

Sep 14

# María Fragoso





María Fragoso lives and works in Mexico City. She holds a BFA from the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA). Solo exhibitions include Material Art Fair, Thierry Goldberg Gallery, Mexico City, Mexico and *Pero qué deseo tan absurdo*, Gateway Gallery, MICA, Baltimore, MD, and her work has been included in numerous group shows. She is represented and currently working with 1969 Gallery. We spoke with María about growing up in Mexico City, her love for color, depicting primal acts and her most recent body of work. See more of María's work [here](#).

---

### **Can you tell us about your childhood and early influences?**

I grew up in the suburbs of Mexico City. The area, built in the sixties, is called Ciudad Satélite and was influenced by a promising American lifestyle, in addition to the inherited Mexican morals of family and religion. It was very patriarchal and heteronormative. I am not trying to generalize that every family lived according to those values, but it definitely pervaded the environment. I was influenced by this in my childhood, mostly because those values didn't match my parents' way of thinking. I remember I used to pretend to be a catholic to fit in at school.

My parents and my brother were my first influences. Everyone drew at home, my mom used to illustrate children books, my dad is an architect and my teenage brother was always drawing too. So I drew all the time. I am also very thankful that my parents constantly took me to different parts of Mexico City, and especially art museums, which have become lasting sources of inspiration.

The fact that my brother was eleven years older than me defined my childhood. He introduced me to all kinds of things that stir my work now. I looked up to his unique taste and humor, and basically everything he did or liked. I was happy other children didn't know the films or music he showed me, it felt like we shared something special. Mainly because at the same time I was extremely influenced by popular culture. I grew up watching TV, a lot of MTV, American TV shows, as well as Mexican children telenovelas. I remember being curious about fame, I think because it felt limitless, it encouraged fantasy.

Drawing gave me a lot of freedom, since I wasn't very good at school, it allowed me to visually understand the world. I feel really close to that time now.

### **When did you start making art?**

I started making art as a child, I drew and collaged. I would spend hours drawing people, fantasizing about their stories and relationships. I really like that some of those drawings have a lot in common with my paintings today. They were really personal, like my own playground, I never thought of them as art making. Now that I think about it, I am happy I was never pressured to perform or to be the best one at it, I did it because I liked it. I never took any special art classes nor did I learn any techniques, but I was for sure making art before college. It was freeing and became my tool to explore any interest I had throughout the years.

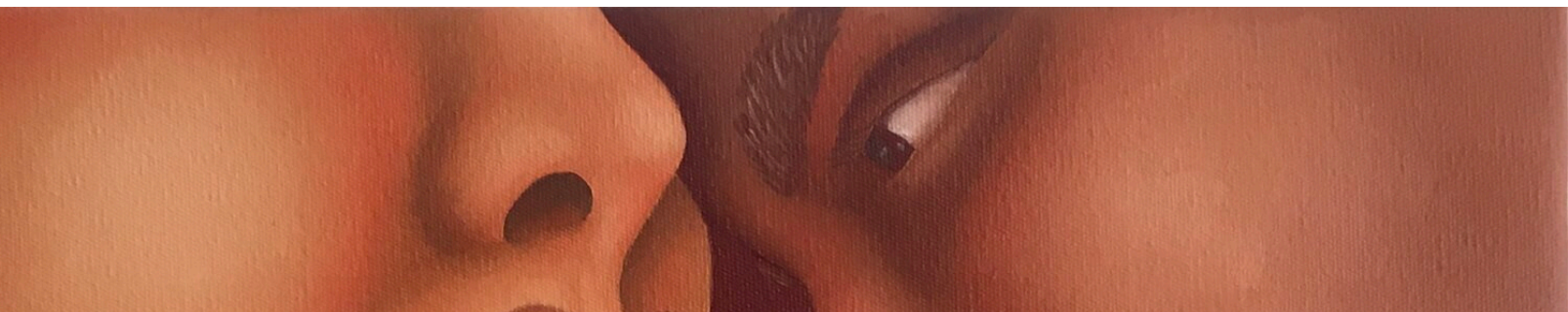
### **You have a BFA in painting from MICA. What was the art school experience like**

for you?

It was a great experience for me. Freshman year I took a painting class for the first time and I loved it. The following year I took a class with Ken Tisa who taught narrative painting through film making, that changed everything for me. We watched *Paris is Burning*, *Black Orpheus*, Jean Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast*. This is when I made the first paintings I loved. I felt I had found a language and subject that felt really exciting. By that time I had also processed the transition from Mexico to Baltimore, it was the first time I was living by myself so I changed a lot too. I had a great group of friends who made everything easier. They were my biggest inspiration and a beautiful company.

Through MICA I was able to study in Florence and take part of the Yale Norfolk program, both really special experiences. MICA also helped me attend Skowhegan after I graduated, I am forever thankful for this.

The last two years I benefited from having a studio and freedom to explore any direction I wanted. Of course with the great help of the faculty and the influence of my peers. I liked the environment, I never felt any hostile competition. It was an individual decision to push yourself, I was really into it and inspired by a lot of the work around, so I worked really hard. That's why I experienced Baltimore mostly at night with my friends. It was a great scene, really strange and fun. I was influenced by those nights greatly. Now I think of MICA and Baltimore with great nostalgia, it was a really good time for me.





