

MODERN ART OXFORD

EXHIBITION NOTES



**Mariana Castillo Deball:
Between making and
knowing something**

**"Recreating an object makes one understand and read the object in a different way."
- Mariana Castillo Deball**

Mariana Castillo Deball (b. 1975, Mexico City, Mexico, lives and works in Berlin, Germany) creates site specific art installations to examine how knowledge and cultural heritage are produced, organised, measured, and authenticated. Her works are informed by her Mexican heritage but from the adopted perspective of Europe, where she has been based since 2002. Deball's exhibition acknowledges how stories are performed and retained in museums, and makes visible lesser known practitioners and makers, whose histories have remained too long obscured.

Mariana Castillo Deball. Ceramics and textiles for *Between making and knowing something* in artist's studio, 2020. Image courtesy Mariana Castillo Deball.



Deball conceived this new commission following a visit to Oxford in February 2020, where she consulted photographic archives at the Pitt Rivers Museum. This prompted further study into the Smithsonian Institute collections in Washington D.C. Deball tends towards the role of anthropologist by making no distinction between her own self-made artworks, the historical exhibits associated with other disciplines, and everyday artefacts. She explores the potential of objects to perform and retain stories by using modes of reproduction, ranging from pottery to weaving and photography, to give shape to and make visible the lives and objects of Zuni *Ihamana We'wha* (1849–1896), her anthropological collaborator Matilda Coxe Stevenson (1849–1915), Elsie Colsell McDougall (1879–1961) and Makereti (1873–1930). These four researchers and makers were active during the years anthropology was emerging as a discipline and, as the artist states, 'there was no difference between making and knowing something'.

Deball approaches these fascinating subjects in the manner of creative 'case studies' or 'micro histories', recalling the writing of Carlo Ginzburg who

▲ In many of the first historical accounts, We'wha was described using feminine pronouns. In the late twentieth century, however, masculine pronouns were used. In writing about We'wha's artefacts held in the Smithsonian Institute collection we have chosen to use feminine pronouns to correspond to the terminology and perceptions of We'wha's time frame.

advocated for an alternative view of history by overlooking the dominant figures of power and concentrating on people who have no name, no voice, who have no documentation. As Deball says, 'history is always viewed from the point of view of power, so how can you go down into the sources and find the history of people who have no voice?'

**"You can never define an object as one single thing; the object changes depending on the place where it is and the people who are manipulating it."
– Mariana Castillo Deball**

Deball has created a dynamic installation of ceramics and textiles hanging from lengths of rope from the ceiling of Modern Art Oxford's largest gallery. These ceramic vessels have been hand-made by the artist from red stoneware, referencing the painted designs and pottery techniques common to the Zuni, a Native American Pueblo people native to the Zuni River valley. Deball also studied artefacts originally made by We'wha who had a particular position in Zuni society as a berdache or 'two-spirit', or what Zunis refer to as an *Ihamana*—the third gender or 'man/ woman'; male-bodied people who take on the social and ceremonial roles usually performed by women in their culture.▲

Stevenson was one of the first women to embark on a career in anthropology. On an expedition to the Southwest of America in 1889 she forged a close relationship with We'wha during fieldwork into Zuni culture. Stevenson is a controversial figure among the Zuni people because the documentation of their rituals is forbidden, and as such her photographs are rarely published today. We'wha was invited to the Smithsonian to produce many objects on site, with Stevenson extensively photographing her processes of fabrication. The material contributions We'wha made during this time, including pottery, looms, prayer feathers, woven belts, and textiles, were reportedly accessioned into the Smithsonian collections and have recently been attributed to We'wha.

Through the three woven textiles tethered to the floor and ceiling Deball reconnects the objects of intrepid traveller Elsie Colsell McDougall's anthropological study to their communities of origin. McDougall spent her life researching the indigenous textile cultures of Central America, first visiting distant and isolated Maya villages in Guatemala and Mexico in 1926 to observe and document weaving materials and techniques. Each swathe of hanging handmade fabric is an unfinished rebozo, long flat garments similar to shawls, often worn by women in Mexico and considered part of Mexican identity. Ukata, a collective of weavers based in the state of Michoacán in Mexico, were commissioned to create these fabrics woven with a backstrap loom, and dyed with an ikat pattern. Deball offers a renewed perspective on McDougall's research by employing the labour of local makers who continue to use the weaving techniques and skills McDougall extensively documented. Their seemingly unfinished threads suggest the continued use and relevance of these traditional garments in Mexico today.

Mariana Castillo Deball, *These Ruins You See*, 2015. Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, Mexico City. Photo Ramiro Chaves.



Cover images: **Mariana Castillo Deball**, *View of the artist's studio*, 2020. Image courtesy Mariana Castillo Deball. **Mariana Castillo Deball**, *Feathered Changes, Serpent Disappearances*, 2016. Installation view. Photograph by Gregory Goode. Photo courtesy of the artist and San Francisco Art Institute.

