

## BEST PRACTICES: EACH ONE OF THE CAROLINA CAYCEDO'S 'COSMOTARRAYAS' IS A UNIVERSE UNTO ITSELF

By Maximiliano Durón – February 27, 2020



Carolina Caycedo in her Los Angeles studio, at work on *Flying Massachusetts*, which is currently on view in her solo show at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston.

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Fishermen and women along the Magdalena River in rural Colombia tend to use the same kind of handmade net, but each fisher casts it differently. The artist Carolina Caycedo, who spent her teenage years there, noticed this around ten years ago, during a visit. Such nuances in casting, she said, represent an “embodied knowledge” based on a “relationship you build with the river.” She was fascinated by the beauty of the nets and began buying them directly from the people who made them—many of whom became friends. She dyes them in brilliant colors, and uses them as the structure for her large sculptures that often resemble birdcages or hollowed drums.

In late December, one of those sculptures hung from the center of the ceiling in Caycedo’s Los Angeles studio, a space she inherited from one artist (Gala Porras-Kim)

and shares with another (Monica Rodriguez). The studio is hard to miss among the storefronts on Chinatown’s Chung King Road: a large window facing the street is covered in miniature flags from countries around the world, with the words “WE STAND UNITED WE FALL” scrawled on the glass. Behind them hang three flags that have been altered to show solidarity between communities: the Star of David sits in the center of the red triangle on the Palestinian flag, the stars in the U.S. flag are replaced by the takbīr (the Arabic phrase meaning “God is great” that appears on Iraq’s flag), and Lebanon and Israel’s flags are combined.

The hanging sculpture is the latest entry in an ongoing series, “Cosmotarrayas”—a portmanteau of “cosmo” and atarraya, the Spanish word for “net”—which was bound for Caycedo’s solo show at the Institute of

Contemporary Art, Boston, which runs through July. Despite the labor that goes into her work, Caycedo doesn't consider herself much of a studio artist; her work ranges from performance to films shot on location to working in and with various communities. This likely accounts for the spartan appearance of her workspace, with a wall of tools and a table scattered with objects that she incorporates into her fishing net sculptures. So far, Caycedo's hanging sculpture, dyed in shades of blue, lavender, and orange, contained a gold pan from Colombia, a piece of embroidered royal blue fabric from the Philippines, and a carved wooden boat that she received from a little boy, plus some shells and bells.

"I've always felt a little bit guilty when I work in the studio on my own," she said. "People are dying. People don't have anything to eat. Why should I be thinking about color? But with the nets, I've found that pleasure. The process of building the nets is just very intuitive."

The new "Cosmotarraya" piece is called Flying Massachusetts. Leaving out the final s, Caycedo said, is an acknowledgment of the Indigenous people who first inhabited the land that became that state and whose name refers to the Blue Hills that overlook the harbor on which the ICA Boston sits. Caycedo felt it was important that the work relate directly to the area that would host the show. Unlike the other works in the series, which are often vertical, Flying Massachusetts was installed in the studio horizontally, to make it appear as if it is flying.

"Although it's acknowledging the indigenous Massachusetts, it brings together other aspects that I want to remember, like the Philippines, Colombia, and Brazil, countries with the most killed environmental activists in the world," she said. "This is a way for me to honor them. Each of these nets is a universe in itself."

Caycedo was born in London and grew up in Bogotá. When she was a teenager, her family moved to Girardot, a small town along the Magdalena River, which carries water from the south all the way to the Caribbean Sea. She originally thought she would pursue a career in theater, but her parents insisted that she go for a law degree. When she got to Los Andes University in Bogotá, she started a dual program in law and fine arts. Through the latter, she learned about performance art and quickly dropped law. "I was interested in theater because I could embody different women, in the possibilities of being multiple people," she said. "When I discovered performance, I realized that I could be many women without having to represent someone else."

Since the beginning of her career, Caycedo has approached performance art from a place that "brings a private moment into the public space" and that aims to generate places for "encounters and the exchange of objects, favors, and services." For her undergraduate thesis, completed in 1999 and titled Quick Cut, she fashioned a box that she would open in various outdoor spots in Bogotá that would reveal a mirror and chairs for free haircuts. In the early 2000s, she developed a seven-year project called Day to Day for which she exchanged services to help ends meet—cooking a meal for a train ticket, for example.

After college, Caycedo left Bogotá. Her mother had passed away and Colombia had too many memories. She first went to London, staying from 2000 to 2005, and then to Puerto Rico until 2011, when she was accepted into the MFA program at the University of Southern California's Roski School in Los Angeles. It was around this time that she began to feel a sense of "longing to find any excuse to connect back to Colombia and to be able to work around an issue there."

Carolina Caycedo in her Los Angeles studio, surrounded by her “Cosmotarrayas.”  
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She went to the town of La Jagua, where work was underway on El Quimbo, a dam that is one of Colombia’s largest infrastructure projects. There, she spent time with local communities of fisherfolk, whose livelihood depends on the fish in the river, and began work on an ongoing project titled, “Be Dammed,” a multifaceted look at the impact of dams being built around the world as a way, Caycedo said, “to better understand the layered political, social, economic, and environmental situations” around her.

