

# North Dakota Museum of Art

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## People's Gold Opens at the North Dakota Museum of Art

Western North Dakota has Black Gold in the form of oil. Eastern North Dakota has People's Gold in the form of arts and culture. Important works of art are currently on display at the North Dakota Museum of Art, which are owned by the people of North Dakota. All part of the Museum's Permanent Collection, these represent the top echelon of People's Gold, according to Museum Director Laurel Reuter. Fifty-two artists have work included in the exhibition. All but five are living artists who come from across the United States and Canada, Japan, Argentina, Colombia, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, South America, France, Mexico, and Wales. This year alone the Museum will accept over \$390,000 worth of art by thirty-nine artists.

Among them is a large installation by Cuban artist Magdalena Campos-Pons. During Campos-Pons' first thirteen years, she resided with her family in the town of La Vega, a former sugar plantation in the province of Mantanzas, Cuba. Years later and long gone from Cuba, she discovered that the small apartment the family occupied was the very place where her great-grandfather had lived when he was brought as a slave from Nigeria to Cuba. The original slave quarters for the sugar cane workers had been reconstructed as an apartment known as the Barracón (barrack).

According to the artist who grew up in very the heart of that old sugar plantation town, "sugar is the reason La Vega was built as a plantation, sugar is a Cuban main product, sugar is a way of sustaining life, sugar is why my ancestors were brought to America, sugar is what my ancestors worked in, sugar was the main product of La Vega, sugar is Cuba"—just as sugar is inseparable from the Red River Valley of North Dakota and Minnesota.

Born in 1959 in Cuba of Nigerian ancestry, Campos-Pons has been living in Boston for the past twenty years where she teaches art at the Boston Museum School. She settled there, not because she wanted to leave Cuba, but because she married a Bostonian.

Africa, however, is deeply embedded in Campos-Pons' work, because African tradition has been ever present in her everyday life. She explains, "Africa was the backyard. Africa was my dad. Africa was my aunt and cousins. It never was a question about Africa [over] there. Africa was here." She recalls that her father sang songs to her from Santería in the Yoruba language and she learned to sing them from memory.

The installation in the exhibition, *The Seven Powers*, was given to the Museum by Jorge and Martha Schneider, originally from Argentina but now living in Chicago. It is a work about keeping and sustaining African tradition after the infamous Middle Passage—so called because it was the middle leg of a three-part voyage, a voyage that began and ended in Europe. The ships on the first leg of the voyage left Europe laden with cargo that included iron, cloth, brandy, firearms, and gunpowder. Upon landing on Africa's "slave coast," the cargo was exchanged for Africans. Fully loaded with its human cargo, the ship set sail for the Americas, where the slaves were exchanged for such things as sugar and tobacco. The final leg brought the ship packed with goods from the New World back to Europe.

Santería is the widespread but little known Afro-Caribbean religion that is practiced in Cuba, throughout the Caribbean and the American Southeast, and by Campos-Pons' own people. It is a mixture of Christianity, the Yoruba religion of Africa, and spiritism. In Santería belief, there are seven *orishas*, or Gods (the Seven Powers), as well as *Eggúns*, or spirits of the ancestors, who help the Santeros back here on Earth. Campos-Pons believes that from the sea came slavery and tragedy, but the misery was accompanied by the Seven Powers who traveled in company with the stolen Africans on those same slave ships across the Atlantic to the New World.

To denote the power and importance of the deities, Campos-Pons gives both scale and color to the Seven Powers. At their feet rest small framed portraits of African descendents in the Caribbean and the United States. In their midst, one stands out: the photo behind sand blasted glass is the image of the artist's "great grandpa who was a Nigerian man brought to Cuba as a slave." The artist explains, "In this work of art I wanted to emphasize the idea of the invisibility and anonymity that so terribly permeated the narratives and stories of Black people in the New World." At the same time, Magdalena Campos-Pons pays homage to the resilience and dignity of these, her own people.