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The Patricia and Phillip Frost Art Museum

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ALBERTO BARAYA
Naturalism/Artificiality: Expeditions, and Research of the Herbarium of Artificial Plants

September 18, 2013 – January 5, 2014
COVER:
Herbarium of Artificial Plants, Expedition New Zealand (Herbario de Plantas Artificiales, Expedición Nueva Zelanda), Plate 04,
2009, Plastic fern (made in China), Photographs and drawings on cardboard,
43 ¾ x 32 ¼ x 2 inches, Courtesy of the Artist
ALBERTO BARAYA
Naturalism/Artificiality: Expeditions, and Research of the Herbarium of Artificial Plants
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Naturalism/Artificiality: Expeditions, and Research of the Herbarium of Artificial Plants brings together works that are the result of several projects and expeditions developed in different places and circumstances. These trips would have been unthinkable without the support and collaboration of many agencies and organizations. My gratitude goes to those that walked with me down some of those roads, those that gathered collections during their own journeys, and countless anonymous and spontaneous collaborators who met me during my travels.

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Museo de Historia Natural de La Salle, Bogotá, Colombia

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(Becas de Creación, La Fábula de los Pájaros)
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Indiana Arts and Humanities
Internal Grant Program, Indiana University, Indianapolis, Indiana, United States
World War II Memorial, Indianapolis, Indiana, United States
Florida Museum of Natural History, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida United States

My sincere thanks to Dr. Carol Damian for inviting me to present this exhibition in Miami, and to the staff of the Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum for its help and support.

Alberto Baraya
Herbarium of Artificial Plants
Herbario de Plantas Artificiales
Expedition Morocco-Cemetery Leaf, Fez, Morocco, 2002

Expedition Morocco-Airport Palm Leaf, Barajas, Spain, 2002

Expedition California-Hydrangea Moore, Hollywood, California, United States, 2010

Expedition Morocco-Hotel Palm Leaf, Fez, Morocco, 2002
Figure 2. Sunflower
Expedition Indianapolis-Sunflower, Indianapolis, Indiana, United States, 2010

Expedition Morocco-Hotel Leaf, Marrakech, Morocco, 2002
Figure 3. Fern
Expedition New Zealand-Plate 04, New Plymouth, New Zealand, 2009
Expedition New Zealand-Plate 07, Otorohanga, New Zealand, 2009
Expedition New Zealand-Plate 10 (e-commerce), New Plymouth, New Zealand, 2009
Figure 4. Bougainvillea
Expedition Shanghai-Bougainvillea
Beret, Miami, Florida, United States, 2012
Latex Tree
Proyecto Árbol Látex
Figure 5. Latex Tree
Latex Tree Project-Branch B, Rio Branco, Brazil, 2006
Anthropometries
Antropometrías
Figure 6. Machu Picchu

- Expedition Machu Picchu-House of the guardian, Anthropometry (Ref9d), Peru, 2013
- Expedition Machu Picchu- Main entrance, Anthropometry (Ref2B), Peru, 2013
- Expedition Machu Picchu-City center, Anthropometry (Ref6b), Peru, 2013
The Fable of the Birds
La Fábula de los Pájaros
Figure 7. Birds
Ornithological taxidermies for bell jar,
Museo La Salle. Bogotá, Colombia, 2011-2012
15 ornithological taxidermies and crystal bell jar, circa 1900. Florida Museum of Natural History, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, United States
The scientific investigation of the “New World” by explorers, scientists, artists, and curious patrons, was a product of Renaissance study of the tangible world and the gradual recovery of information found (rather than imagined) by observation and experiment. This new scientific method became a means of determining principles governing the physical universe and, with such information, mastery of the world beyond European horizons. The subsequent quest for information as a means of possession and trading for wealth began in earnest in Europe in the eighteenth century. Among an enlightened aristocracy, the interest in nature itself, that was seen as a passion, soon had military and economic significance; it promised geopolitical advantage and strategic control not only of the voyages of exploration, but of the people within each domain and their natural resources.1

