

HOST Celeste

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The Contemporary Austin

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HOST

HOST is an exhibition space and program series that amplifies The Contemporary Austin's commitment to centering artists and welcoming publics. With each exhibition cycle, an artist will create a newly commissioned environment in the HOST gallery space at The Jones Center. Programming will accompany each work. Throughout the run of each exhibition, artists will invite visitors into their worlds.

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HOST display type by Simon Walker at Beasts of England.

Graphic design by Phillip Niemeyer.

Celeste

Celeste is an artist duo based in Mexico City formed by María Fernanda Camarena and Gabriel Rosas Alemán. The artists' collaborative practice centers on exploring archetypal images and creating spaces that welcome social interactions. Their large-scale, dyed and painted fabric installations employ a distinctive warm color palette and respond to architectural environments while incorporating a vocabulary of images, such as extended hands and empty vessels, which speak to the personal and collective unconscious.

Celeste's exhibition presents a new large-scale textile painting, created specifically for the HOST gallery, as well as two new wall-mounted copper sculptures. The painting portrays an abstracted landscape evoking an expansive geographical terrain where earth meets sky. Hanging from a ceiling-mounted curtain rod and tracing a gentle curve across the gallery, the painting comprises five conjoined fabric panels together measuring approximately forty feet long. Across from the painting and complementing its long arc is an artist-designed bench, offering a place for visitors to sit and linger in the space.

The artists take inspiration from the vital history of murals in their hometown of Mexico City, including how these murals traditionally functioned to shape public space and communicate through images. In developing the painting's complex imagery, they observed numerous murals throughout the city, paying attention to compositional devices such as the use of vignettes to organize depictions of events in space and time. The artists



Celeste, *Manta de cielo*, 2022. Pigments and acrylic base on dyed cotton canvas. 275½ x 354¾ x 110¼ inches. Installation view at JO-HS, Mexico City, 2022. Photograph by Sergio López.

also maintain a critical distance on this history, in which murals were typically commissioned by the government and served to indoctrinate the public into official views. Celeste's practice challenges this history by creating welcoming environments using portable, flexible canvases with imagery that accommodates innumerable interpretations. Inspired by symbolic imagery, in which figures may convey numerous meanings, as well as a form of counseling called narrative therapy, which holds that the stories we tell shape the worlds we inhabit, the artists invite visitors to tell their own stories through the work's evocative yet deliberately open-ended images.

The artists designed the installation as a space that can accommodate community programs. Throughout the exhibition's run, the gallery will be activated through programming on the first Wednesday of each month. In addition, Celeste's project includes educational and community programming at both museum locations and a dual-language artist book produced by the artists and The Contemporary.

— **Robin K. Williams**, Curator, The Contemporary Austin



Celeste, *Manta de cielo*, 2022. Pigments and acrylic base on dyed cotton canvas. 275½ x 354¾ x 110¼ inches. Installation view at JO-HS, Mexico City, 2022. Photograph by Sergio López.



Celeste, *Hacer olas*, 2023. Pigments and acrylic base on dyed cotton canvas.
39¼ x 492 inches. Installation view from the artists' studio in Mexico City.
Photograph by Alejandro Camarena.



Robin K. Williams: *What does the name of your collaboration, Celeste, mean to you?*

Celeste: While looking for a title for our first exhibition, we thought of including the opposite color of that of our palette in the title. A way of completing the whole was to evoke what was not visible, the color blue. Celeste could refer to the sky, the color, or the celestial bodies that we painted, we like that ambiguity. In the present, Celeste represents a new way of creating; it encompasses the coming and going of our constant negotiation.

Robin: *How do you approach collaborating with one another in developing your work, in general, and how did you approach creating your exhibition at The Contemporary?*

Celeste: Our personal life and our creative life are one and the same, so listening, receiving and reaching agreements is our day to day. As individuals, we have different drives and interests, and it's not always easy or fast to reach that agreement. The search for that balance is at the base of who we are and what we do.

For The Contemporary, we agreed we wanted to do a large-scale piece. First, we played with the way the fabric would occupy the exhibition space, giving it a sculptural presence. Then, we thought of ways for the community to use it.



