



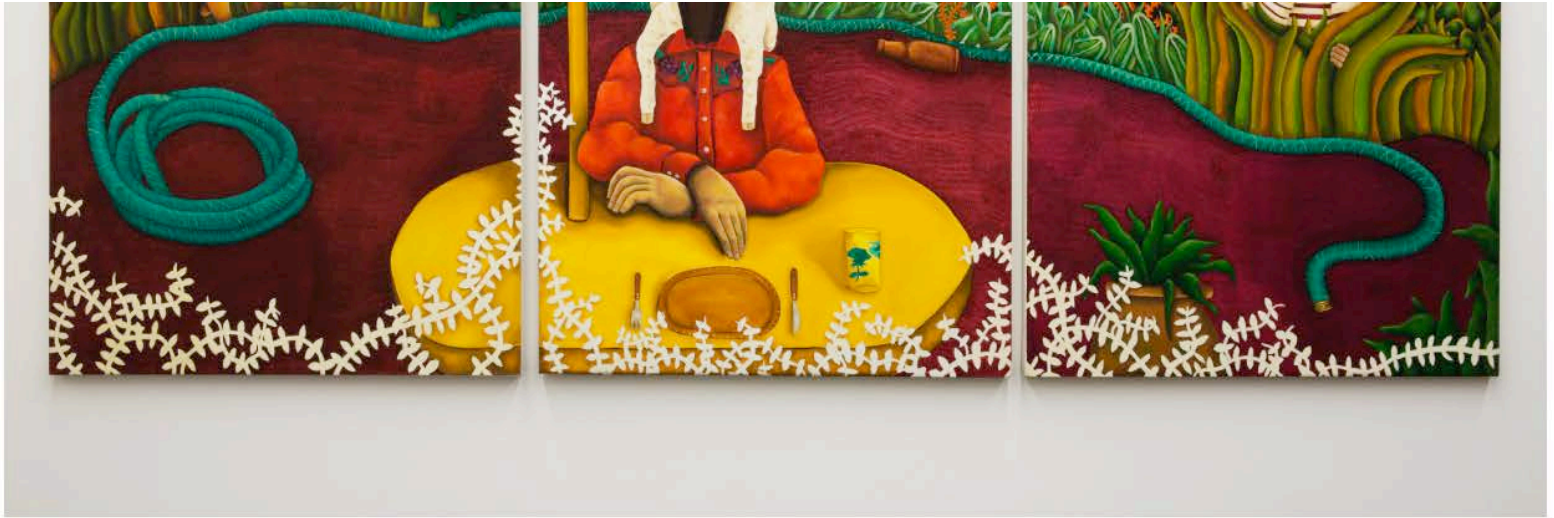
The modern apartment building behind the white wall resembles the image of a fortress on top of a hill from some fable or children's tale that I read a long time ago. Though this is not the first time that I visit María's house in the expanding outskirts of Mexico City, where both of us grew up, for some reason, this resemblance hadn't caught my attention in the past. I've only now become aware of the fact that her lonely tower stands at the end of the road. Maybe this revelation has something to do with the thick and threatening clouds that are looming in the distance as I approach the vehicle entrance manned by armed guards at the end of the sixth section of Lomas Verdes. One of the guards asks me to give him an ID once I'm at the gate, he also wants to know the exact address

and apartment number I'm visiting. After I scramble through my phone's archive and find María's information, the door opens and I enter the small residential area built around a single two-way street. As I park my car, I look up at the building and I try to picture María standing behind her easel near the balcony on the top floor, painting against the backdrop of the artificial landscape of Mexico City's periphery; pouring vivid color onto the canvas and trying to rearrange the people, objects, shapes of her surroundings to give them a different meaning through her painting.

I remember my first encounter with one of María's early paintings. It had hardly been a year since we stopped seeing each other with the implausible frequency with which we get used to seeing our friends in school. The depth of the painting's red background, the chaotic beauty of its contorted and faceless bodies, and the secrecy and power of the mask of the central character made me experience a sincere aesthetic fascination that went far beyond my predisposed appreciation for my friend's work. When I think of that painting now, I believe it not only showcased María's talent, but it also prefigured many of the elements that have become central and immensely meaningful in her current art practice.