"Many times, the trajectory of the object and how it arrived at the specific place it is in now is really interesting, really rich, but somehow, it's never integrated into the history of the display itself."
- Mariana Castillo Deball

A series of 19th century museum vitrines loaned from the Oxford University Museum of Natural History have been repurposed by Deball to display McDougall's photographs, alongside the photographic archives of Makereti (1873–1930). Makereti, the daughter of an English general and chief of the Maori Arawa tribe, was a famous tour guide in New Zealand who became known for escorting visitors through the geyser valley of Whakarewarewa near Rotorua. She established a career as a highly regarded ambassador and interpreter for Maori culture in the late Victorian period. In 1924 Makereti enrolled as an anthropology student at the University of Oxford and went on to make significant contributions of Maori objects to the Pitt Rivers Museum, donating her personal collection of wood carvings, weapons, ornaments, feathers and flaxen coats and other Maori possessions she brought with her from New Zealand, which are still displayed at the museum today.

Deball's final artwork in the exhibition speculates on an alternative view of history by providing an audio guide for a museum artefact which has been removed from view. Deball describes the history of an archaeological object in the Pitt Rivers Museum collection which cannot be seen, indicated by a museum display case which lies empty. Displays index the relationships between people and things, these devices transform 'things into objects' and can be interpreted as catalysts for mechanism of institutional power. In an exhibition of reproductions and copies, Deball shifts the focus away from questions of authenticity and the veracity of an original artwork, to instead allow visitors space for imagination and their own interpretation.

Gallery 1

1. **WHEN THE ARMS
LEGS
stretched**
2020

19 ceramic vessels made of red stoneware painted with engobe slip, perforated and connected together with 100 meters of black cotton rope.

Produced with the assistance of ceramicist Silvia Andrade. Courtesy of the artist

2. **A—LL AROUND TO THE OCEANS**
2020

Three hand-woven rebozos dyed with an ikat pattern and displayed with backstrap looms

Produced in the state of Michoacán, Mexico by Ukata. Courtesy of the artist

The ceramic vessels hanging from the ceiling of the gallery have been hand-made by Deball from red stoneware inspired by the painted designs and pottery techniques common to the Zuni, a Native American Pueblo people native to the Zuni River valley. Deball has specifically recreated artefacts originally made by the Zuni *Ihamana We'wha* (1849–1896) whose objects are held in the Smithsonian collection. *We'wha* was widely known as having exceptional skills in weaving and pottery, and in 1886 she was part of the Zuni diplomatic delegation to Washington D.C. hosted by her American anthropological collaborator, Matilda Coxe Stevenson.

Deball often experiments with different modes of reproduction to question how we come to understand history through displays of objects in museum collections. As she explains, "recreating an object makes one understand and read the object in a different way".

Deball makes visible the individual creative dynamics of Stevenson and *We'wha* - two pioneering individuals who pushed the boundaries of their generations in terms of gender and education - by inscribing their indigenous knowledge and artistic skill into the fabric of her replica artworks.

The vessels are perforated with a 'kill hole', a gesture that was used by different cultures to eliminate the utilitarian value of an object. The artist uses these 'kill hole' perforations to connect the ceramics with ropes looping across the large gallery. These share the space with swathes of handmade textiles reaching eight metres in length. The fabric was produced in the state of Michoacán in Mexico by the collective Ukata, and have been hand-woven with a backstrap loom, and dyed with an ikat pattern.

Gallery 2

3. **Makereti fieldwork photography, book and postcards, 2020**

Photographs courtesy of the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, and the Alexander Turnbull Library Collection, New Zealand.

Museum cases courtesy of the Oxford University Museum of Natural History

The Maori guide and anthropologist Makereti was born Margaret Pattison Thom, to a highborn Maori mother, Pia Ngarotu Te Rihi, and a retired English army officer, William Arthur Thom. While working as a tour guide in Whakarewarewa she was known as Maggie Papakura, naming herself after the 'Papakura' geyser when asked about her original Maori name.

also evident in her numerous professional studio portraits and the various attributed and self-determined names she used throughout her lifetime.

4. **his heart
rested
at the site named the MIDDLE PLACE.**
2020

Duration: approx 2 minutes

Courtesy of the artist

Museum cases courtesy of the Oxford University Museum of Natural History

Gallery 3

5. **Elsie McDougall fieldwork photography, parts of wooden backstrap looms**

Photographs courtesy of the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford

Museum cases courtesy of the Oxford University Museum of Natural History

The British anthropologist Elsie Colsell McDougall spent her life researching the indigenous textile cultures of Central America, first visiting distant and isolated Maya villages in Guatemala and Mexico in 1926 to observe and document weaving materials and techniques. McDougall specialised in studying the complex weaving methods and loom devices used by indigenous communities within these regions, and her

