



María

Fragoso

# RITUAL OF DESIRE

María Fragoso is interested in the act of looking. The figures in her paintings, too, are constantly engaged and engaging in this act. They are looking directly at the viewers, who are looking at them, both active and passive in a locked reciprocal gaze with the audience. Fragoso's work is confrontational this way, but it also invites close observation. Through her work, Fragoso investigates the idea of investing time in looking as her paintings have a slow unveiling; they both reveal and conceal their content through careful details. The profile of painter María Fragoso recapitulates her newest body of work, exploring how her grotesque yet beautiful paintings cultivate a personal sense of empathy and curiosity.

01



Mexico-based artist Maria Fragoso is fascinated with the intrinsic need for human connection. Her figurative paintings and drawings explore how people relate with each other, centering on visual cues and bodily performances that communicate, for instance, the feeling of tender touch, the sound of a mouth spouting saliva like a water fountain, the soft press of a tongue, the smell of sluggish air, the sweet taste of fruit. In her surreal representations of feminine figures, Fragoso emulates the feelings and sensations that define how we exchange love through as well as inside our bodies.

## 01

Fragoso makes quicksketches whenever she gets ideas for painting. Although she has a mental image that she has been planning for a while, she would always go back to the sketches when she is building an atmosphere or composition.

Text by Jae Kim  
Photography by Maureen Evans

Having spent most of her life in Mexico, Fragoso was naturally drawn to Mexican history and contemporary art, which sparked her interest in figurative painting. At the same time, conservative views regarding sexuality and class in Mexican society motivated her to respond to these topics creatively and translate them into her own narrative that infuses humor, criticism, and love. Art, for Fragoso, helps her to navigate coexisting and often contradictory realities in her world because it allows her to visually convey feelings that may be difficult to express otherwise.

After moving to the United States, her visual narrative towards her figurative works amplified as she interacted with a diverse community of people who shared similar experiences as her, allowing her to become more confident in her identity. She recalls, "I think my relationship to Mexico is very personal and emotional. And my relationship with the United States has a healthy distance. Which offers a special kind of freedom, but the question of belonging becomes really important and complex for both cases."

Art has always been central to Fragoso's life. The daughter of a children's book illustrator and an architect, she began drawing at the age of two and carried a sketchbook with her wherever she went throughout her youth. In 2019, she earned a BFA from the Maryland Institute College of Art and has since held residencies at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Yale Norfolk School of Art, the Vermont Studio Center, and Palazzo Monti. Growing up, Fragoso found inspiration in Otto Dix, Francisco Goya, and Giotto, among other artists. Most of all, however, Fragoso drew inspiration from the experience of walking through the world with an open mind: to her, the act of looking and remembering are essential pillars of artistic discovery.

Whenever Fragoso has new ideas for a painting, she takes notes and makes quick sketches. Most times, she already has a mental image that she has been planning for a while, but she refers to these preliminary sketches when she is trying to build an atmosphere or composition. Oftentimes, she photographs her friends and arranges the images as cutouts and collages as references or preparatory drawings. The figures in her photographs and drawings are central to her work, often serving as the basis for her paintings.

02



## 02

María Fragoso's studio in Mexico City



“I want the viewers to have their own experience from looking at my work, I don’t have the intention of providing one specific message or narrative.”

### 03

To mouth (2020)  
oil on canvas,  
47 × 59 inches,  
Courtesy of  
1969 Gallery and  
the artist.

### 04

Seeding (2020)  
oil on canvas,  
40 × 36 inches,  
Courtesy of  
1969 Gallery and  
the artist

### 05

María Fragoso’s  
studio in  
Mexico City

In March 2021, Fragoso had her first solo exhibition at the 1969 Gallery in New York, titled “El jardín entre tus dientes,” translating to “The garden between your teeth.” Set in an otherworldly dreamscape of sanguine warm hues and sensuous textures, this body of work follows two lovers through their rituals of desire and captures the objects they offer each other. “El Jardin entre tus Dientes” provided Fragoso’s first opportunity to create and exhibit a new body of work from scratch. She created most of the work throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been “an emotional rollercoaster” for her. “It wasn’t always easy to stay creative and productive. After everything that has happened, it’s wild to see the work in the gallery a year after.”