As I step into the central courtyard of the building, I wonder what María's studio looks like right now. Maybe it's messy and filled with the objects and pictures that are taking shape in her current painting, I imagine a Chavela Vargas song playing in the background while she paints or takes a break to drink a beer. *Ojos de obsidiana, te parió tu madre, tepalcate eterno*. Maybe the painting that she's working on right now would truly astound me if I was able to experience it in person. However, I shouldn't enter María's apartment coming from the outside, so instead, I take a seat by a table next to the garden after I wipe the surface of the chair with a sanitizing towel and I wait for her to join me. When she arrives, we exchange our displeasure at life in confinement and talk about all the plans that fell apart. After we've shared our resignation for some moments, we embark on a long-overdue conversation about María's paintings, about what she sees in the world that makes her want to paint, and her process of creation. Though I've known María for a long time, I've never had the chance to interact with the artist that she has become. For the first time, I'm able to get a glimpse of her perception of the world and to develop a clearer understanding of her aesthetic endeavor.





One of the first questions that I have relates to your creative process, which is surely different for every artist and it is also bound to the medium of expression, which in your case is painting. Does the particular situation that you capture in each painting come with a “before” and an “after” to the moment that you’re capturing? Is there something that leads to the situation being portrayed on the canvas or something that follows the moment in the painting?

I guess I think less in terms of time and more about the space, like what happens when you have the frame of the painting? What is going on in the surroundings of what you’re painting? In the beginning, I wanted to have that idea of what was going on before and after, and it was intended, but then, when I saw the painting itself, I felt like it lacked that meaning, because, in the end, it turned out like a theatrical scene. It seems like the characters are only waiting for that moment to be seen in that very particular way. It’s almost as if you were creating a photograph, like when they used to dress people in a certain way and put their most valued objects around them to include everything in the picture. I think many times there is that feeling. Even if I want it to be otherwise, most of the time, the situations I portray don’t appear to be spontaneous. They appear more constructed, like frozen in time.

But then, even if there isn’t that temporal consideration of what’s going on beyond the frame, you’re still invested in a narrative in your painting.

Yes. What’s maybe interesting is that there isn’t a past or a future in the painting itself, but I think that the relation from one painting to the next one is where that time does exist, because oftentimes the paintings are related through the objects or the characters that reappear.

How does your process of creating a painting begin?

I always begin by looking at a collection of images or references that I have, and I start assembling them together as if I was making a collage and thinking about which ones can relate to one another. So, from there I start piecing the composition together and that’s where the ideas on the narrative or the general themes of the painting appear as well. The way I look for those references is by going through a huge collection of images that I have. It’s a

combination of paintings or images from books and also a lot of pictures that I've taken, especially in Mexico.

If objects are at the start of the creative process and there's an idea of creating a sort of collage, when and under what reasoning do the characters come into the painting?

I also have a collection of images for that. Sometimes it's just an image of two hands touching in a particular way or two people hugging each other, and that can come from an existing painting, from a photograph, or literally from the internet. That's also an especially relevant source now because there you have an endless collection of images that someone considered important enough to show the rest of the world and you also find things that are really fascinating or sweet there. It's also important to mention that I don't mean to appropriate these images and interactions of other people and present them as my own. I rather like to think about this with the concept of intertextuality in literature. The interactions and the objects that I portray in my paintings are meant to be read as references or quotes of what other people have created or captured and, as I mentioned, those contents come from all possible media and sources: other paintings, images from the internet, music, films.

So, once I have this collection of different interactions between people that I want to use, first I draw them, and then, based on the drawings, I realize that this interaction is significant because of this theme or for this reason, and then I choose what objects and what atmosphere and what context may correspond to that interaction. That's when color starts playing a role as well. I have to decide what color will be important to emphasize those feelings or that experience that I would like to capture and convey.