The long history of European images of America goes back to the first incidents of Contact and the realization that there really was another continent interrupting the westward passage of European merchants to the rich spice islands of the East. This unexpected existence had a profound effect upon Europe’s consciousness of itself in the so-called New World, and Spain’s determination to control and exploit the area.2 Much has been written by contemporary scholars regarding the “agenda” of the scientific expeditions that adds complex layers to the information itself, and provokes the discussion in terms of “biological theft” and issues of colonial superiority. Undoubtedly, Alberto Baraya has come to the same realization that the categorization of the New World species by the famed “traveler-artists” (viajeros) was more than scientific research and for many years he has been questioning their empirical objectivity with projects that deconstruct the entire process through the creation of his own collection of specimens and their exhibition.3

2 Ibid., 64.
Just as the nineteenth-century years of Independence throughout the Americas fueled the European curiosity about the new lands, the dramatic increase in the number of traveler-artists, scientists, map-makers, books and prints on the subject also increased dramatically. Coupled with a Romantic vision of the exotic, it is also interesting to note that many of the images, species, descriptions and stories that arrived in Europe were written by people who had actually never visited! So Alberto Baraya’s often absurd reconstruction of the scientific expeditions and the findings that resulted may be seen as a contemporary deconstruction of the accepted, and an equally absurd artistic vision of his new compendium of species. Baraya’s construction of a *Herbarium of Artificial Plants* simply elaborates upon the same process of gathering the species, documenting each with the meticulous precision we have come to associate with botanical illustration, giving them a name, and entering them into the record. Why not see the appropriation of the commonplace, the detritus of our own humanity, as valid constructions for today’s reality? Baraya’s ironic and cynical comments on the scientific, and our ready acceptance of a scientist’s, botanist’s or traveler-artist’s records, results in a new aesthetic as a re-assessment of the wonders of the “New World” (which was not New or Discovered anyway – people had been here for thousands of years). Just as the European traveler came to America with expectations of the remote and strange, and was not disappointed with the vast wilderness that appeared, a visitor to this exhibition of Alberto Baraya’s new taxonomy of exotic species will also not be disappointed as the absurdity of his scientific evidence comes to light.

The Frost Art Museum is honored to welcome Alberto Baraya and his extraordinary projects, so relevant to our 500-Year Commemoration of Ponce de Leon’s arrival on the shores of La Florida, and all of that journey’s ramifications for today. The presence of Ponce de Leon and the other explorers changed the course of history, and this exhibit brings a new perspective with provocative ideas that contribute to the scholarship about the Americas.

Carol Damian
Director and Chief Curator
The Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum
The journey began with a trip to Gainesville to explore the ornithological collections of the Florida Museum of Natural History at the University of Florida. With a notebook, a native birds guide and binoculars in hand, we traveled north, enjoying the scenery and watching Florida's wildlife along the way.

Once we arrived at the museum, we spent an entire day dusting, discovering and documenting its magnificent collections of stuffed birds, eggs and sound recordings. Drawer after drawer, we came across an amazing bird compilation that includes approximately 20,500 specimens, representing at least 2,300 species. We spent the day photographing taxidermied birds, flat skins and spread wings, and gathering scientific data for one specific purpose: to make art.

Since the late 1990s, Alberto Baraya has been using scientific elements as the basis for his work. As a contemporary explorer/artist, he has traveled to America, Europe, Asia and Australia, with the ultimate goal of producing art. Every trip he made has enabled him to further develop his research, and his findings have inspired him to visually represent what he calls “new realities.”

One of his first projects focused on mystification and artificiality. He traveled to different European cities, including Paris, Madrid and London, and photographed himself wearing a “cut head” while visiting different landmarks and museums. In addition to studying the reactions of the public, he analyzed the re-contextualization of the same object, the “cut head,” in different environments. This contemporary pilgrimage set the tone for the traveling exercises he would pursue in the future.