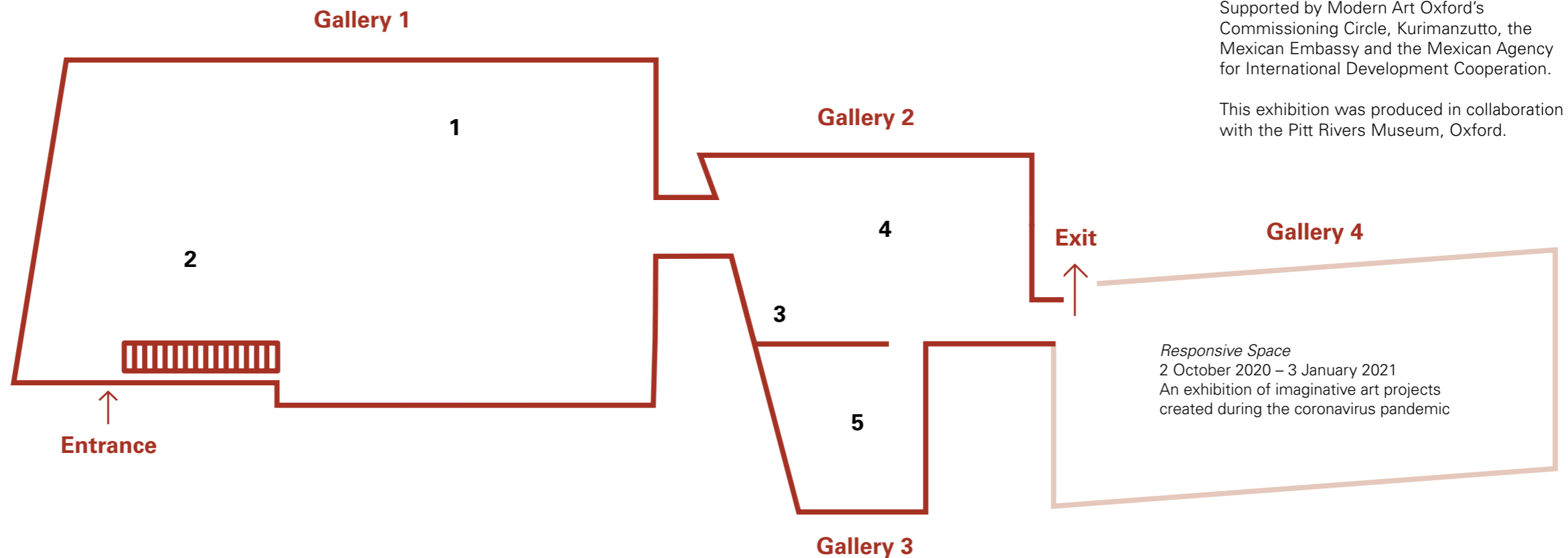
these sheets are now pasted onto walls in this gallery. This improvised wallpaper originates from various newspaper publishers in Michoacán, and is also where the textiles in the largest gallery were made. The local news reports provide a contemporary backdrop for the display of McDougall's intimate portraits of indigenous textile makers in Central America.

Artist thanks

Mariana Castillo Deball and Modern Art Oxford would like to give special thanks to Silvia Andrade, Sophie de Saint Phalle, Remko van der Auwera, Anna Szaflarski, Philip Grover, Eliza Howlett, Dr. Gwyneira Isaac, Ukata (Rosa Liliana Pascual Bautista, Albertina Bautista Caballero, Cuauhtemoc Pascual Bautista, Rosa Maria Ramirez, Carlos Pascual Bautista), Galerie Barbara Wien and Kurimanzutto.

Supported by Modern Art Oxford's Commissioning Circle, Kurimanzutto, the Mexican Embassy and the Mexican Agency for International Development Cooperation.

This exhibition was produced in collaboration with the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford.



Deball has curated a selection of Makereti's photographs held in the Pitt Rivers Museum collection. These focus on her domestic life in New Zealand, from the interior of her whare (her Maori home) decorated with framed photographs of the famous Victorian figures she met, to group portraits of her Maori community and cloaks and carvings. These photographs indicate the complex cultural heritage of Makereti as she moved fluidly between Maori and English-speaking worlds. Yet significantly these photographs are not part of her ethnographic fieldwork on Maori culture, but instead are staged scenarios documented by a hired photographer. They convey Makereti's entrepreneurial flair in fashioning her self-image,

Deball has previously repurposed antique museum vitrines to playfully disrupt ideas around how museological displays frame or convey historical narratives. All the vitrines in the exhibition are 19th century cases loaned from the Oxford University Museum of Natural History, and were first used when it opened to the public in 1861. One of the cases lies empty and, through an audio piece, Deball reflects on the history of an archaeological object in the Pitt Rivers Museum which cannot be seen and remains in storage.

findings were printed in the anthropological series Occasional Papers on Technology published by the Pitt Rivers Museum between 1939 and 1963. These photographs depict the finger-weaving techniques and back-strap looms studied by McDougall, accompanied by a map illustrating the geography of her fieldwork.

6. **Michoacán, 2020, newspaper**
Courtesy of the artist

The woven rebozo textiles hanging in Modern Art Oxford's largest gallery were wrapped in newsprint for their transport to the UK, and

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