It became a forum-like space. The bench is essential to making the viewing experience more inviting, to make space for the audience.

Robin: *Could you describe a couple of the major themes you explore through your imagery and how you hope visitors might interact with these elements?*

Celeste: We always situate our images within a space, the landscape of the world we've created. The reference from earth, sky, and the middle way come from the *IChing*, a pool of images full of knowledge that serve as guide and inspiration for our process.

We like to go back to our shapes, or symbols, and use them again and again, stretching them and looking for new possibilities. The vessel is our most important recurring image; it's a container. Making/opening/transforming space are key ideas that could be represented by that image. More recently, the intertwining of hands, which for us is like the warp and weft of textiles, is an important motif that could serve as a metaphor for the coming together, and expanding, that is happening now in our practice.



Celeste: *What did you find in our work that made you think of us for the inaugural show of the HOST program at The Contemporary?*

Robin: What first attracted me to your work was the warmth and beauty in the spaces you create through the large-scale textile installations. And then, after meeting you, I was compelled by your generosity and the ethics of collaboration that motivates your practice. For us the HOST series is about welcoming artists into the museum and enabling them to welcome visitors into their worlds. We aim to support artists in creating new work for the exhibitions, so they may shape the gallery into an environment if they choose, and also to provide further context around the work and extend its reach through programming. With both goals I found amazing resonance in your practice because of how you create spaces that also foster social environments. For example, beyond the gallery presentation, we will present your installation *Manta de cielo* at our sculpture park, Laguna Gloria. The work is a fabric tarp that transforms the atmosphere of a space or creates a newly usable kind of space. We'll host a picnic and other engagements under the tarp. To me this is a beautiful activation of both space and community. We're all really excited about it.



Celeste: *Where in our images or process do you find resonance with your own practice as a curator, and how does it unfold in your research?*

Robin: I'm interested in your approach to collaboration and social engagement. I appreciate this in everything you do—from how you collaborate with one another to how you approach devising events such as the picnic or opening the gallery space up to become a forum for public programming. As a curator for The Contemporary, and as a longtime Austin resident with deep investments here, I value the ways in which your work can extend so generously into the community. I'm also interested in your approach to imagery. You cultivate a vocabulary of images that recur across your works, and although these images possess certain meanings for you both personally, viewers' interpretations do not depend on your intentions. Instead, your images are open-ended, capable of taking on many different meanings. Joan Jonas is an artist who I have researched extensively, and this approach to images strongly relates to the way I understand her practice.

Celeste: *We had a good time showing you around our city and sharing our references with you. What did you find on that trip that is still with you?*

Robin: So much! It was an amazing trip. In particular, the tour of murals will always stay with me. In the central historic district we looked at murals by Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Marion and Grace Greenwood, Isamu Noguchi, and others. Some of these murals were in quiet government office buildings, and others were in wildly chaotic markets. It is incredible how deeply integrated they are into the urban landscape and social fabric. I also fondly remember our visit to the wonderful nonprofit art book library Aeromoto with your friend Macarena Hernandez, who is a cofounder there and who we are working with to develop your artist book. And, I can't forget the incredible Mercado Jamaica, where the flower stalls and trinket stands were selling wares for the Day of the Dead. I bought so many skeletons! I wish I could go on and on.

Celeste is an artist duo formed by María Fernanda Camarena (Guadalajara, 1988) and Gabriel Rosas Alemán (Ciudad de México, 1983). Through the integration of diverse media and disciplines in their practice, Celeste conducts a negotiation that expands concentrically in order to gradually encompass other collaborators and spectators within the workings of an intimate exchange. Celeste has exhibited internationally, including solo exhibitions at venues such as Museo de Arte de Zapopan, Mexico; Guadalajara 90210, Mexico City; and Project Pangée, Montreal, Canada. The HOST exhibition at The Contemporary Austin is Celeste's first museum presentation in the United States.

Robin K. Williams is Curator at The Contemporary Austin.



Celeste photographed by Juan Hernández.