. Particularly how documenting those histories in your work and archive is a public political intervention once it enters the world. When you make an *ofrenda*, which honors and remembers the people you are close to, do you ever think of this as a documentation of that person, made for the public? Or is the process of documenting specific people more personal?

AMB: Both. It begins, for me, to heal the loss. I just really, really need to hold on to my memory of them. The things we did together, who they were in the world. Then the second part is that I want it to be public because I want people to know how important they were. I want to share that part of history with other people, because I think it's really important. The *ofrendas* for my peers, those are the hardest because I'm not alone. They're important to a lot of other people, but I need to share how we worked together, what we did together. With my family, how else would I survive? Like doing Judy's piece at the Oakland Museum, it's the tradition, but the reason it's tradition is that it's very healing and it helps you. I wish more people could understand that and then they would do it because then they would see that it's not macabre and it's not morbid. It is life-giving because when you do it, you remember them, and you find the little things that made them happy. When you put it all together, it's almost like you're giving it back to them. Yes, it's personally healing, but it's also about wanting to share that sense of a collective history.

The archive is my way of leaving something for other people to learn from. I like to imagine what it would be like for people when they get in there and dig around. I am still deciding on certain things that I will or will not put in, but in general, I think it's a pretty good record.

MT: This might be a question for a different interview, but I'm curious. In this collective moment of mourning that we're experiencing as the world goes through the pandemic, there's something people could learn from that process of remembering that happens through making altars and *ofrendas*.

AMB: Oh, I'm working on that . . .

I'm trying to get organizations across the country to do digital *ofrendas*. Judy [Baca] is doing it with SPARC. I think I have the Galería on board, and I'm working with NALAC [National Association of Latino Arts and Culture] to see if I can get them to ask their organizations to do it. They would be online images for the dead in their region who have died from COVID so that everybody, or at least the Latinos who have passed, will have a place to be remembered. I feel like this Day of the Dead is going to be a very, very important one because this is probably the greatest level of mourning worldwide that we've had since any of the Great Wars.

MT: Undergirding all of this is the important role you've played in establishing the Chicana art field, or just Chicana art in general. How do you think your archive contributes to Chicana history and what do you think it can contribute in perpetuity? I'm thinking specifically about accessibility for students, scholars, et cetera? Then, how do you feel about the fact that you are shaping history by deciding what is documented and then made public or visible?

AMB: I would say that my archive is more concerned with the work of women, the women in my peer group, and other women in the field of Chicana and Latina [art] because I've written about them, I've known them over the years, and I still have communication with them. I feel like that's really important. I'm only sad I haven't done the book of my dissertation, but I feel that the archive provides an insight to some of those women. I have files on all of them as you well know. I have some correspondence with them.

Most of the catalogs that I wrote for are in there. It will be accessible to students and art historians. On this whole discussion about diversifying the museum, it's not a simple fact of collecting artists. If you don't have curators of the group that you're collecting, guiding the process of acquisitions, and curatorial

statements, and exhibitions, it can go all wrong. If you put them in the wrong context or you don't even understand what it is they made. It's a challenge for the next generation. That's what my project at the Galería, (Re)generation, was about, finding a way to get other Latinos and Chicanos out in the field, writing, curating, whatever it takes to move the museum world and the art world further along.

MT: Why was it important for you to have such a strong hand in the archive, and not simply hand everything off to somebody else? Were you thinking about what you wanted people to know about Chicana identity, history, memory, as well as your own life and the lives of those around you? Really, what do you want people to take away from your archive?

AMB: I never thought of handing it off. I also felt like some parts that were so hyperpersonal, early drawing books, my hippie pictures, because you know, the hippie days were a little bit naked, a little wild. I was thinking I could add them to the archive. I think I will just make much more sense to people. In some ways I needed to have my hand in it because I've always felt misunderstood. My *Cibuatlampa* piece, which is in my *Venus Envy* series, is really about being too big.

I was working in a research facility, and the people there were treating me as though I were overbearing, toxic. Once a man said, "You're just like a one-note song because all you talk about is diversity, endlessly, and people are sick of it." I'm thinking, "Why do you think they hired me here? I'm supposed to be writing a book about how to run a diverse classroom." It's that feeling of never fitting in. I didn't fit that space. I was too big, too loud, too outspoken, too everything, and it never went away. I thought the archive would need me to make myself understandable to people. I was tired of being misunderstood.

During that period when I was speaking up to the museums and conferences, I was beginning to feel that I had just worn myself out—doing something that people asked me to do, but that they didn't really want me to do, or they didn't want to have to do what I said they should. That's when I started (Re)generation. I thought, "Okay, if I can't change a sixty-year-old white man, why don't I just go back and grow some other people who can take his place when he retires or whenever?" All of those things made me want to set the record straight. That's what the archive is, setting the record straight.

Underneath it all, I feel like we are still in a battle, and I don't think it will end soon. I said to Richard the other day, "You know, we have to keep going as far as we can to get all this work done because it's a record, and the record is important because other people can claim that record someday as their own." If I

don't put it out for people, if I don't write the things, if I don't give the talks, if we don't have the archive accessible, how will they know?

When I go to the conferences and I tell them this history they stare at me, "When did that happen?" I say, "Before you were born and it's going to happen again. So, you might as well be armed with some history. You might as well know how long we have all been doing this and why it's important to continue to do it." The archive helps that in a bit of a way.

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Amalia Mesa-Bains is an educator, artist, and cultural critic. As an author and lecturer on Chicano art, her work has enhanced understanding of multiculturalism and reflected major cultural and demographic shifts in the United States. She has worked to define a Chicano and Latino aesthetic in the US and Latin America, and has pioneered the documentation and interpretation of long-standing Chicano traditions in Mexican American art. Her artworks have been exhibited and collected in both national and international venues. Mesa-Bains has served on the San Francisco Arts Commission and the Board of Directors for Galería de la Raza and Center for the Arts at Yerba Buena Gardens. She has received special achievement awards from the Association of American Cultures, the Association of Hispanic Artists, San Francisco State University Alumni, the Stanford University Ernesto Galarza Award, and the University of Texas at Austin Americo Paredes Award and is a recipient of a distinguished MacArthur Fellowship. She founded and developed the Visual and Public Art program at California State University at Monterey Bay and is currently Professor Emerita at the university.

Madison Treece (she/her) is a PhD candidate in visual studies in the History of Art and Visual Culture Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her work focuses on contemporary Chicax art and visual culture with an emphasis on borderlands, landscape, and the politics of migration. Madison holds an MA in art history and museum studies from Tufts University and a BA in art history from the University of California, Santa Barbara.