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CHELSEA, CONCEPTUAL ART, NEW YORK, REVIEWS AND PHOTO STORIES, SCULPTURE

Edra Soto: Casas-Islas | Houses-Islands at Morgan Lehman Gallery, NYC

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Edra Soto: Casas-Islas | Houses-Islands, 2021, installation view, New York City.

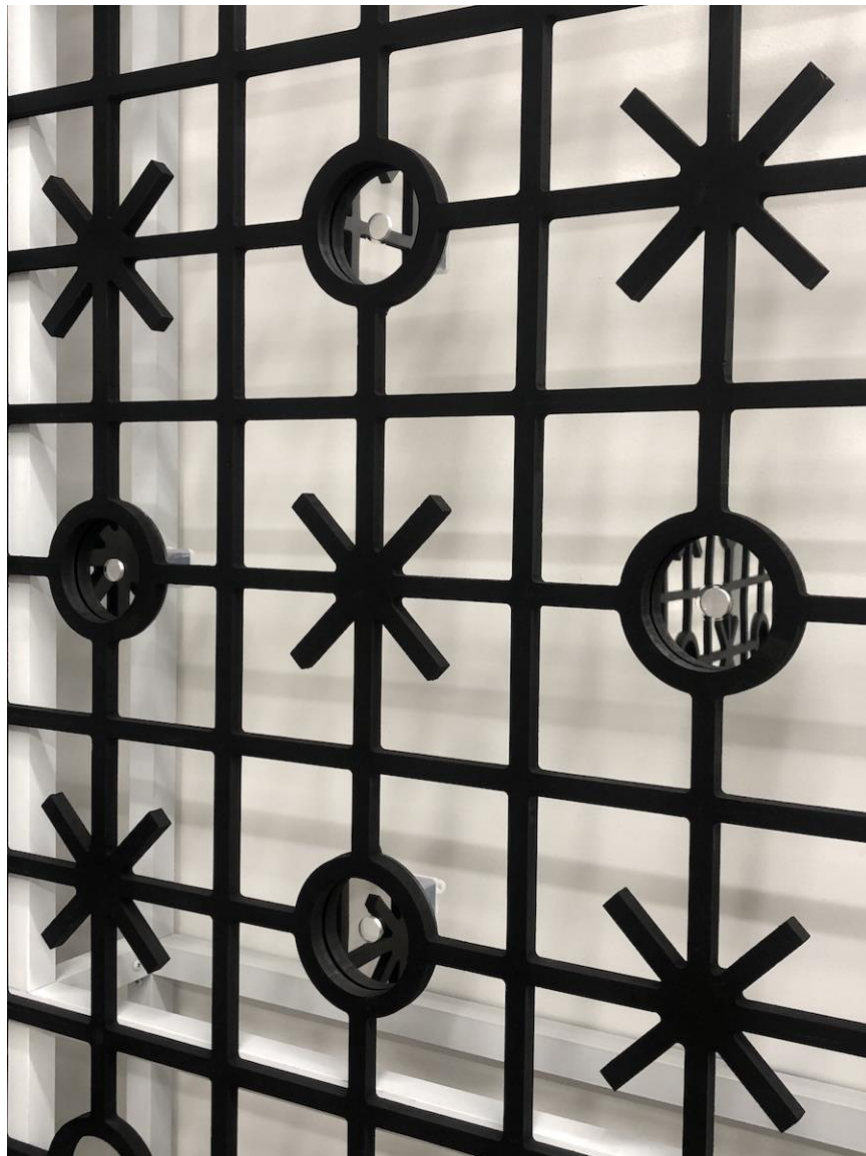
[Edra Soto: Casas-Islas | Houses-Islands at Morgan Lehman Gallery](#)

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Image courtesy of Morgan Lehman Gallery

On a daily basis, we interact with fences, walls, and other barriers that take up different shapes and sizes. Subconsciously, we automatically accept that their purposes, and reasons for being, demand separation. One could say that it depends on one's perspective, and even one's understanding of "history", to be able to accurately define a fence's purpose, whether it's to keep "others" away or keep a group inside a perimeter. But whether it be to designate a space as private property or with restricted access, to delineate where the lands of neighboring countries

begin and end, or to classify neighborhoods and their social classes as a result of their divide, a fence as a concept and construction, more often than not, takes on the task of dividing groups of people within different scales of space. At times they can act one in the same, internally and externally, on an abstract or symbolic level. But when it comes to its actual physical manifestation, a fence can have an element of false transparency to them. These structures of separation entail the use of a set design pattern, interconnecting the material being used, and as a result leave hollow, negative spaces one can fit their fingers through. Think about farms, construction sites, industrial warehouses. These spaces are protected by established barriers, i.e. fences, that keep us out while still offering a view into what's being guarded. It's a dynamic in which we are given the optics into something we cannot fully comprehend or access. We're made aware of a reality existing adjacent to us, yet we're denied its details, the names involved, or the ability to touch and feel what's beyond the barrier. But what if a barrier can act as a door into these narratives rather than negating our access?



