

# salt 1:

Adriana Lara

May 6 – September 26, 2010

# salt 1: Adriana Lara

As museum visitors, most of us have come to expect certain conventions of museological display: a painting hangs in a frame, flat against a wall; a sculpture sits on a pedestal, beneath a glass vitrine perhaps. In this inaugural installment of the UMFA's *salt* exhibition series, Mexico City-based artist Adriana Lara takes the exhibition format itself as an object of inquiry, arranging unexpected objects in unexpected, sometimes humorous configurations that foreground and dismantle the conventions of displaying and looking at art.

It has been nearly one hundred years since the artist Marcel Duchamp introduced the readymade, the term he used to describe manufactured products that he positioned as works of art. With this gesture, Duchamp changed the course of art-making, demonstrating that the choice of object is itself a creative act and that the presentation of an object in a new context gives it a new meaning. These lessons have been internalized and elaborated by subsequent generations of Conceptual artists, for whom ideas are more important than the visual appearance of the artwork. It is this lineage—that of the readymade and Conceptual art—in which Lara works. Yet, even as she frequently employs found objects in her work, she upends our expectations of the readymade, resituating art in the realm of the ordinary. Neither strictly aesthetic nor utilitarian, her works disrupt our attempts to fit them into neat, pre-determined categories.

*salt 1: Adriana Lara* presents several new works alongside pieces from the artist's acclaimed *Installation* series; the latter form a kind of mini-retrospective, restaging projects made over the past few years. In title, Lara's *Installations* play upon the ubiquitous presence of installation art in contemporary art institutions today. Installation art has become a dominant genre, yet the term 'installation' is frequently used to describe an increasingly diverse range of environments and exhibition formats, rendering the term almost meaningless. (Traditionally, 'installation art' proper—as opposed to an 'installation of art'—presents an all-encompassing space into which a viewer physically enters.) Lara's *Installations* exploit the current ambiguity surrounding installation art as a category. Consulting an English dictionary, she decided to illustrate one of the definitions for 'installation': "objects placed with a ceremony." Unlike the immersive experiences on which so much installation art is premised, Lara's *Installations* place an almost perverse emphasis on the literal placement or process of installing an object—on the "ceremonial" actions and accoutrements that attend the making and subsequent display of art.

With surprising arrangements and juxtapositions, Lara imbues objects with ambiguity, asking us to look again, and to look more closely. *Installation (1.75 + 2.00 Diopters)* (2009) consists of a pair of Lara's own eye glasses. Resting partially on their accompanying label, they have ostensibly been set down in



Adriana Lara, *Installation (Seashells)*, 2008, mixed media

a moment of carelessness. Look again and the meaning transforms. Bending down to the level of the display case, the viewer can peer through the lenses, as if seeing with the artist's own eyes. Sharing this case is *Installation (Seashells)* (2008) (fig. 1). A grouping of seashells are here displayed next to an identifying label, with three rogue shells sitting outside, on top of the case. A large conch shell is enclosed in plastic mesh packaging, revealing itself as a store bought souvenir destined for home décor—seashells are more commonly displayed in domestic spaces than in art museums. Yet art objects, like souvenirs from the natural world, are also isolated, cut off from their contexts of origin.

The *Installations* mischievously reflect on how art institutions (museums, galleries, art schools, the broader art market) bestow meaning and value on art. In a museum, mechanisms of display—the props and furniture, lighting and labels—are traditionally meant to fade into the background, serving as invisible supports for the art on view. Lara confounds this

hierarchy of display. *Installation (Toilet Paper) (2008)* echoes the rogue seashells, with a roll of toilet paper that sits atop a plexiglass vitrine on a pedestal, instead of inside the display case, where it apparently belongs. The empty vitrine is rendered useless—one of the defining criteria of art—and may thus be considered an aesthetic object. The roll of toilet paper, on the other hand, retains its usefulness—at least potentially. For *salt 1*, Lara has repurposed the UMFA’s gallery furniture, presenting a case, a pedestal, and a platform riser as her own work. She titles these, in faux bureaucratic fashion, *I.D.S. (Installation Display Structure) #1, 2, and 3*. By defamiliarizing the exhibition format, Lara exaggerates the ambiguous status of the objects on display.

