

# AT BALLROOM MARFA, THREE ARTISTS (RE)CONSIDER THE DESERT

Beatriz Cortez, Candice Lin and Fernando Palma Rodriguez take inspiration from Marfa's harsh desert landscape and the associations conjured by its desolation.

*By Lindsey Reynolds – July 3, 2019*



View of Beatriz Cortez's *Shields*,  
2019, at Ballroom Marfa.  
Photo by Alex Marks.

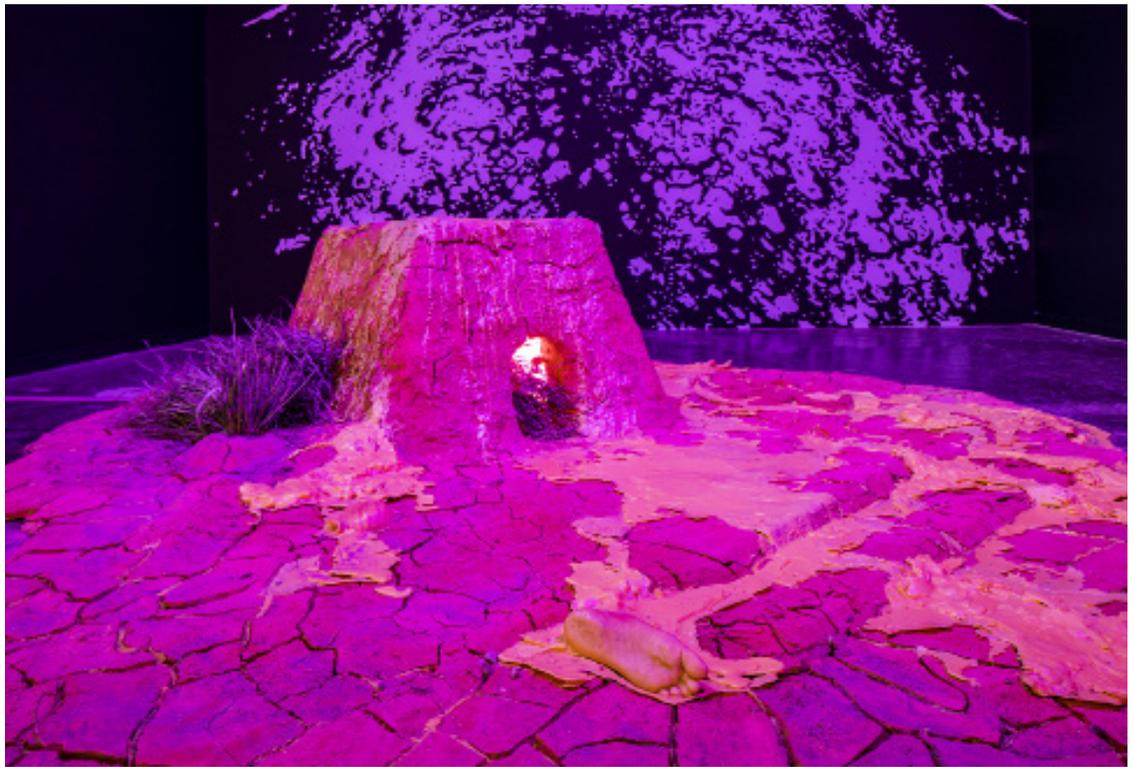
Given its reputation as an increasingly relevant cultural destination, people seem to forget that Marfa, Texas, is in the middle of the Chihuahuan Desert.

Three visiting artists, Beatriz Cortez, Candice Lin, and Fernando Palma Rodriguez, bonded with Marfa's blistering landscape in preparation for their group show "Candelilla, Coatlicue, and the Breathing Machine" at Ballroom Marfa, on view through Oct. 27. Drawing from the peculiarities of the desert eco-

system and associations conjured by its desolation, each artist fits the motif into their practice in what makes for a meandering and decidedly mechanical arrangement of newly commissioned works as well as portfolio highlights. The show is organized by Ballroom director and curator Laura Copelin.