Baraya continued to explore the idea of mystification and artificiality through the series Herbarium of Artificial Plants. He embarked on new expeditions, this time focusing on documenting a common element found in all the places he visited: fake plants and flowers. Gathering man-made objects inspired by nature and studying the way these were used in various places, allowed him to analyze how different societies have been shaped over the years.

1 Alberto Baraya, interview with the author, August 2013
The Herbarium series, which became an ongoing project, goes beyond the simple act of collecting. By studying what Baraya gathers, it is possible to identify his intentions and his needs, and to analyze the social and cultural context of his findings. Visually and conceptually, his taxonomies remind us of the images produced by European scientists during eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New World expeditions. At that time, scientists collected, dissected, classified and framed species of native fauna and flora, with the ulterior motive of controlling and exploiting new territories. One century later, Baraya appropriates similar forms of scientific representation to create taxonomies of artificial flowers and plants, and to analyze and question today’s realities.

In his Herbarium of Artificial Plants, Baraya uses found objects such as silk, plastic or glass flowers and leaves, to create beautiful taxonomies. Science and art are combined with drawings and annotations related to his research, as well as to the social and political implications of his findings. During his trip to Indianapolis, for example, he visited the World War II Memorial. In addition to acknowledging the ritualistic meaning of artificial flowers and flags used to honor the fallen, he questions the irony of the fact that, most likely, those flowers and/or flags were made in China.

Perhaps the most ambitious project of the Herbarium series is the Latex Tree. In 2005, he was invited to travel to Acre, in the Brazilian Amazon, to develop a project for the 27th São Paulo Biennial. The result was the production of a life-size rubber tree made from natural latex. The outer layer of the tree was peeled off from the man-produced tree and exhibited during the biennial. In addition to presenting a visually striking piece, the project provided a commentary on the exploitation of rubber in nineteenth-century Brazil, and the geographical and political isolation of Acre in the twenty-first century.

Baraya’s expeditions allow him to analyze the particularities of different societies. This is clearly illustrated in one of his most recent projects, Anthropometries, which includes a series of photographs taken during a trip to Machu Picchu, Peru. During this expedition, he used a tool applied by early physical anthropologists to identify and understand the human and physical variations of Native Americans, correlating certain human characteristics to ethnic and racial factors. He asked local people and tourists to measure him with an anthropometric caliper, inversing the role of the explorer. Through this series, he criticizes the scientific theories of the late-nineteenth and early-
twentieth centuries, and proposes a revision of the concept of “discovery” between individuals and cultures.

Baraya travels to explore today’s world, which he believes is “totally absurd.” Globalization has given men many commonalities and the objects he finds in his expeditions prove that what used to be exotic or unique for some has become common to all. He believes each individual constructs himself based on his relationships with others, by projecting himself onto the other. For Baraya, this exchange, the “before and after,” the “come and go,” is a very important process. Fake plants are part of this process, which is why he uses them to create works of art that call attention to the absurd mechanisms that transform society and culture, defining what one is, and where one is located. Through this “absurd,” he tries to understand what is the “matter” the world is made of.

Baraya believes his work may be seen as ecological, but should also be seen as practical. It focuses both on the falsehood of human constructions and on the destruction of nature. Fake nature carries the nostalgia for real nature. We all wish to hang on to nature in absurd ways, in most cases through deception. When we decorate with an artificial plant, we are using a symbolic element, we replace the real thing. This applies to a simple centerpiece or to a flower arrangement used as a ritual object on an altar or in a cemetery.

The fact that a man-made object replaces the real thing leads us to question what it represents, what it copies, what it pretends to be, but is not. The exhibition *Naturalism/Artificiality: Expeditions, and Research of the Herbarium of Artificial Plants* presents Baraya’s findings and projects based on travels to Acre, Bogotá, Gainesville, Indianapolis, Long Beach, and Machu Picchu, and includes select works from the series *The Fable of the Birds, Herbarium of Artificial Plants,* and *Anthropometries.* The exhibition is a sort of album, a collection of “collections,” an illustrated travel journal we can admire and interpret based on our own journeys and experiences.