*Installation (Banana Peel) (2008)* involves the participation of a UMFA security officer, who has been instructed to eat a banana each morning and discard its peel somewhere in the gallery. The perishable object is less recognizable as an artwork than as a premise for slapstick comedy, a messy interruption in the otherwise pristine exhibition space. Although the UMFA staff takes care to deposit the banana peel in places where viewers are not likely to step, *Installation (Banana Peel)* nonetheless suggests more sinister intentions on the part of the artist herself. Indeed, Lara has suggested that *Installation (Banana Peel)* is in fact an as-yet unrealized performance piece involving a hapless visitor’s pratfall. *Installation (Plastic Snake) (2006)* (fig. 2) similarly suggests a potential danger. A plastic snake sits atop a stack of poster-sized



Adriana Lara, *Installation (Plastic Snake)*, 2006, mixed media

paper that recalls artist Felix Gonzales-Torrez's 'paper stacks' of posters that viewers may take away with them. If Gonzales-Torrez's work of the 1990s retains a significant presence in contemporary art institutions today, its popularity is due perhaps to the spirit of generosity often attributed to the work (or, from a more cynical perspective, its indulgence of the audience's consumerist desires). Lara's *Installation* withholds generosity, threatening viewers with a snake bite.

Seashells and banana peels: Lara's practice takes the objet trouvé, or found object, as its point of departure. Yet she is less interested in the process by which an object is found, than by the way in which it comes to be lost in the first place. Indeed, *Installation (Abandoned Luggage)* (2009) (fig. 3), composed of an ordinary suitcase, appears not so much a found object, as one that has been hastily left behind. We may imagine that the installation process for this "installation" entails the simple act of walking away. The piece again conjures up Duchamp, who created the



Adriana Lara, *Installation (Abandoned Luggage)*, 2009, mixed media



Marcel Duchamp, *Boîte-en-Valise*, 1935-41, mixed media, © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris / Estate of Marcel Duchamp

*Boîte-en-valise* (1935-40) (fig. 4), or box in a suitcase, which comprises a brown leather carrying case that housed miniature reproductions of the artist's own work—a sort of traveling, readymade retrospective. If Duchamp's readymade teaches us that it is the context in which an artwork is presented that gives it meaning, *Installation (Abandoned Luggage)* points to a 'context' that extends beyond the physical gallery or exhibition space. The naming of the work—*Installation (Abandoned Luggage)*—transforms the ordinary suitcase into another potentially dangerous object (not unlike the banana peel or snake), for since September 11, 2001, luggage 'left unattended' has carried associations of terrorism. The meaning of Lara's abandoned luggage is contingent on a historically specific context—on a particular moment in time. It is conceivable that one day a lost suitcase might again be nothing more than a lost suitcase, rendering Lara's piece devoid of a meaningful context.

Two new works by Lara take the form of canvases printed with reproductions of two modernist paintings; respectively, they are



Adriana Lara, *Sobre Dos Figuras (pareja de niños)*, 2010, digital print on linen

*Sobre Dos Figuras (pareja de niños)* (fig. 5), after a painting by the Mexican artist Fernando Reyes, and *On Untitled (Abstraction)*, by the little-known American Abstract Expressionist, Sam Middleton. These “paintings” do not hang politely in place, but instead jut out a few inches from the wall, slightly askew. To make these pieces, Lara reproduced photographs of the original paintings, printing the images onto canvas; in this way, the works confuse the materials we typically associate with photography and painting. But it isn’t Lara’s aim to pass these prints off as replicas, or even “good copies.” The images are appropriated—sampled, though not stolen. Lara has made her pictures just a little bit different from the originals, inserting a tiny, trompe l’oeil fly that sits on the surface of each canvas. It is a joke—the smallest possible alteration that makes the work her own. Once again, Lara asks us to look more closely. Art inhabits the same world we do—the real world, with its buzzing flies and discarded banana peels.

~ Jill Dawsey, Acting Chief Curator



**Adriana Lara** (b. 1978) lives and works in Mexico City. She is a member of “Perros Negros,” an “art production office” that proposes new platforms for making, exhibiting, and discussing art; is chief editor of *Pazmaker*, a free distribution zine-like publication; and she is part of *Lasser Moderna*, an experimental band that combines Latin cumbia with electronic music. Lara has had solo exhibitions at Artpace, San Antonio, Texas (2009); Gaga Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City (2008); Galería Comercial, San Juan, Puerto Rico (2007); and Air de Paris, Paris, France (2007). Her work has been included in many group exhibitions, including *The Generational: Younger than Jesus*, New Museum, New York (2009); *San Juan Poly/Graphic Triennial*, Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, San Juan, Puerto Rico (2009); Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin, Germany (2009); and *LA MAMAIN ET LA PUTAIN*, Air de Paris, Paris, France (2006).

---

**salt** is an on-going series of semi-annual exhibitions showcasing work by emerging artists from around the world. *salt* aims to reflect the international impact of contemporary art today, forging local connections to the global, and bring new and diverse artwork to the city that shares the program’s name.

salt (sôlt)

n.

1. A colorless or white crystalline solid used extensively in ground or granulated form as a food seasoning and preservative
2. An element that gives flavor or zest
3. Sharp, lively wit
4. A mineral sharing definitive characteristics with Utah's capital city