



Cecilia Paredes:
By my side or back of me

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April 18 – July 19, 2025
The Print Center, Philadelphia



Thank you for visiting our exhibition!
Please share your thoughts with us
in a brief survey.

The Print Center is pleased to present **Cecilia Paredes: By my side or back of me**, the Philadelphia debut for the Peruvian-born, internationally recognized artist. This solo exhibition presents Paredes' exceptional performative photographic self-portraits as well as an immersive, site-specific, sculptural installation created from "wishes" contributed by visitors to The Print Center. Together, these works address themes of migration and home, nature and the man-made, and the poetics of a collective voice.

We are honored to be the venue to introduce the renowned Latin American artist to Philadelphia audiences – as this is her first show in the city she has lived and worked in for twenty years. Paredes' practice includes both image-based and performative works, for which she draws from many sources, including her own experiences, Peruvian history from ancient civilizations through Spanish conquest, and an abiding reverence for nature. The work reveals her passion for landscape, mythologies, cosmologies, literature and anthropology, while addressing the essential subjects of re-location and home. Her use of all-over patterning, symbolic textile design and performative self-portraiture connects Paredes to a compelling lineage of female photographers who have used similar strategies to investigate identity, such as Patty Carroll, Lalla Essaydi, Rania Matar and Shirin Neshat.

We thank Joanna García Cherán for her thoughtful consideration of Paredes' "photo-performances." The Print Center is pleased to support the work of this emerging scholar, and is grateful for her crucial reading of Paredes' work in relation to theories of visibility and invisibility.

The exhibition was made possible by the generous support of the Edna W. Andrade Fund of the Philadelphia Foundation, for which we are grateful. Lastly, we thank Cecilia for being a generous and creative collaborator and enthusiastic partner.



Cecilia Paredes, *Wisdom*, 2021, inkjet print

Cecilia Paredes: By my side or back of me

Lauren Rosenblum

The title of **Cecilia Paredes'** exhibition, "By my side or back of me," is drawn from the Walt Whitman poem "To the Garden the World," 1860, from *Leaves of Grass*.¹ In it, he writes of Eve and Adam walking close together through Eden's idyllic paradise. Both the figures and terrain are unspoiled embodiments of perfection. In the poem, Whitman evokes the sacrosanctity of nature and the garden as a physically sensual sanctuary. In 1968, the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges reflected, "For a time, I thought of Whitman not only as a great poet but as the *only* poet."² Many decades after first reading *Leaves of Grass*, Borges commemorated Whitman's

1 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, edited by Peter Riley (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2024).

2 Jorge Luis Borges, "Autobiographical Note," *New Yorker* (September 11, 1970).



Cecilia Paredes, *The Witness*, 2020, inkjet print

life and death in the sonnet “Camden, 1892,” 1966. He writes embodying Whitman’s voice:

*I am almost no more, but my verses scan
Life and its splendor. I was Walt Whitman.*³

Whitman died in 1892 as America’s foremost 19th century poet. Borges was born only seven years later in 1899 and became a premier author of 20th century postmodernist literature. He lost his sight at the age of 55 and made the first of several brief trips to the United States in late 1961, not long before his own death. In “Camden, 1892,” Borges reflects on the melancholy of aging and the gift of memory that also comes with a lifetime of experience. Paredes envisions a scene of Borges visiting Whitman’s last house in Camden, NJ, where he runs his hands over the older man’s bed. She is as fascinated with Whitman’s poetry as with Borges’ prose that conjures Whitman. By claiming this lineage, her work aligns with these writers who draw from a reservoir of memories to create images that also “scan life” to find “splendor.”

³ Jorge Luis Borges, “Camden, 1892,” *Selected Poems, 1923-1967* (New York: Dell Publishing, Co., 1973), 175.

In her long and distinguished artistic career, Paredes has dedicated the last twenty-five years to concurrently making poetic photo-performances and resplendent sculptures. Both show her embrace of earthly materials. They are distillations of the relationship between the natural world and human existence. She ruminates on the significance of nature as, in her own words, “a refuge, an anchor, a place to heal, to be in peace, to soothe, and to find answers.”