*While it burns, 2020*

**You have an amazing sense of color. Is this something you've always been attracted to? How do you choose color and what does color mean to you?**

Thank you. Yes, color is really important in my work and in general in the act of looking. In painting it's a visceral entry, color is the first thing that brings you in, and unfolds meaning and emotion. It creates an atmosphere. I try to think about it as a rhythm, it guides your eye through the painting. Color emphasizes the importance of certain elements through repetition or singularity. It underlines symbolism too.

When it comes to choosing colors I want them to be pleasing and bold, as well as unsettling. That is why I love red. It's so intense and contradictory. Red in a painting is attractive and seducing but it can also feel aggressive or repulsive. It means both passion and danger. Its relationship to the body is life and death, comforting warmth and fieriness. I believe we are attracted to certain colors based on the things and places we've seen, and specially the things that give us pleasure or have a big impact on us - such as art. Color is completely related to the memory and it is a way to create emotion.

**In many of your paintings, there's a character that seems to be looking straight at the viewer. Is that intentional? Who are the characters in your paintings?**

That is intentional. The character is acknowledging that they are being looked at, or that the action that they are engaged in is being seen. It creates tension and an unavoidable connection with the viewer. I am interested in the psychological effect this creates. When a character in a film stares back at you, it feels perverse. I am looking for a similar feeling rather than confrontation. It's more about engaging the viewer to feel identification or to want nothing to do with it.

The characters are people I know, at least the main figure always is. Other characters are sometimes the result of combining or changing a face or different faces. Sometimes I paint myself too. Although who we are in the painting isn't necessarily bonded to reality, there is the possibility to represent something else or to perform a different persona.





*Teach me sweet things, 2019*

## **Where does the interest in depicting birth scenes come from?**

I really can't think of many other things that are as beautiful and powerful as birthing. I love the many representations of birth scenes through time and cultures. From nativity scenes to Louise Bourgeois' sculptures and drawings. The *Birthing Figure* representing Aztec goddess Tlazolteotl which is one of my favorite works ever. Or recently I love Louis Fratino's male birth painting. I am just completely amazed and fascinated by this.

I am very inspired by representations of pregnancy and breastfeeding too, as a way to understand subjects of fertility, love, sex, motherhood and human relationships. I think that comes across in paintings such as *Delia sin miedo*, or in *Cántaro lleno* where the vase reassembles the female body.

There is something nostalgic too, so much desire. A longing to understand better ideas intrinsic to womanhood, many that I have difficulties with. When I painted me and my friend Yona holding figures of babies, painted wood statues of baby Jesus, I was fantasizing about seeing us as mothers. Even if nothing about it was real. In that painting I was referencing *The Cholmondeley Ladies* by an unknown artist at the Tate Britain. It's such a beautiful painting, especially seeing two women sharing motherhood. There it means sisterhood but you can also imagine and make space for queerness.





*De nuestro jardín de frutas falsas, 2018*

**You are now based in Mexico City. Does place influence your practice in any**

**way?**

Mexico City has many realities and my work can only speak to my experience, but that has always informed my visual language and subject matter. It is interesting because that was during the time I wasn't painting here, now it's my first time working here and I'm curious to see how this will impact my work. Because of covid I've been at home most of the time since I arrived six months ago, so I haven't been able to experience that, but I really want to get to know the scene better and connect with more artists. I have learned a lot from other places too, specially Baltimore but also places I've worked at during residencies. I learned so much from adjusting to those different conditions and environments.

**Food is ever present in your works, bringing a multitude of characters together.**

**What attracts you to the act of eating?**

I am attracted to representations of eating in art, films, writing, daily life, just everywhere. I find them so incredibly interesting. I am interested in food being so charged with symbolism and able to provide so much specificity, I like to play with that. I am usually very careful choosing the role of food in each painting.

To me eating is sharing, is a way to express love and nourishment, sex and desire. In one of my paintings two boys are sharing an apple, which feels both like a struggle and a kiss. Other times eating is actually devouring, perhaps a wish to consume them, to want to take a piece for yourself, even if it's a result of excessive love. This is what I call a cannibalistic devotion. Eating is also an act of pleasure, therefore portraying that comes with a sense of hedonism and decadence. It can be a loving, erotic or violent act.

It is connected to the body and the experiences the body goes through. Seeing food and the act of eating evokes our senses and makes us think of feelings such

as hunger, fulfillment or disgust. Just those words are inspiring to me, and I think also approachable for the viewer. I like for example depicting food that has a specific culture association, viewers usually respond to that. So I also see it as a way not only for the characters to come together but also to connect with the viewer.



*No me comas, 2019*

**What would you say has been your biggest struggle so far?**

I graduated a year ago from my undergrad at MICA and I think I am still learning how to navigate this next phase. At school and also during residencies you are focused in your work, even when it's challenging it's still exciting. Then you get be around artists which I think, I don't even fear to sound cheesy, is the biggest gift you can get from being an artist. But I didn't have the experience of what happens when the work leaves the studio and you have to deal with a different type of pressure and expectations. I am really excited tho but sometimes I feel overwhelmed by the things I don't know.

### **What are you working on now?**

I'm working on a series of colored pencil drawings and some new paintings. I am participating in a couple of shows this year and early 2021, since I work really slowly and there has been a lot of complications this year, I am trying to have a good body of work to show soon. I am really excited for this. I'm also preparing my first show at 1969 Gallery which I'm thrilled about.





*El paraíso perdido será siempre el paraíso, 2019 - all images courtesy of the artist*

**Caitlin MacBride** >