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Gallery Glance: 'Edra Soto: the place of dwelling,' Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art

By Steven Stewart for *KC Studio* | June 22, 2026



Installation view of 1 BB Chair (2025), textile and plastic, 36 x 36 x 22" in the exhibit, "Edra Soto: the place of dwelling at Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art (courtesy of the artist © Edra Soto. Photo by E.G. Schempf)

Edra Soto's "the place of dwelling," organized by independent curator Kevin Moore, occupies the atrium of Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art with a presence that feels faintly ecclesiastical. The space induces a kind of upward attention; whatever occupies it must either submit to its vaulted authority or find a way to fold that eccentricity back onto itself. Commissioned for the museum's 10th-anniversary Atrium Project, a series conceived to give visibility to emerging and mid-career Hispanic and Latinx artists, Soto's exhibit does precisely that.

Born in Puerto Rico in 1971 and now based in Chicago, Soto has built a practice around interrogating architecture as a social instrument rather than a neutral backdrop. In Chicago she also co-directs The Franklin, an opinionated outdoor space focused on anything worthwhile. Her work in the Kemper exhibition draws from the rejas, breeze blocks and ornamental grilles common across Puerto Rican domestic architecture — patterned screens that permit airflow and visibility while quietly regulating both. Decorative, of course, but also quiet technologies of control.

In *los ojos del viento (the eyes of the wind)* (2025), Soto installs sand-imbued, spray-painted steel mandala forms in configurations that straddle totem and grid, similar to the fans in *La leyenda de los 4 vientos (The legend of the four winds)* (2025) on the adjacent wall. At first glance they appear festive: intricate, rhythmic, optically staccato. But the longer one stands before them, the more their logic shifts and melds into the architecture. They insist we look at and through simultaneously. The eye catches a pattern, goes long and low into complacency, slips past into the atrium's height, then rebounds.

Transposed into architect Gunnar Birkerts' cathedral-like

Kemper interior, these vernacular references cease to read as domestic. They feel infrastructural. One begins to sense how beauty can function as a softening device for boundary-making — how repetition and symmetry neutralize division.

And then there is the chair.

Slightly off-center, *1 BB Chair* is an ordinary patio chair upholstered in a luxurious burst of fabric bearing the unmistakable face of Bad Bunny. Playful, faintly absurd, and disarming — like a misplaced Temu special order gone tragically right — it reads as insurgent softness against the steel geometries, a reminder that culture circulates differently from policy.

If the steel works diagram the systems that structure Puerto Rican space — colonial governance, economic extraction and the long ambiguity of territorial status — the chair proposes another architecture: one of global pop sovereignty.

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Bad Bunny — less celebrity than diasporic emblem — represents a Puerto Rican identity that cannot be neatly annexed. The United States may legislate the island's political condition, but it cannot contain its cultural powerhouse.

What Soto achieves in the atrium is neither confrontational nor compliant. She filters and activates Kemper's vertical sanctuary. By inserting Caribbean-derived architectural notes into this Midwestern monument to modernism, she reveals that both are structured by decisions concerning access, visibility and power. The atrium remains lofty but no longer feels neutral — beautifully argumentative, if not urgently so.

In Soto's hands, ornament is argument, and every screen is also a mirror: a shield and a window, all the things the best art should endeavor to achieve.