

OpenStudio

A collection of art-making ideas by artists

Artist Name: Amalia Mesa-Bains

The Nicho Box or Small Shrine

Two small shrines on the wall that are metal nicho boxes with pictures of nuns inside are part of the installation of *Venus Envy*. Also, the Vitrines offer a sense of the presentation of things precious to me including pictures of friends and family as well as special objects like my sister's braids.

Many cultures have traditional forms of spirituality including home altars honoring the family and life events. The home altar often includes family photos as well as precious objects and religious or sacred objects, letters, and flowers and candles. Some special items are presented in small shrines or nicho boxes. The nicho box or niche highlights special objects by foregrounding them in the box like a small shrine.

This project invites you to make your own Nicho Box or Small Shrine. Will your Nicho Box pay tribute to or honor someone who is important in your life (family, friends, a deity, a teacher)? Will your Nicho Box honor a specific life event or moment in time? What images, objects, and materials will you use?

Instructions

1. The box serves as the base and the backdrop is created first with images from magazines, digital prints, or copies of family photos.
2. Smaller boxes glued inside can be used as platforms inside the box to present smaller precious materials.
3. The outside of the nicho box can also be decorated.

Create an Exhibition of the Nicho Boxes:

The nicho boxes can be presented in class as an exhibition and students who are comfortable can share a little about their box and what is precious to them.

[Download a PDF of this activity](#)

Materials:

- A basic box (a painted shoe box, boxes collected from a cigar store, discarded gift boxes, a small wooden crate, an old plastic container covered in paint or cloth)
- Personal photos
- Magazine images
- Decorative papers
- A favorite object
- Natural objects like rocks, leaves, driftwood, or branches

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Artist Biography Amalia Mesa-Bains

Born in 1943 in Santa Clara, California
Currently lives in San Juan Bautista, California

Amalia Mesa-Bains is an internationally renowned artist, scholar, and curator. Throughout her career, Mesa-Bains has expanded understandings of Latinx artists' references to spiritual practices and vernacular traditions through her altar installations, articles, and exhibitions, and in 1992, she was awarded a Distinguished Fellowship from the MacArthur Foundation. Her work has been shown at institutions such as the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the New Museum, and international venues in Mexico, Istanbul, Colombia, Venezuela, Ireland, Sweden, England, France, and Spain. In 2011, her work was featured as part of *NeoHooDoo: Art for A Forgotten Faith*, and in 2013, she recontextualized objects from the collections of the Fowler Museum at the University of California, Los Angeles in *New World Wunderkammer*. As a cultural critic, she has co-authored along with bell hooks *Homegrown: Engaged Cultural Criticism*. She co-founded and directed the Visual and Public Art Department at California State University at Monterey Bay, where she is now Professor Emerita. Mesa-Bains' community work includes board of trustee positions with the Mexican Museum in San Francisco and advisory boards for the Galería de la Raza, and the Social Public Resource Center in Los Angeles.



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About Open Studio

Designed by practicing artists, the [Open Studio](#) classroom activities aim to connect high school teachers and students with key ideas and issues in contemporary art. See all of the [Open Studio activities](#).