In her new body of work, Fragoso alludes to a variety of mythological and literary texts. For instance, the characters in her paintings are inspired by *Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes*, a dictionary written by Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig for lesbian lovers. In particular, Fragoso developed a deep interest in the concept of bodily fluids—saliva, blood, vomit, tears, and urine—as well as how their exchange can operate as a form of affection. In many of Fragoso’s paintings, saliva appears as a motif to signify an offering of love. Figures spout water from their mouths like fountains as if they are perpetually giving life and love to each other.

In these rituals of desire, Fragoso also meticulously renders love offerings between her characters in the form of objects. Candles, seashells, pomegranates, figs, and eggs lay scattered on floral pucker table cloths in a sumptuous feast. In works like *Seeding*, the arrangement of these objects closely mimics the form of a shrine, refer-

encing the tradition of Aztec burials where precious objects surround corpses. These symbols of fertility, love, and lust in Fragoso’s work are meant to resemble the body itself, too.

Interestingly enough, although love and relationships remain the central motifs behind Fragoso’s work, each painting communicates a different message or question. Fragoso clarifies, “I enjoy that my works incorporate the idea of a transfigured world that takes the form of what surrounds us but shows it as something questionable and mutable. These intimate narratives, dramas, or theatrical scenes gravitate between reality and the otherworldly. Introducing my interests in fantasy, mythology, the uncanny, dreams, fiction, and performativity.” Even between separate paintings in the series, the relationships between the figures sensually connect from one work to the next, forming a larger narrative that allows viewers to understand the figures in different ways. What is most important to Fragoso is the idea of layering, not only as a visual technique to convey stories in her work but also as a message in and of itself. The figures in her paintings carry layers: as a protection, a second skin, a disguise, a performative choice. They wear masks, bodysuits, gloves. We can peek into their inner body through a hole in their clothes, their open mouth, the socket of their eyes, the cuts on their belly. Within these layers, Fragoso explores the psychological depths of love within the human psyche and captures an emotional exchange filled with innermost emotions, instincts, fears, and desires. The colors of Fragoso’s paintings also function as an entryway for the viewer into such depths as they unfold meaning and emotion by themselves. What may seem like a decisive decision to use hues of red, green, and yellow is actually an intuitive process that reflects what the artist gravitates towards in aesthetics and life in general. Formally, Fragoso finds fascination in how colors react with each other, a phenomenon that guides her through the process of developing work as it helps her to decide where it goes and what it needs. The beauty of color in Fragoso’s work appears in the rhythm it creates

04



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07

Decadencia, un solo sabor a fruta madura (2021)  
oil on canvas,  
20 × 28 inches,  
Courtesy of  
1969 Gallery and  
the artist.

08

El mar que sube mudo hasta mis labios (2020)  
oil on canvas,  
28 × 24 inches,  
Courtesy of  
1969 Gallery and  
the artist.

as it guides the viewer's eye through the paintings to emphasize certain elements through repetition or singularity.

If there is one thing that undergirds the body of Fragoso's work, it would be love. Love, a form of exchange and connection, trumps all. In Fragoso's own words, "Love means generosity, a willingness to give and receive, as well as an act of caring for someone or something, being vulnerable and intimate. Love is transformative, inspiring, moving, intoxicating. It's incredibly complex too, but a powerful way to understand oneself, others, and everything around us."

07



08



"I am interested in imagining and playing with the fiction of love. Because by its own nature love and the understanding of it is so related to imagination. Subjective to each person's experience, sometimes even varying from the experience of one's lover. Other times love exists only in our minds as a romantic or ideal belief."

"I think many times people want to understand literally what is happening in my work but there isn't a linear narrative. It gives more when it is seen in relation to our senses and unconscious. A part of the psyche is fluid and can't be understood in one specific way."