For those who haven't made the trek, Ballroom Marfa is a gallery (slash arts center slash multimedia presenter slash festival venue) housed inside the

Candice Lin, “on the back of syphilis mountain candelilla grows,” 2019. Candelilla wax, beeswax, red clay, cement, paint, grow lights, oil barrel, stagnant water, dried and living candelilla plants. Courtesy the artist, Ballroom Marfa, and François Ghebaly. Commissioned by Ballroom Marfa. Photo by Alex Marks



hull of a historical dancehall. Guests enter through a frosted glass sliding side door that obscures the gallery’s interior. With the current show, you pull the door open and the blazing desert sunlight beams on to Beatriz Cortez’s “The Infinite Mixture of All Things Past, Present, and Future,” also known as the “Breathing Machine”.

The piston-driven sculpture by the Los Angeles-based artist aspirates, rhythmically pumping the pistons up, down, up, down, seeming to push freshly generated air into a row of teeny seedlings that sit atop the machine parts, each a variety indigenous to the Americas. Time will tell if their growth is helped or harmed by aided respiration, but in doing so, Cortez probes humanity’s simultaneous reliance on nature and industry. She questions whether human-made technology can support the natural world which far outdates it in terms of cosmological time and she provides a model in which the two mutually coexist.

Candice Lin also contemplates moments of history through the lens of the desert’s endemic agriculture. In a full-room installation piece entitled “on the back of syphilis mountain candelilla grows,” the California-based artist forms a bleak vignette of colonial tensions over the harvesting of the candelilla plant. In the land surrounding the Rio Grande, indigenous populations used it as a homegrown remedy for syphilis, as European colonizers spread the disease like wildfire. Candelilla is still harvested today though commercially for products like soap and lotion.

Lin’s installation is lit by a sickeningly pink neon glow and the oozing biohazardous terrain is actually candelilla wax, the plant’s healing byproduct. It claims a victim whose parts poke out and whose hands feebly cling to the desert earth. At the center of the piece, candelilla stalks burn inside an earthen altar while a live plant grows nearby. Lin emphasizes

Fernando Palma Rodríguez, “Ahuaxtli,” 2019. Volcanic stone, mechanical material, robotic hands, irons, kettle, water tower, water from the Rio Grande, electronic controller, oil barrel, remote control car, software. Courtesy the artist, Ballroom Marfa, and House of Gaga. Commissioned by Ballroom Marfa. Photo by Alex Marks



the plant’s resiliency despite centuries of cultivation. She also uses it as a foil for the destruction of an entire way of life.

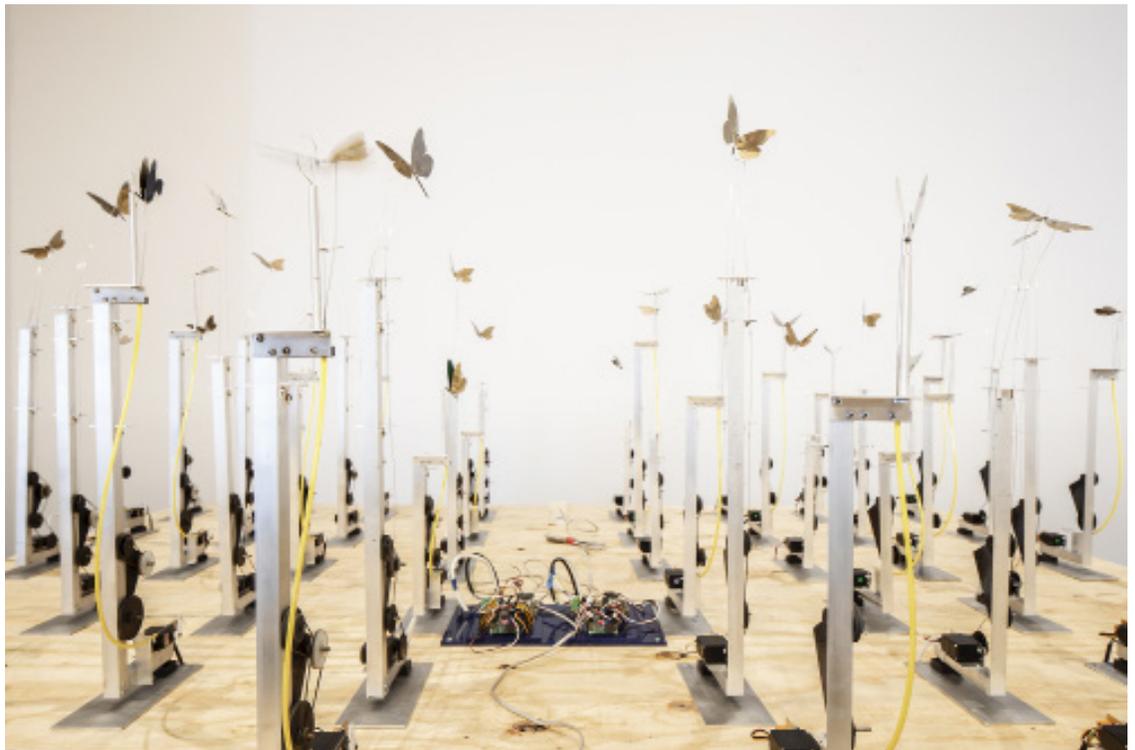
With candelilla and the “Breathing Machine” covered, “coatlicue” refers to the Aztec earth goddess. Fernando Palma Rodríguez, a Mexico City-based artist and activist dedicated to the preservation of the indigenous Nahuatl culture, uses Nahuatl terms as the titles for all of his works in this exhibition.

