

NANCY FRIEDEMANN-SÁNCHEZ

# Turn of the Sea



A flotilla of sorts rests in the center of the gallery as if calmed by the sea. Titled *Travelers and Settlers*, it is the first artwork artist Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez made after settling in Nebraska, years after migrating to the United States from her familial home in Bogota, Columbia. It consists of a few family heirlooms along with boat-like scraps of lumber and driftwood placed on seemingly improvised tables of plywood on wooden trestles. The effect is transitory, suggestive of continual packing and unpacking.



Cabinet (detail), 1625 – 1675, Colombia. Museum no. W.5-2015.  
© Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

The artwork in *Turn of the Sea* explores the ebb and flow of a global transformation that began with the Spanish exploration and conquest of Central and South America and continues through the migratory patterns of the present. Friedemann-Sánchez approaches the subject through her ecofeminist and intersectional point of view, weaving threads of personal history into the larger structure of colonialism and racial identity. Her work is organized into a visual novel titled *Mestiza dos Veces*, “Mestiza two times”, reflecting her mixed-race identity as it would have been classified in colonial Spain. (Friedemann-Sánchez is the daughter of an American and Colombian and has immigrated to the United States, thus the two times designation). A selection of work from *Mestiza dos Veces* is exhibited here.

Like with *Travelers and Settlers*, the other artworks pack up easily. Her *Casta* and *Cornucopia* paintings are overwhelming in size and absolutely, unapologetically beautiful. They are created on black Tyvek, a petroleum product more commonly used to wrap buildings under construction. It rolls up and ships perfectly, then unfurls to hang elegantly on the gallery wall. The compositions and the subject matter appear classically beautiful, full of harmonies and balance. Against the black they glow with a Baroque mystery. Graceful lines and decorative details charm the viewer, beguiling us with pure visual pleasure. And within all that, Friedemann-Sánchez slips in elements of her own *Mestiza* world.



Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez, *Cornucopia 2*, 2017, Ink on Tyvek, 80 x 160 inches.



Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez, Installation view of *River and Travelers and Settlers*.

## A Global Language

Historical structures of design account for some of the appearance here of beauty, particularly the slightly odd but perfectly arranged flowers. Friedemann-Sánchez's work is based upon intensive research into small, intimate types of colonial floral design and a pre-Columbian decorative technique that employs a natural lacquer from the *mopamopa* tree. It is known as *Barniz de Pasto* after the southern Colombian city where it once flourished. In colonial times, decorative *Barniz de Pasto* objects served as prestige objects for the European elite, but their creation relied on a complex merging and converging of class and culture. Native Colombian plant life, European tastes, Latin emblems, and examples of Chinese lacquer were hybridized into a new, surprisingly cosmopolitan vocabulary of décor that originated in the production of trade objects by Indigenous craftspeople.

The monumental bouquets of *Cornucopia 2* and the four *Dream Map and Cornucopia* paintings appear almost delirious, but each bloom was copied from one originally constructed using *Barniz de Pasto*. Examining objects such as a prized 17<sup>th</sup>-century Colombian cabinet from the Victoria

and Albert Museum in London, Friedemann-Sánchez has collected an archive of these floral designs along with animal and symbolic patterns from colonial times. Their outlines and flourishes are not naturalistic. As noted by the V&A Museum: *Because they represent a meeting of three continents and cultures, barniz artifacts have been described as "some of the first works of a globalized world"* (Jorge F. Rivas).<sup>1</sup>

In 2009 Friedemann-Sánchez was awarded an Artist Research Fellowship from the Smithsonian Institute where she examined the elaborate lace that was so popular with the Viceroyalty of New Granada. These patterns were imported by Andalusian nuns who trained Indigenous artisans in the complicated lacemaking techniques. Their industry grew swiftly as the higher castes sought to imitate the dress of the Spanish nobility. In the 53-foot-long *River*, these delicate patterns merge with signs of cultural debris to form its undulating sense of movement. Fluid lines reconstruct details of the nobility's frills into a waterscape that seems to flow unfettered across an entire wall. Only close examination will reveal where remnants of lost culture has affected its path.