Paredes has led a migratory life. Born and raised in Lima, Peru, she lived in Mexico City, Mexico; Rome, Italy; and San Jose, Costa Rica, before settling in Philadelphia, where she has now resided for some twenty years. While political events shaped this trajectory, her artwork transforms episodes of compelled relocation into materially rich meditations on home. Her sculptures and photographs emerge from the accrual of these experiences. An individual work evokes the emotional landscape of a given place, and her body of work as a whole maps her journey.

The Print Center presents Paredes’ photo-performances that she enacts in private for the camera, which, in turn, captures a precise moment of creative revelation. In the two series on view, the artist stages the meeting of natural and man-made worlds. In the “Landscapes” series, the artist’s body is painted to match a swath of textile that both wraps her body and serves as the picture’s backdrop. Paredes constructs an image of ornamental camouflage. Myriad patterned textiles register the artist’s memories and experiences culled from a peripatetic life. The “Abandoned” series is set within deserted 19th century factory buildings once used for textile production. There, the artist’s performances awaken the derelict industrial spaces and memorialize their utility, just as they are being reclaimed by nature.

The photographs are complemented by the ambitious sculptural installation titled *Wishes*, 2025, in which anonymous desires for



Cecilia Paredes, *The Weaver*, 2019, inkjet print on canvas

the self and the world are strung together on a continuous band of paper ribbon that winds its way around an entire gallery.

Abandoned

In the large-scale photograph *The Weaver*, 2019, a woman dressed in white sits with her back to the viewer in front of a 19th century lacemaking machine. Inside the Pennsylvania factory, metal columns support the cavernous room with a wood ceiling and walls coated with faded green paint. Large windows let in bright light from one side, casting the other half of the room in a dark shadow. The floor has been haphazardly swept, leaving a pile of dust and clippings at one side.

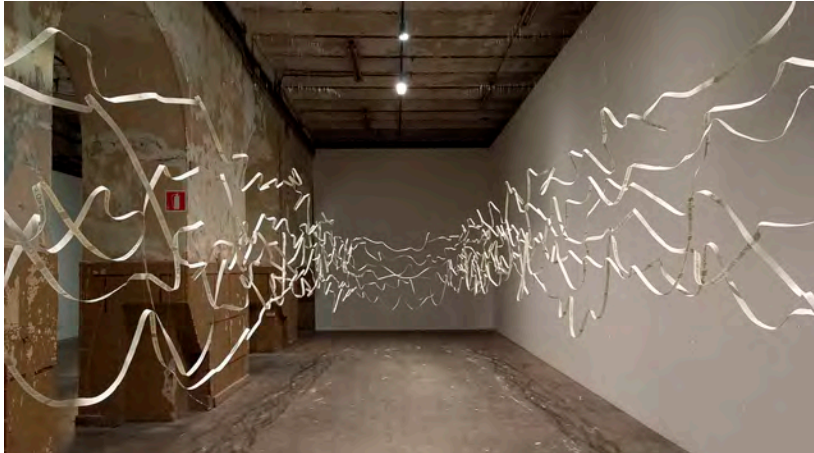
Who works the machine? The artist is like a phantom occupying the space, with a skirt made from cuts of white lace trailing behind her. In front of her, the lace machine stretches across the room, with delicate pieces of fabric draped over its multiple spindles. In the mid-19th century, this machine was used to thread strands for the net, the most tedious part of making the textile, and work a pattern



Cecilia Paredes, *The Encounter*, 2020, inkjet print

simultaneously. It forged a knotted, looped, twisted and braided ornamental openwork fabric. Paredes calls upon a time when lace, even the affordable mass-produced variety, served as a decorative mark of beauty and timelessness.

In *The Encounter*, 2020, Paredes inhabits another empty commercial warehouse. Textile mills such as this made the Philadelphia region a leader in the industry over 150 years ago. Now, the barren factory floor shows luscious green nature growing slowly, emerging from the cracks in the surface to start the process of reclaiming the expansive, empty space. The vibrant moss appears in dense and pillowy patches that are seemingly soft to the touch. Paredes sits crossed-legged on top of one large tuft sheathed in fabric mimicking the vegetation below her, and holds a branch in her hand, like a scepter. Attending to the scene of emergent greenery, Paredes becomes a visionary figure cultivating the encounter between the intrinsic beauty of the natural world and the poignant beauty of architectural ruin.