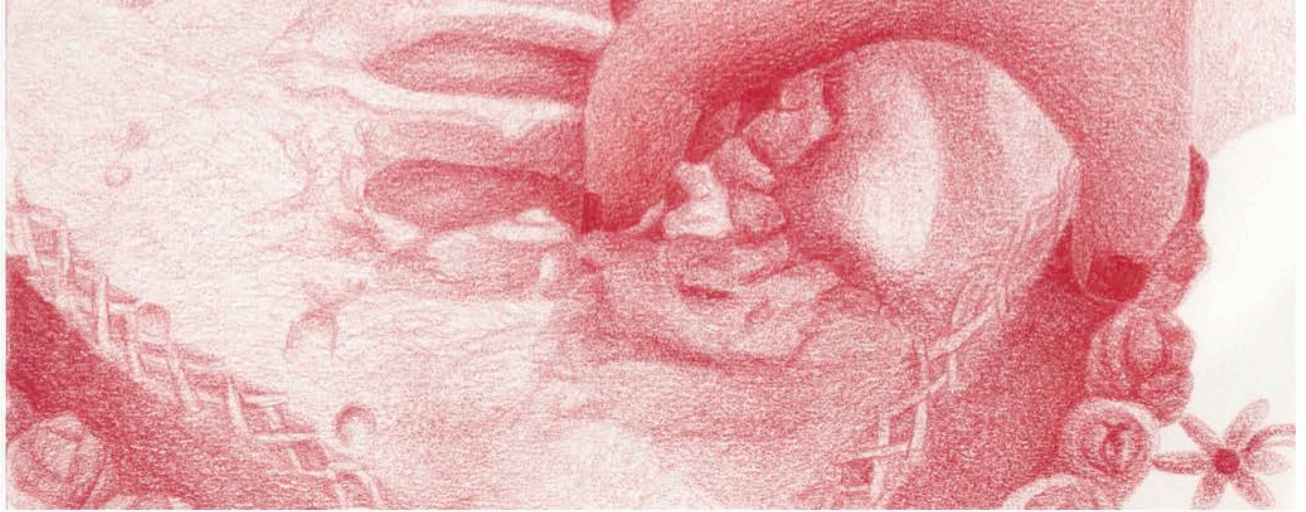
After finishing high-school, María studied Fine Arts at the Maryland Institute College of Art. She lived in Baltimore from 2015 to 2019. During that time, she was invited to take part in artist residencies at the Yale Norfolk School of Art, the Palazzo Monti, the Vermont Studio Center, and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. In the last five years, María's work has been displayed in a number of exhibitions in galleries and art institutions in the U.S., Italy, and, most recently, in Mexico City's 2020 Material Art Fair. As with everyone across the world, the unfolding of the COVID-19 pandemic placed a sudden halt on many of María's professional plans for the rest of the year. Despite the complications during

the last few months, María has kept working and her paintings will soon be exhibited in the Everyday Gallery in Brussels starting October 15, in Mana Contemporary Gallery in Jersey City on October 18, and in the upcoming exhibition of the Taubman Museum of Art in Roanoke titled: "A Very Anxious Feeling: Voices of Unrest in the American Experience".

Even though nothing can match the aesthetic experience in person, spending some time looking at María's paintings on the screen turns out to be mesmerizing. Beyond the intense use of color and the uncanny atmosphere surrounding each painting, the observer cannot escape noticing the motifs, objects, and characters that appear again and again: the food, the sense of touch, the Mexican artesanías[1], the characters looking fixedly at the viewer sitting behind arranged tables, the masks, the red, *all of the red*, the nudity and the vaguely disturbing eroticism are not only the recurring elements that make the style of María's paintings so unique and distinctive, they are also the elements that mobilize and embody the interactions and questions that she's interested in exploring. The act of eating and the exchange of food, for instance, are fundamental themes in María's conception of intimacy and human interaction. The depiction of some types of food, like fruits, are meant to evoke fertility, lust, and the human body in María's paintings. The characters sitting in front of decadent banquets covered in flies or devouring human or breast-shaped pastries not only allude to one of the most deeply human and familiar forms of interaction, but they are also imbued with a powerful erotic connotation that echoes through the other elements depicted in each scene. Painting is undoubtedly a visual medium, but the central role that the acts of touching and tasting play in María's work produce a seductive invitation to experience everything beyond the visible. More than waiting to be seen, it seems like these paintings are waiting to be *felt*.







In a way, your paintings rely on a very “Mexican” frame of reference in the objects, the attires, the names of the paintings, and maybe even the color you feature. How has your experience of Mexico shaped your identity as a painter?

I believe that growing up here in Mexico City was fundamental. Something I find very interesting is that my paintings are always related to Mexico in terms of space and a very specific culture. Even when I have tried doing paintings that in my eyes don't portray that relationship at all, given their context, they are always read like that.