## The Feminine

The scale of Friedemann-Sánchez's artwork adds another important layer to our understanding. The length and fluidity of *River* speak not only to great currents and tides, but to extraordinary 20<sup>th</sup>-century artists like Helen Frankenthaler, whose huge, innovative stained paintings from the 1950s struggled for recognition in the male-dominated world of Abstract Expressionism. During that period easel painting was abandoned for large canvases designed as fields in which to awe the viewer with the artist's expressive power. Jackson Pollock's *Mural* is the perfect example of the magnitude with which Friedemann-Sánchez unfurls her flowing lace and floral patterns like a triumphant banner.

Another of the artist's influences is Miriam Shapiro, whose colorful "femmage" artworks (a combination of feminist and collage) were created with materials like quilting, appliqué, and various craftworks that, in the 1970s, were associated with women's homemaking. Like Shapiro, Friedemann-Sánchez wants to see this feminine iconography validated and honored, then further marshals them to evoke and consolidate complex cultural memories.

Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez, Installation view of twelve *Castas*, 2017-2021  
Ink on Tyvek, comb and masks. 80 x 40 inches each.

Beyond art, this sort of material culture, the physical evidence of a people's experiences, is relied upon in several fields including anthropology. Friedemann-Sánchez practically grew up in that discipline, free to explore Bogota's Museo Nacional de Colombia where her mother worked as an influential anthropologist. That background informs the rigor of her research into Columbia's material culture. It also pointed her to the way taxonomy has been used to understand the world.

## Taxonomy

Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez's study of colonial floral patterns naturally segued into a fascination with the colonial world of botanical classification and illustration. She turned her focus to the Royal Botanical Expedition that left Spain for New Granada in 1783, only 25 years after the birth of modern taxonomy. This began with *Systema Naturae*, 1758, by Carl Linnaeus. *Systema Naturae* divided the world into three kingdoms, plant, animal, mineral, each subdivided into classes, orders, genera, species, and varieties. A disciple of Linnaeus, José Mutis, relied on his system to establish a botanical garden in the artist's home city of Bogota. It is still there. There, he categorized more than 24,000 new plants that were illustrated in a distinctly Latin American style by a talented and hardworking team of Indigenous artists. Their illustrated *Flora de Bogotá o de Nueva Granada* was so large not even Habsburg Spain could afford to print it. Unsurprisingly, the seemingly infinite natural resources of the "New World" intensified the further refinement of taxonomy.<sup>2</sup>



By far, the most disputed effort of colonial taxonomy was the *casta* system devised by the Spanish to neatly categorize the quickly compounding racial diversity of children with mixed European, African and Indigenous parents. The term “*casta*” is derived from the Latin “*castus*” (chaste) and implied purity of bloodline. In colonial times it referred to a system of socio-racial classification that impacted every aspect of life from taxation to the right to marry, and it established a hierarchy with the purebred Spaniard at the top. As mentioned earlier, Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez engages her *Mestiza* label to better understand her own heritage.

## Castas

Spanish colonial racial designations grew so complex, visual aides were soon needed to explain them. A group of sixteen *Castas* became a subject of painting for elite collectors in Europe as well as the Americas. Artists as esteemed as Miguel Cabrera created sets of *Castas*. As with most paintings of the genre, he portrayed a mother and father of two different races with their mixed-race child for each *casta*. The families were presented as content and happy, in pleasant domestic interiors or scenes of colonial life that reflected their social ranking. Occasionally the lower castes were portrayed as impoverished or indifferent, but the paintings never hinted at the deep resentments caused by the rigidity of the system.

