



*An Ofrenda for Dolores del Rio*  
1984

**Amalia Mesa-Bains**

Born: Santa Clara, California 1943

mixed media installation including  
plywood, mirrors, fabric, framed items and  
decorative elements

96 x 72 x 48 in. (243.8 x 182.9 x 121.9 cm)

Smithsonian American Art Museum

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1998.161

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*In this mixed-media installation, Chicana artist Amalia Mesa-Bains honors and celebrates the life of the Mexican actress Dolores del Rio. Researcher Laura set out to find answers to some of her questions concerning this unique and complex artwork:*

- **What purpose do *ofrendas* serve in the Mexican American community and why did the artist dedicate this *ofrenda* to the Mexican actress Dolores del Rio?**

One of the challenges I have encountered while researching this artwork is that the *ofrenda* (or altar) as an installation is a completely unique, if not relatively new, art form. While it is true that *ofrendas* have been used for many, many years in the Mexican American or Chicano community, I discovered that Amalia Mesa-Bains was really one of the first Chicano artists to turn this traditionally spiritual medium into a more secular device – a gallery installation. In one of her artist statements, Mesa-Bains writes: “The development of my work has been rooted in the practice and consciousness of my community. Through the traditions of the home altar and the celebrations of the Day of the Dead I have created a hybrid form of ephemeral installation. Both of these traditions of popular culture represent aspects of a redemptive and resilient struggle to maintain family history and cultural continuity in the face of colonial domination.”

Reading these words from the artist herself made me realize that in order to understand the cultural implications that are at the core of this installation artwork, I first needed to research the role of an *ofrenda* in the Mexican and Mexican-American communities. What I discovered when I looked through various online resources was that traditionally *ofrendas* have been used as a part of the Day of the Dead (*Día de los Muertos*) celebrations in Mexican culture. Family members create these altars in their homes to remember and honor their dead family members. They do this by assembling various items that hold a special significance to the deceased including photos, food, candles, mementos that the deceased owned or any other item that held a particular importance for the family in order to remember their dead. An exhibition catalogue, in which this *ofrenda* to Dolores del Rio was included, discusses the history and significance of the Day of the Dead: “Since Pre-Columbian times the annual observance of the holiday has involved the construction of an “offering” in the form of home and public altars dedicated to deceased loved ones. Through these visual constructions, the dead are brought back and remembered by living relatives . . . These altars are believed to assure the continuity of life by honoring and remembering the dead. In remembering those who have died, we find solace in the thought that we will not be forgotten after our death.” (Galería Posada, 1984)

By dedicating this altar to Dolores del Rio, Mesa-Bains is acknowledging and honoring the impact that the Mexican actress had on the artist’s life as a strong Mexican female role model. In her artist’s statement on this work, Mesa-Bains explains why she dedicated this altar to Dolores del Rio: “In modern times the cinema has been the moving force in promoting the myth of female beauty. Among its creations have been Marlene, Marilyn, Greta and the great Mexican beauty Dolores del Rio. Dolores symbolized a beauty that transcended carnal reality. Despite her depictions as an “exotic beauty” in the Hollywood films of the 20’s and 30’s, the radiance of her *belleza* (beauty) eclipsed the trivial celluloid situations. Whether her character was situated in a quasi-Polynesian, Russian, or South American setting, the magic of her beauty remains in our memory. In her roles in the Mexican Cinema, she reflected the heroic history of her country. With a career in both the American and Mexican cinema, Dolores symbolized a universal yet particularly Mexican beauty to a generation of Chicanos. In her position as an accepted beauty in both cultures, Dolores gave meaning and power to a generation of Chicanos suffering rejection because of the accepted Anglo standard of beauty. This altar gratefully acknowledges the power of her mythic beauty and her contribution to *Nuestra Cultura*. The objects on the altar are a gesture symbolizing her glamour, elegance and *corazon* (heart).” (Galería Posada, 1984)

As an artist, Amalia Mesa-Bains is very aware that she is secularizing the traditional religious practices of Mexican Catholicism by installing her *ofrendas* as exhibition pieces. In some of her installations she combined images of the living and the dead in the *ofrendas* in an effort to make temporary offerings instead of more permanent offerings. For this, she endured some criticism by some of the more religious members of the community. She states that “I was purposefully fusing the two. I placed the image of my sister with my grandmother, and I added my own face mask, and immediately the old women in the community came in to tell us that this was very bad luck and very dangerous. In an offering to the dead, you never include an image of the living. They could

not accept that I was merging two traditions – the permanent, ongoing record of the family in the altar and the temporary, ephemeral practice of the offerings for the dead. For them, they were two separate things. I continued with the practice and adapted and innovated on it, and as I worked through this form, it became clear why altars have been sustaining to families – they’re a form of memory-making and history-making, and they accrue.” (Hooks, 2006)

Upon further exploration of the artist and of her work, I discovered something unexpected; on the surface it is easy to see how her *ofrendas* meant to pay homage to her culture and to the subject (del Rio) but what might not be so apparent is that her *ofrendas* also evolved from some of the principles to emerge out of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, which occurred in America during the 1960s through the 1980s. This was a connection I did not expect to find, but I found it fascinating, as it certainly opened up a broader context through which to see and understand this artwork. Mesa-Bains is not only just an artist, she is a published author as well, which made it easy to locate her own statements about this particular idea through some of the publications she has written.

In one of her books, Mesa-Bains writes that both the bigoted environment she grew up with, combined with the Chicano home altars and yard shrines she saw on a daily basis during the 1960s inspired her and other Chicano artists to create the altar artwork. The two themes they recognized that evolved out of that socially and politically charged period, resistance and affirmation, helped the artists to organize their ideas. “Resistance art critiqued colonial practices, hegemony, white racism. Affirmation-centered art helped us reclaim practices that made us unique as a people, and which had sustained our culture in hostile environments, including the traditions of the home altar.” (Hooks, 2006)

Through several exhibition catalogues which included this artwork, I also learned that the evolution of Mesa-Bains’ work has been categorized into three periods by scholars and critics alike. As *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Rio* is one of her earlier works, I would like to explore the following question in order to better understand how this artwork fits in the artist’s oeuvre:

- **How has Amalia Mesa-Bains’ artwork, particularly her *ofrenda* installations, evolved since she created this installation in 1984?**

### **Selected Bibliography:**

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