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See the earth from a new perspective at MCA Denver

Of-the-moment artists Clarissa Tossin and Tania Candiani offer intriguing perspectives on where we have been and where we are going



By **RAY MARK RINALDI** | media@rayrinaldi.com | The Denver Post
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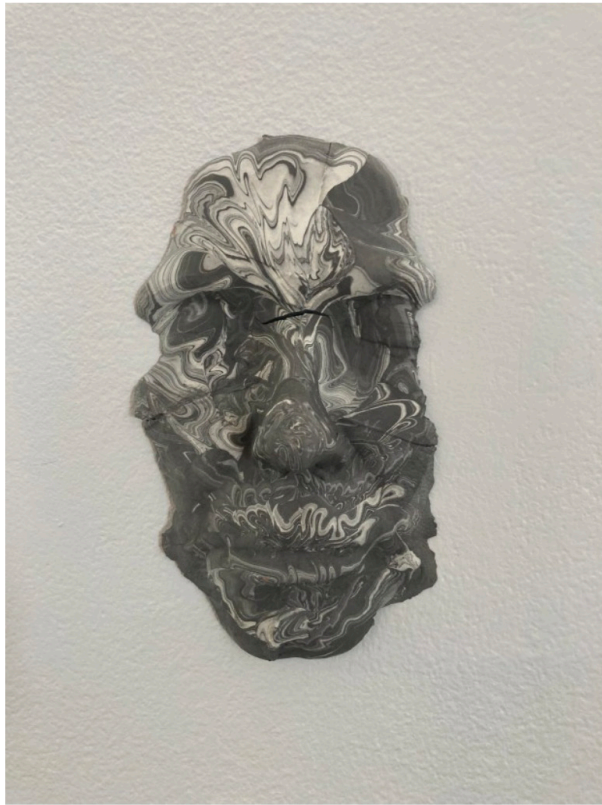
When it comes to the international contemporary art scene, two places dominate the landscape these days: Mexico and Brazil. The Latin American countries are having a moment, fueled by a generation of artists who have come into their own and are using their voices to say new things about everything from social justice issues to the environment.

And no two artists are more highly regarded in those places than Clarissa Tossin, who is 49 and Brazilian, and Tania Candiani, who is 48 and Mexican. Each artist is currently presenting work via solo exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver.

Both shows are instructive. First, because they serve as introductions to mid-career artists who are very much in vogue at museums across the hemisphere. The MCA has a knack for knowing when to jump on the bandwagon of an emerging talent, and that serves us well locally. As usual, the museum's timing is just right.

Second, because both exhibitions provide intriguing ideas about our past, present and questionable future, employing deep research and 21st-century technology to help us see planetary concerns in entertaining and intriguing ways.

Or, in Tossin's case, interplanetary concerns. Her show, "Falling from Earth," is obsessed with the moon and its fate as space exploration continues to evolve. Or, in Tossin's case, interplanetary concerns. Her show, "Falling from Earth," is obsessed with the moon and its fate as space exploration continues to evolve.



One of the pieces in Clarissa Tossin's series titled "Becoming Mineral." She made the casts of her own face during the pandemic. Photo by Ray Mark Rinaldi, Special to The Denver Post

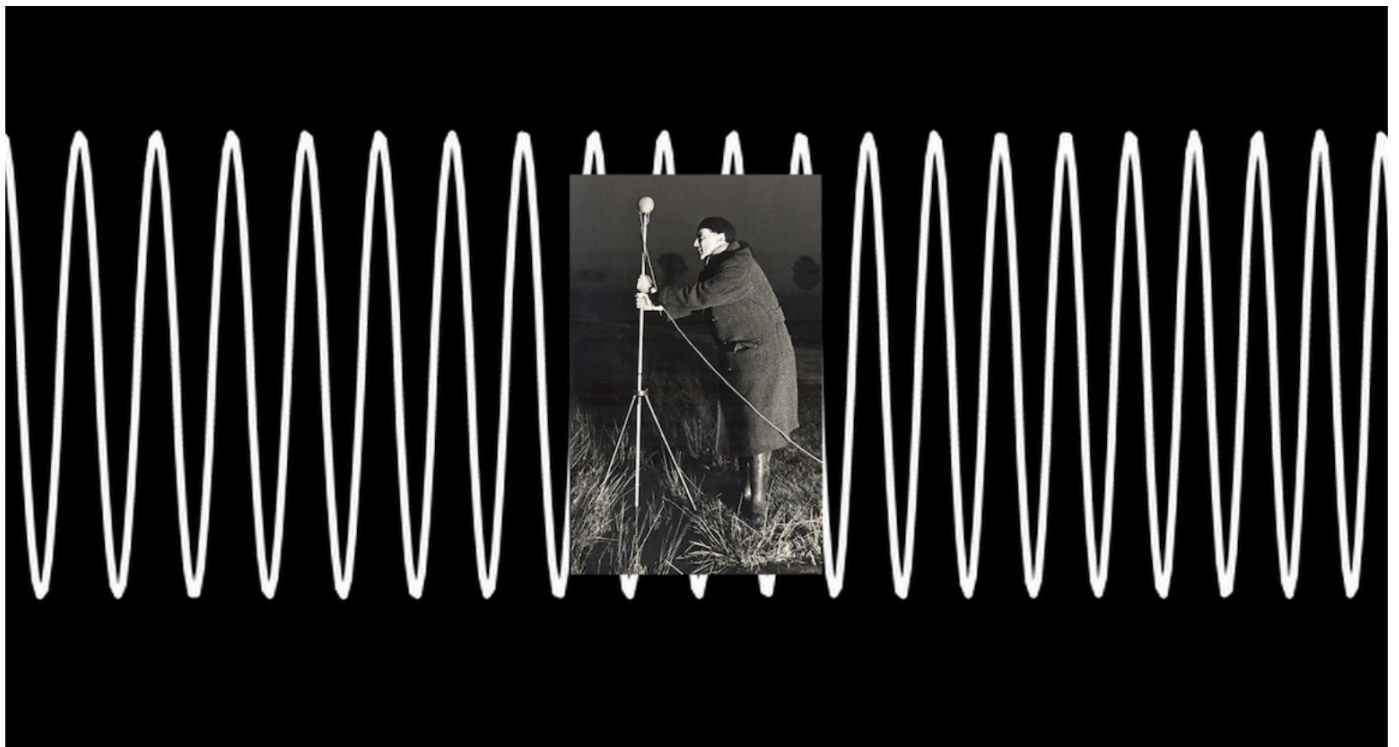
The exhibition has multiple elements, but the most captivating premise is this: Humans have done a miserable job of taking care of their own planet, and as scientists and capitalists refocus their efforts on sending astronauts back into the stratosphere on new space missions, we are just as likely to mess up other places — primarily the nearby celestial body that inspires everything from tidal movements to love songs. The moon had better watch out.