Installation view of Cecilia Paredes, *Wishes in the Air*, 2015, Tabacalera Art Promotion Space, Madrid, Spain

Wishes

Paredes recounts a singular experience while in a Peruvian church, where she happened upon an urn filled to the top with wishes written by anonymous parishioners on slips of paper, as entreaties to a saint. These notes expressed a wide range of hopes, admissions and intentions. Those initial hand-written lines included the wishes: “forgive my ungratefulness,” “let him grow to adulthood,” “let the judges be flexible,” “let me get out of debt,” “don’t let me be small-minded,” “deliver us from the bad enemy,” and “heal my husband.”⁴ Through an agreement made with the priest, she was allowed to take them home. Over the years since, Paredes has collected numerous wishes from people around the world, and in this site-specific installation at The Print Center, she includes the wishes of our visitors. They are printed in one long line, strung together on a ribbon of paper that winds through the entire gallery, conveying the poetics of a collective voice.

Lauren Rosenblum is The Print Center’s Jensen Bryan Curator.

⁴ Blanca Berlín, “The No Return: The Dignity of the Quotidian as Language,” in *Cecilia Paredes: El no retorno* (Pamplona, Spain: Museo Universidad de Navarra, 2018), 115.



Cecilia Paredes, *Paradise Hands*, 2011, inkjet print on Dibond

Towards Opacity and the Other

Joanna García Cherán

Cecilia Paredes creates a tension between visibility and the hidden in the works she calls photo-performances. In the “Landscapes” series, the Peruvian-born artist camouflages her body against intricate, patterned fabrics reminiscent of Victorian parlors, allowing herself to disappear into the ornate surroundings. She began the series in 2004 when she moved from Costa Rica to the United States. The preparation process can involve up to nine hours of meticulous painting as she carefully transforms her body to match the delicate petals and leaves of her chosen backdrop. In works like *Dreaming Rose*, 2009, we witness the artist’s body seamlessly merge with the lush, intricate blossoms; the richness of their petals blurs the boundaries between self and space. By blending herself into the landscape, Paredes suggests the complexities of migration, where the migrant “Other” and the labor that sustains



Cecilia Paredes, *Dreaming Rose*, 2009, inkjet print on Dibond



Cecilia Paredes, *Sea of Roses*, 2011, inkjet print on Dibond

luxury are often overlooked – existing in a space of visibility yet still hidden from full recognition.

Paredes sources her fabrics for her photo-performances from textile markets all over the world, each carrying its own history. Works like *Dreaming Rose* and *Sea of Roses*, 2011, evoke the transatlantic histories tied to the emergence of the European wallpaper industry. Originally created in China and imported to Europe in the 17th century, wallpapers were adapted to European tastes, becoming symbols of luxury and refinement.¹ The roses at the peak of perfection in *Dreaming Rose* epitomize the motifs of French Victorian decor. However, beneath this veneer of opulence lie histories of colonial extraction that fueled such conspicuous

wealth. If we attune our senses to the lower frequencies of these images, we may begin to see the underside of the beautiful.² As contemporary reproductions of the decorative art, these patterns take new meanings and point to globalized economies built on centuries of colonialism and exploitation. These works conjure the fraughtness of the American Dream and the loneliness of a newcomer in the so-called land of opportunity – a place that demands quick adjustment to a new environment.

Shifting our focus to the image's foreground amplifies how Paredes subtly conceals her face with crossed arms in *Dreaming Rose*, thus eliciting a sense of deliberate invisibility within the ornate backdrop. Similarly, in *Sea of Roses*, her torso is placed against flocked wallpaper, her head directed away from the camera. These quiet

¹ Lesley Hoskins, *The Papered Wall: The History, Patterns and Techniques of Wallpaper* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005), 42.

² Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 10.

concealments propose a type of resistance that resonates with Martinican poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant's concept of opacity. In *Poetics of Relation*, 1990,³ Glissant argued for “the right to opacity for everyone,” emphasizing the agency to resist classification or simplification into a singular identity. We may look at the artist's body dissolving into the background as a mode of resisting capture or reductive frameworks of knowability.

Paredes' work insists on a liminal site where boundaries are blurred – between subject and backdrop, the human and nonhuman, and more. This alternative plane may be home for the colonized subject, the immigrant, and the exiled – often hidden or ignored – creating alternative forms of life and meaning away from the surveillance of dominant systems. Through her mimetic gestures, Paredes transforms into an extension of the flora, alluding to a tenderness and softness that escapes the harshness of everyday life. There is power in maintaining such vulnerability and a propensity for beauty even amidst precarity. In this series, the artist reclaims a form of agency in defiance of the systems that seek to control and categorize. Cecilia Paredes proposes that there is something to be seen, but not by everyone. It is for those willing to look beyond the surface and recognize the complexities that lie hidden beneath.

Joanna García Cherán (Purépecha) is a California-based art historian, writer and curator. She has a BA in history and Spanish literature from the University of California, Berkeley and an MA in art history from Williams College, Williamstown, MA. Her research focuses on contemporary art, photography, Indigenous sovereignty and visual culture. García Cherán's writing has been published in *Artsy*, *First American Art* magazine, *Hyperallergic* and *Latina* magazine. She is currently the Capital Group Foundation Curatorial Fellow in Photography, Cantor Arts Center, Stanford University, CA.



Cecilia Paredes, *Memories*, 2015, inkjet print on Dibond

About the Artist

Philadelphia-based Peruvian artist **Cecilia Paredes** (born 1950) attended the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru in Lima, Cambridge School of Art in England, and the Scuola Libera del Nudo of the Academy of Fine Art in Rome. She has an extensive exhibition record with solo shows in the United States at ArtYard, Frenchtown, NJ and the Museum of Latin American Art, Long Beach, CA, as well as abroad, including Museo de Osma, Lima, Peru; Museum of Navarra, Pamplona and Museum of Art, University of Salamanca, both Spain; and the Costa Rica Museum of Art, San José; among others. She participated in the 2015 Havana Biennale; the 2007 Bienal of Architecture and Art, the Canary Islands; and was featured in the Latin American Pavilion of the 51st Venice Biennale in 2005. Her work is held by numerous international collections and American institutions, including the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX; El Museo del Barrio, New York, NY; University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia; and McNay Art Museum and San Antonio Museum of Art, both San Antonio, TX; among others. She is represented in the United States by Ruiz-Healy Art, New York and San Antonio.

³ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 194.

Programs

Gallery Talk + Opening Reception

Thursday, April 17

5:30pm Gallery Talk with the Artist and Lauren Rosenblum

6 – 7:30pm Reception

Conversation with Cecilia Paredes

Wednesday, May 28

6pm, in-person and on Zoom

Public Exhibition Tours

Wednesdays, April 30 + May 28, 12pm

Fridays, June 6 + July 18, 5:30pm

RSVP requested, but not required: info@printcenter.org

All of The Print Center's exhibitions and programs are free and open to the public. For more information or to register for Zoom, visit printcenter.org.

Support for the exhibition has been provided by the Edna W. Andrade Fund of the Philadelphia Foundation.



All images courtesy of the Artist and Ruiz-Healy Art, New York and San Antonio.

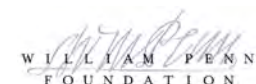
About The Print Center

Mission

For 110 years, The Print Center has encouraged the growth and understanding of photography and printmaking as vital contemporary arts through exhibitions, publications and educational programs. The Print Center has an international voice and a strong sense of local purpose. Free and open to the public, it presents changing exhibitions, which highlight established and emerging, local, national and international contemporary artists. It mounts one of the oldest annual art competitions in the country, now in its 100th year, provides the Artists-in-Schools Program to Philadelphia public high school students and its Gallery Store offers a carefully selected array of contemporary prints and photographs onsite and online.

Funders




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Notes

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