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Chicago-based artist Edra Soto has been exploring these ideas using “rejas”, the decorative screens ever-present in mid-twentieth-century Puerto Rican domestic architecture. Usually integrated and associated with lower and middle-class homes on the island, these “rejas” or “quebrasoles” offer distinctive, memorable visual patterns. Currently running along the walls of Morgan Lehman Gallery in Chelsea, Soto’s “Casas-Islas (Houses-Islands)” offers a new iteration of her ongoing body of work called “GRAFT”, a series of architectural interventions that the artist first started in 2012. As a way of integrating herself into a space outside of her native PR, and advocating for the preservation of this visual element, the piece employs a typical “rejas” design of circles and four-pointed stars in a pattern that resembles the screens often guarding the semi-private balconies and windows of these homes. Soto’s work takes this screen, a ubiquitous element within the Puerto Rican imaginary across generations, and raises questions through its representation. The structure makes evident the material conditions of a place where impermanence is always present, and the relationships Puerto Ricans have to their architecture, and their homes, are fleeting. All in all, the pattern-filled wall acts as a gateway to the socio-economic history of the island, but also into Soto’s personal narratives.



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In addition and within the main structure, Soto offers over 100 small photographs, presenting a variety of subjects. Edra Soto's use of such language, although concise in its formation and structure, presents a gateway into a non-linear web of narratives- evoking the irrational logic of memories as they randomly pop in our heads: images of the artist's mother in her robe, a poster with people smiling under a banner for the city of "Bayamon", a group of leafless trees after the passing of Hurricane María. This act of drawing one's self closer to the "rejas" screens, in order to see the images embedded in the structure, alludes to our innate urges when we approach fences: we want to reach what's on the other side, grasping onto the structure with our fingers. Soto describes the act akin to peering through the quiebrasoles and rejas surrounding a Puerto Rican home to glimpse a small portion of the home behind the walls, challenging notions, and invisibility. This invites the audience to perform a metaphysical experience of recalling memory through semiotics, manifested in the physical plane; evoking images that shape a visual language towards the Puerto Rican imaginary- an experience that is shaped by cycles and memories surrounded by the "rejas". This conglomeration of a non-linear visual narrative is even more noticeable when we take into consideration the diasporic relationship the author has with the macro-subject of the images. Soto finds herself going back and forth between Chicago and Puerto Rico, collecting fragments from her visits. But indeed these fragments are what pop up in our heads at times when we encounter symbols and objects that suddenly take us to that mental archive we each have. In doing so, the physical structure of the "rejas" act as a narrative structure in and of itself, where we encounter cycles of daily life through the patterns familiar to those living in those spaces. With this new element to the structure, Soto invites us to glimpse into the diasporic experience.



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Through this work, the artist opens their home to us, using the representation of something that's supposed to signal outsiders "do not pass". Rather than act as a barrier between two places, two peoples, two narratives, Soto flips the fence on its head and creates a portal. This iteration of GRAFT turns casual intimacy into a concentrated engagement of the artist's reality and narrative, which are already separated from Soto by land, financial circumstances, and other elements of life that factor into the separation between a diaspora and their home.



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Under the previous administration in the US government, much emphasis and debate revolved around the construction of a wall, and its presumed power to separate a place, and its people, from "others". But as I mentioned, these walls, erected by a higher power from the outside, can also serve as a way to keep something or someone inside a space like prisoners. In a place like Puerto Rico, citizens are protected *and* trapped by fences with spearheads pointing towards both sides of the structure- "protected" by the isolating barriers of the Caribbean sea and US Customs, while being economically trapped by US policy such as the Jones Act, which defines the island's inability to develop commerce across the waters that surround it. As a result the existence of such borders on the basis of colonial powers often forces citizens to find refuge on the colonist's side of the wall. Soto's work invites us to reflect on these dynamics and unites us to think about the power of fair representation and community through memory and space.