“Ahuaxtli” means “dew” and it is the mechanical installation piece at the front of the gallery, just behind the “Breathing Machine.” Various plastic pieces and wires string between assorted moving parts and cause a pair of hands to clap and a pair of irons to walk like feet. A remote control truck spins its wheel inside an oil barrel that could crush your feet if you walk too close. His other kinetic sculptures, “Xi mo matlazacan ce cehce”, two mythical cardboard heads

with towering bodies made of ladders, chomp and bite into the viewer’s space.

“Tocihuapapalutzin (Our revered lady butterfly)”, however, requires the viewer to make it move. A pass in front of a motion sensor will send a hundred scrap metal butterflies into a flurry. Palma Rodríguez senses beauty in the refuse of consumerism and fraught international trade — each butterfly is fashioned from a Mexican beer or soda can.

Cortez tinkers with forged materials in a similar fashion. In “The Beast”, she has redesigned the playing field of a broken down pinball machine to be a cheekily critical map of the powers at play in transborder immigration. The player can be captured by La Migra (border patrol) or cast back out into the desert when the ball is flipped. This simulation reminds us of the fun we can have while others must suffer to attain our way of life.



Fernando Palma Rodríguez,  
*“Tocihuapalutzin (Our revered lady butterfly),”* 2012. Microcontrollers, wood, aluminum. Courtesy the artist, Ballroom Marfa, and House of Gaga.  
Photo by Alex Marks

A series of Cortez’s domed structures, reminiscent of those used for playground climbing, sit in the gallery’s outdoor courtyard. These recall provisional housing, something one might construct with very limited resources, but in a hypermodern fashion. Coated in metal and coolly angular, they are only big enough to fit one person. They could be considered oppressive or stylishly minimalistic, depending on the means of who lives there.

Fate and fortune are recurring themes for Cortez. Several fortune-telling boxes scatter the exhibition, where visitors can press a button for a printed receipt of daily advice or an omen. They are printed in both English and Spanish. Visitors leave with an ephemeral souvenir — all in all a moment of lightness.

The three elements of this wide-ranging exhibition represent a trio of perspectives on the long-contested piece of land on which Marfa sits just north of the

U.S.-Mexico border. Between countries, between humans and nature, the desert remains in spite of conflict. It can be unforgiving. It exacts a toll. And these artists urge us not to contribute to that toll.

*“Candelilla, Coatlicue, and the Breathing Machine” continues at Ballroom Marfa through Oct. 27.*



Beatriz Cortez, "The Fortune Teller Machine (Nomad edition)," 2015. Found wood, linoleum, Arduino Uno, thermal printer, thermal paper, mechanical bird. Courtesy the artist, Ballroom Marfa, and Commonwealth and Council. Photo by Alex Marks.



Fernando Palma Rodríguez, detail of "Ahuaxtli," 2019. Courtesy the artist, Ballroom Marfa, and House of Gaga. Commissioned by Ballroom Marfa. Photo by Alex Marks.