Friedemann-Sánchez’s *Castas* are titled after these original *mestizaje* (race mixings) but depict single figures that defy easy categorization. They appear ghostly but larger than life and wearing ceremonial masks and *peinetas* (Spanish hair



Miguel Cabrera, *Mestiza*, 1763, Oil on canvas. Museum of the Americas, Madrid. One of a set of 16 *casta* paintings depicting Spanish colonial racial hierarchies.

ornaments designed to be worn under a lace mantilla). The androgynous bodies are painted with translucent whites and mottled with earthy browns. Arms raised high, they appear to vibrate with energy. Thinking of the demeaning experience of being searched at airports, Friedemann-Sánchez asked her models to lie upon the Tyvek in the position required for the TSA body scan. She traced around them, then arrayed each fragile outline with delicate flowers and a ceremonial mask from Latin America and the Caribbean. The combination of the posture, the scale, the mask and the delicacy of the each figure is unsettling. Labeled with Spain’s original terminology, Friedemann-Sánchez’s *Castas* compel us through contradiction rather than conformity.





Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez, *Dream Map and Cornucopia 6*, 2022  
Ink on Tyvek, 135 x 90 inches.



Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez, *Dream Map and Cornucopia 7*, 2022  
Ink on Tyvek, 135 x 90 inches.

## Poetry and Dreams

Poetry and art naturally diverge from the rigidity of categorical thinking, rounding out our humanity and acknowledging the unknown. Friedemann-Sánchez's latest work is a collaboration with poet Farid Matuk. Born in Peru of Syrian and Peruvian parents, Matuk, like Friedemann-Sánchez, focuses on the lingering legacy of colonization. Their handmade edition of *Redolent* on display in *Turn of the Sea* is a haunting intersection of both artists' raw experience between worlds.

The images Friedemann-Sánchez created for *Redolent* have a mythical feel with a note of the vernacular. We see more of this spontaneity in her *Dream Map and Cornucopia* series, recognizing the colonial *Barniz de Pasto*-style flora and fauna, but here they seem caught within a more

complex and layered tapestry. Faint outlines of primal forms weave in and out of enormous, almost surreal bouquets. Roses grow from fern leaves and strands of Matuk's poetry coil in and out of the tangle of forms. The overall effect is phantastic, otherworldly. Friedemann-Sánchez associates these paintings with the Amazon.

The myths and legends surrounding the Amazon Rainforest are only matched by the reality of this little-known region. La Sachamama, a gigantic boa constrictor and spirit mother of the forest, the three-foot wide monster blooms of *Rafflesia arnoldii* and traveling palm trees (*Socratea exorrhiza*) seem as plausible to us as, perhaps, the Treaty of Tordesillas (wherein Spain and Portugal agreed on how to divide the new world up between them) sounded to the Amazonians.

Dreams, too, challenge our barriers of reality in the Amazon. A case in point is the Achuar people, known as the dream people of the Amazon. Unknown to the world until the 1970s, they've retained customs long lost by other indigenous peoples. Achuar families share their dreams every morning in predawn rituals that determine the path of their daily activities, often using ayahuasca and chacruna, plants with psychotropic properties. Interestingly, these dream people, in association with the Pachamama Alliance,<sup>3</sup> have, so far, successfully defended their well-being and that of the Amazon rainforest.

Meanwhile, the currents of the *volta do mar largo*, ie Turn of the Sea, continue to make great circles in our oceans, still bringing surprises to our shores and sorting our debris. In her paintings Friedemann-Sánchez presents us with a voyager's hopes and dreams, loss and longing, struggle and survival, all woven into a seamless whole. The work is one with its historical identity.

Karen Emenhiser Harris  
Guest Curator

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## References

- <sup>1</sup>Victoria and Albert Museum, London. <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/box-of-mysteries>
- <sup>2</sup>Bleichmar, Daniela. "Painting as Exploration: Visualizing Nature in Eighteenth Century Colonial Science." In *Colonial Latin American Review*, vol. 15, no. 1 (June 2006), pp. 81-104.
- <sup>3</sup>See Pachamama Alliance. <https://pachamama.org/achuar> for more information.



Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez and Farid Matuk, Detail of *Redolent*, 2021, Handmade accordion book, 14 x 9 x 104 inches (as displayed)



back cover:  
Installation view of *Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez: Turn of the Sea*.

front cover:  
Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez, Detail of *Cambuja*, 2017, Ink on Tyvek, comb and mask.