As a concept for an art exhibition, this notion is either far-fetched and sensationalized or prescient and concerning, and "Falling from Earth" feels like all of those things at times.

Governments across our globe are already talking about mining minerals and water from the moon to enable missions to Mars and other destinations, and Tossin drills down deep on just how specific those plans are, providing background info and maps about possible extraction sites and diagramming our attempts to reach other planets.

For example, her map-like rendering of Mars' Jezero Crater — where the Rover mission landed in 2021 — is fabricated from used Amazon delivery boxes that have been cut into strips and woven together into a tapestry. The brown cardboard boxes remind us of the massive amounts of unnecessary waste and environmental damage we create in the name of commerce and convenience.

The artistic twist is that she does it using materials that force us to look back as we look forward.



"For the Animals," made in 2020, explores the history of sound and how we receive it. It is 10:01 minutes long. Image provided by MCA Denver.



A still image from Tania Candiani's video "Hole in the Rock," capturing a concert she performed in 2020 for the animals at Hole in the Rock Park near Phoenix. Photo by Ray Mark Rinaldi, Special to The Denver Post

There are so many layers to this piece, and Tossin's Brazilian perspective on things gives them certain credibility, beyond the obvious references to the tradition of textile arts in Brazil. This gesture might simply feel gimmicky if Tossin were not actually from the country where the Amazon River flows and where the surrounding terrain has suffered immeasurably from 500 years of mining and deforestation.

She may not have personally seen what happened, but she is close enough to see what is coming — at least that is how the piece and others like it in the exhibition resonate in a North American museum.

Where the exhibition goes over the top is in the presence of an actual hunk of basalt and a vial of lunar soil presented in display cases. The samples are on loan from artist-friendly NASA and were collected during early Apollo missions. It is kind of fun to see them — Moon rocks at the MCA! — but they feel like props, overwhelming Tossin's good ideas. Like some other objects in the show, such as the clay casts that Tossin made of her own face in various states of decay and which are scattered across the galleries, the artifacts feel like a stretch intended to make full use of MCA's large second floor.

In that way, "Falling from Earth," curated by Miranda Lash, is a mix of captivating and excessive turns. Tossin's "Death by Heatwave," for example, is a monumental silicone cast of the roots of an actual sycamore tree that she says perished due to rising temperatures. Spread out over the entire floor of the MCA's largest gallery, both the scale of the work and, in turn, the tree's fate are something to behold and a fitting climax for an exhibition that is easy to classify as important and ultimately worthy of deep consideration by MCA visitors.

By contrast, Candiani's three-channel video, "For the Animals" is a nearly perfect fit for the MCA's basement, a tight, dark gallery space that has proven itself to be the museum's most intimate and surprising showplace when programmed astutely, in this case by Lash, again, who is apparently a very busy curator.

"For the Animals" is a broad exploration of sound — its history, the places it emanates from and how humans receive it, though from a naturalist's perspective. It has a narrative that is both ecological and scientific, with quick cuts of visuals interspersed with graphics and accompanied by a poetic narration.

The piece, made in 2020, defies description in all the right ways. Watching it feels like a cognitive, intellectual pleasure as well as a sensual, sensory hit of the best drugs out there. Candiani is not the first artist to use this in-motion medium to tell stories, but her editing skills put her at the top. Interestingly, the video is also playing right now at Mexico City's University Museum of Contemporary Art (MUAC), the most important place for new work in all of the Americas these days. Again, the MCA is meeting the moment.

At just over 10 minutes, "For the Animals" may also serve as the perfect escape on a hot summer afternoon. Sit through it two, maybe three times.