I also feel an intense love for the objects. I'll put a lot of value on a jug that I find very special or on a small flowerpot, for instance, and I believe that something like that is very important in Mexico. Here, we have a lot of objects that are handcrafted and have immense aesthetic value. I've always found these objects amazing because they are completely unique and they embody meanings and traditions that have been passed on through generations in the communities where they are traditionally made. Artesanías are genuine pieces of art that unfortunately oftentimes appear to be anonymous: the people who create them hardly get recognized or properly remunerated for their labor and that also means that it's easy to attribute meaning and reason to the design of these objects as if they didn't have one already. I think there is a great responsibility for any artist representing artesanías to not pretend to appropriate their designs or meanings as something of their own. Once again, I like thinking of my representation of some of these objects as quotes or homages to their aesthetic significance. The way people use and showcase these and other objects is also fascinating to me. It's this idea that everyone becomes a curator of the objects in their own house, and something beautiful about Mexico is precisely that: people will decorate everything, even the corner of a restaurant, for example, and it will always have this mystery behind it because you don't know why the person decided to nail a picture on the wall and then put a flower on top of it and have that functioning as a stand for the TV cable. So, what happens when you put those objects in a painting? You can take a jug or anything that you saw somewhere and, by placing it in this different frame and interaction, it takes on a whole new role. The objects start developing human attributes or reflect a certain psychological or physical trait that connects to the rest of the composition.

I agree, and maybe by using these artesanías and objects that despite being common have great aesthetic relevance and meaning in your paintings, you are also questioning the value of the industrial, mass-produced object. The things that you are putting on tables and in conversation with your characters are not IKEA glasses, after all; they are unique things loaded with meaning and even with a certain personality.

Exactly, and many have an enormous importance. If you investigate more about each object, you find out that oftentimes their reason to exist is not only the use you can give to them. Frequently they have a religious origin, or they were meant to represent a much larger idea, like good or evil.



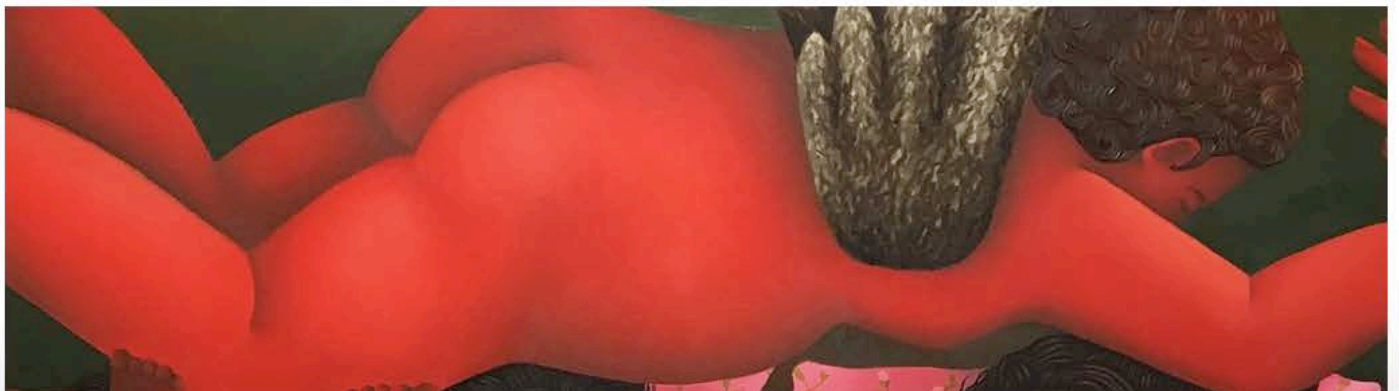
Do you have any examples in mind?

Well, there's this mask in Frida Kahlo's house, for example. More than the paintings, I think I became obsessed with the collection of objects in her house. So, there's a devil mask in one of the rooms that has a little person on the forehead. I tried finding out what that meant, and it was something very interesting related to a traditional dance where good, evil, and sin were represented.



Besides the colorful artesanías, several other elements of Mexican culture have played a significant role in María's development as a painter. She has always been captivated by the unique way in which Pre-Hispanic cultures addressed existential issues like life, death, nature, identity, and motherhood through the raw beauty of carved stone and clay centuries ago. The works of several female painters of the 20th Century like Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo, and Frida Kahlo, who also engaged with their relation to Mexico in their art, have also had a great influence on María's work.

