advent, and to what extent they’re unchanging with time, seems to be the conundrum at the heart of this thoughtful body of work.

—Steve Panton

**Los Angeles**

**Solang Pessoa**

Blum & Poe

Dictionaries define a fetish as a spirit attached to a material object; if nothing else, the oddly configured, misshapen, and obsession-al pieces made by the Brazilian artist Solange Pessoa count as such. Her sculptures look as if they have a job to do in the service of divination or magic. The work is deeply suffused with metaphysics, mystery, loss, and sorrow. Pessoa combines the conceptual and philosophical with the quasi-anthropological, fabricating her own permutations of a “primitive” sublime. Engaging the machinery of primitivism, her work embraces myth and psyche, resurrecting the bonds that tie the present to a now exotic, primal past.

These extraordinarily romantic and expressionistic works underscore Lévi-Strauss’s idea that “every effort to understand destroys the object studied in favor of another object of a different nature.” The objects that Pessoa studies—fossils, ancient tools, cave paintings, glyphs, indigenous artworks—come to have a “different nature” via multiple influences, including Arte Povera, Art Brut, and the work of Ana Mendieta. Pessoa’s work is a record of gestures, the shapes themselves smoothed but unfinished and non-geometric, with softened, rounded edges and labial indentations. Many pieces bear feathers or yam leaves—emphasizing kinship with ceremonial objects. The imagery originates in Pessoa’s interest in rebirth, growth, and the movement between the inner (intuitive and intangible) world and the outer world of matter.

In this show, the multi-part installation Origo (2010-17) dominated a large expanse of floor and colonized the walls with four wall-mounted objects. Constellations of irregular, egg-shaped clay spheres were placed randomly on the floor alongside biomorphic bronze mini-islands nested within yam leaves and human hair. In another space, the floor was covered by nearly a dozen hollowed-out, vessel-like shapes carved into wavered, snake-like spirals and coils. The warm-toned soapstone is common in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais, where Pessoa lives. The most extraordinary objects—five cloth, feather, and bronze sculptures collectively titled Aô-Aô (the name of a Guarani mythological monster) — recalled feathered, chimerical creatures hung by their necks from the wall.

There’s an immense irony at the heart of this work. The pre-contact, nearly extinct place that was the “New World” of the Southern hemisphere seems fated to be constantly mined and re-imagined by subsequent generations of the Europeans who hastened its demise. What barely remains seems to be the source of a profound truth. The now unexceptional shifting of indigenous objects from natural history museums to art museums had the artist’s studio and new-age mysticism as its by way stations. This is not a criticism, only an observation of just how strange and pervasive primitivism is as a phenomenon. Everything that has made the pre-contact era so seductive to artists, anthropologists, and writers in the Americas is visible in Pessoa’s work. Over 300 years of literary and artistic culture have emerged from the dissonance and
friction between past and present, colonized and colonizer, the “raw and the cooked,” all expressing the longed-for simplicities of the never again to be.

—Kay Whitney