Francine Birbragher
Curator

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2 Ibid
EXHIBITION CREDITS

Herbarium of Artificial Plants, Expedition New Zealand (Herbario de Plantas Artificiales, Expedición Nueva Zelandia), Plate 04, 2009, Plastic fern (made in China), photographs and drawings on cardboard, 43 ¼ x 32 ¼ x 2 inches, Courtesy of the Artist

Herbarium of Artificial Plants Expedition New Zealand (Herbario de Plantas Artificiales, Expedición Nueva Zelandia), Plate 07, 2009, Plastic fern (made in China), photographs and drawings on cardboard, 43 ¼ x 32 ¼ x 2 inches, Courtesy of the Artist

Herbarium of Artificial Plants, Expedition California, Hydrangea Jasmine (Herbario de Plantas Artificiales, Expedición California, Hortensia Jazmín), 2012, Found object, drawing and photograph on cardboard, 43 ¼ x 32 ¼ x 2 inches, Courtesy of the Artist

Herbarium of Artificial Plants, Expedition California, Miranda Pineapple (Herbario de Plantas Artificiales, Expedición California, Piña Miranda), 2012, Found object, drawing and photograph on cardboard, 23 ¾ x 17 ¾ x 2 inches, Courtesy of the Artist

Latex Tree Project, Branch B (Proyecto Árbol Látex, Rama B), 2006, Latex cast, 78 ¾ x 197 x 4 inches, Courtesy of the Artist

Queen Mary Grass (Hierba de la Reina Mariá), 2012, Found object, label and photograph, 47 ¼ x 12 x 8 inches, Courtesy of the Artist

L.A. Palms (L.A. Palmeras), 2012, Printed map, Five color photographs, pins and pencil, Variable Dimensions, Courtesy of the Artist

Sunflower Taxonomy (Taxonomía de Girasol), 2011, Mixed media, 43 ¾ x 32 ¼ x 2 inches, Courtesy of the Artist

Triangular Memorial Flag Cases (Dos Contenedores Triangulares de Banderas Funerarias), 2011, Mixed media, 25 x 19 x 4 inches, Courtesy of the Artist

Tricky Tropical Forest, A Hero’s Stage (Bosques Tropicales Engañosos, Escenario de Heroes), 2011, Mixed media, 23 ¾ x 17 ¾ x 2 inches, Courtesy of the Artist

The Fable of the Birds (La Fábula de los Pájaros), 2011-2012, Color photographs, 24 photographs - each 14 ½ x 21 ¾ inches, Courtesy of the Artist

Expedition Machu Picchu, Approximate Arthropometries (Expedición Machu Picchu, Antropometrías Aproximadas), 2013, Black and white photographs, Variable dimensions, Courtesy of the Artist

Tricky Tropical Forest, A Hero’s Stage (Bosques Tropicales Engañosos, Escenario de Heroes), 2011, Mixed media, 23 ¾ x 17 ¾ x 2 inches, Courtesy of the Artist

Herbarium of Artificial Plants, Bougainvillea (Herbario de Plantas Artificiales, Buganvilla Baret o Baretillia), 2012, Silk found object (made in China), wire and plastic, 22 x 32 x 2 inches, Private collection, Miami

Unknown artist, Fifteen ornithological taxidermies and crystal bell jar, Circa 1900, Taxidermied birds and other mixed media encased in a bell jar, 31 ½ x 13 ¾ x 11 ¼ inches, Courtesy of Division of Birds, Florida Museum of Natural History, University of Florida
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This exhibition is part of the Frost Art Museum’s 2013 series: Commmemorating 500 Years: Spain-Florida-Caribbean