María admits to having a great fascination for Surrealism since she was little. However, she's hesitant to label her work under that category. Even though the scenes depicted in her works clearly take place somewhere outside our reality, the objects, the characters, and their interactions surrounded by an eerie atmosphere are, in fact, ordinary and familiar, especially to anyone acquainted with Mexican life and culture. Placing the real and the familiar in an unknown space beyond our reality produces the effect on the viewer that is fundamental to María's aesthetic endeavor. According to her, the hesitation of not knowing whether what's in the painting is real or not is what creates the possibility for unanticipated narratives. The meaning of common objects, gestures, and interactions changes when these are placed in an alternate reality of the painting, and it's in that space of hesitation about the relation of the painting with our world where the possibility to question dominant conceptions of gender, sexuality, human relations and even one's own identity emerges. Even when the characters depicted on the canvas resemble María or people close to her, they aren't meant to be identified with the real people. The human figures are more like actors performing deeds that suggest a certain meaning that corresponds with the rest of the elements in the painting.







There has always been a discussion on whether art in different media can be taught or whether being an artist depends on unteachable capacity and talent. You had the opportunity to study Fine Arts at a university abroad. What were the most important things that you learned through your formal education and what things were you forced to learn on your own?

Painting itself can be very complicated because it's basically chemistry, and it's based on such ancient processes that you just have to learn about how things react with one another. That's something that I'm still constantly learning. I think something important is that, in college, you learn a lot from what others are doing. You become influenced by your peers and your teachers and the recommendations they give you. Your knowledge of fundamental things like Art History also expands in a totally new way. And you also get introduced to the idea of Contemporary Art, so you start seeing what people are doing right now and that defines your understanding of the possibilities of what you can do. It opens up your perspective on the potential openings that exist. Some classes that are very intensive also become necessary because they force you to paint a lot and that's when you learn the most because you have to take risks and you make a lot of mistakes. I think I've learned something from each painting or that there's been some kind of improvement from each painting to the next. However, there are also things that cannot be taught. Being in school is something idyllic, in a way. You're working with people who are interested in the same things and in the same way as you are and I've always believed that interacting with other artists is very magical and it always teaches you a lot, but it's something very different from the next context where you have to show your paintings in a gallery and then you put what you did in a different situation and in a different conversation altogether.

Given that you went to university abroad, do you think that you apprehended and captured certain Mexican motives in your painting because they weren't present in your immediate surrounding or because they were part of an identity that you were expected to assume?

Totally. First of all, I think each city and country has its own aesthetic understanding and its own art movement going on at the moment. I feel that there hasn't been a lot of figurative art and figurative painting in Mexico in the last years. Conceptual Art is much more relevant and much more appreciated here, while across the border, there is a massive figurative art movement that revolves around the idea of identity, because there is a whole discourse on cultural identity and identity in every sense, so I think that from observing what other people

were doing, it became perfect for me because that has always been interesting to me. In another way, I think I also missed Mexico a lot and that's maybe why I had a sort of need to connect what I knew and what I felt interested about and to learn how those things were perceived there, which is a vastly different reading to when you show your work here.





María feels reluctant to have her profile or her work considered as something that is representative of Mexico or of the “Mexican experience”. She knows that something as vast, as complex, and as diverse as a country and a culture cannot possibly be fathomed by a single person or body of work and that the Mexican reality that she has experienced is quite different from that of a vast majority of Mexicans.

From her studio on the top floor of the tall apartment building at the end of the road, María cannot grasp or capture the immensity of all that surrounds her—nobody can. By transporting the elements of her own personal understanding of Mexico into the world of her paintings, she asks the viewer to question any monolithic conceptions of what it means to be Mexican. In the end, what María’s paintings demand is much more than the distanced appreciation from the viewer. They want an engagement that mimics the depicted action: they want to be caressed, held with affection, kissed, and devoured.

In the time María and I have been sitting under the little roof next to the garden, it started and stopped raining. Now, the cold humidity has made the air surrounding us turn into a thin layer of mist. Once again, I have to think of the similarity of this place at the end of the road with some remote fortress shrouded in fog and mystery. It’s upsetting to not be able to say goodbye to those you care about with a hug, and that smiles have to hide behind pieces of cloth. María and I stand up and she walks me to the door of the building. We wink at each other like little children across a crowded schoolyard.