“Art has always been for me a tool to exist in society and to exert citizenship,” she said. “Social issues, injustice, and origins of violence have always been real preoccupations in my work. Environmental focus comes only with ‘Be Dammed,’ but this environmental interest is never dislocated from that social and political aspect.”

One series in “Be Dammed,” named “Water Portraits,” many of which were recently on view at the Orange County Museum of Art, is a group of cascading pieces of fabric

with abstracted images of various bodies of water on them that Caycedo has digitally manipulated and collaged. On the surface they appear to be sublime renderings of a natural landscape, but for Caycedo, there’s something deeper to these works. In fact, she rebuffs the static notion of landscape altogether.

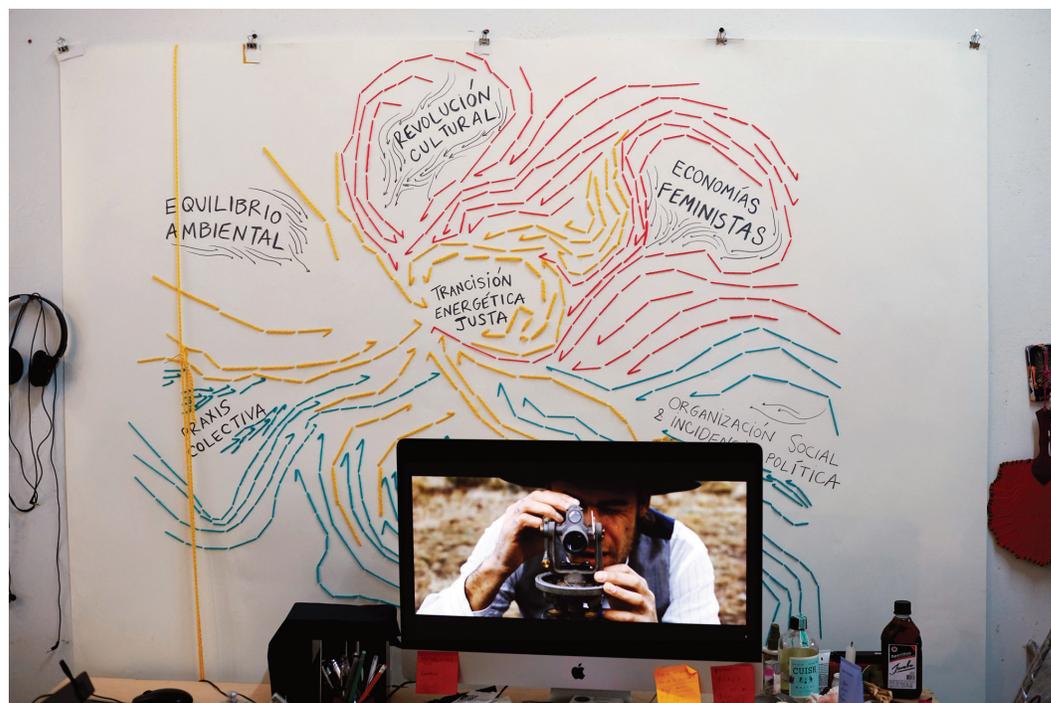
“The ‘Water Portraits’ are a reference to understanding those bodies of water as living entities that have political agency,” she said. “A big process in ‘Be Dammed’ has been to unlearn the term ‘landscape’ and to unlearn given formats and ways we were trained as artists to see nature. It’s inviting people to revise their understandings about nature, which has been dominated by Western thought and philosophy, where nature is separated from culture, and humans are outside of nature. With my work that’s what I’m trying to subvert.”

Caycedo is currently in the final phases of producing a new filmic work, made with David de Rozas, that will debut at Ballroom Marfa in Texas this summer. The film looks at the tangled histories and misconceptions of West Texas, from its Indigenous peoples to its oil industry. Her work will also be the subject of a mid-career survey later this year at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

With the Texas work, titled *The Blessings of the Mystery*, Caycedo and de Rozas have combined documentary footage with 19th-century reenactments that look at how the West has been constructed, both physically and in the collective imagination. “What we’re doing is a portrait of the Far West, of West Texas, that gives account of the layered and complex environmental moment it’s going through,” Caycedo said. Though critical of the state’s oil production, the film isn’t meant to be judgmental but, instead, to start productive conversation. “We’re trying to pull away from these

On Caycedo's computer, footage from a new film that will debut in Texas this summer.

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reductive ideas of Texas—presenting the rich biocultural diversity that West Texas actually has.”

Caycedo has been working in video for the past several years, but this new project relates most directly to one she made during a yearlong residency in 2018 organized by the Vincent Price Art Museum and the Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens. She had unlimited access to the Huntington’s vast archives, collection, and grounds, and at first considered creating work around the water systems of Southern California.

But, being a brown woman in this very white space, she said, she knew she needed to contend with what the Huntington represented as well as its founder’s own history—wealth obtained through the transcontinental railroad and an early 20th-century public transit system in L.A., known as the “Red Cars,” built primarily by people of color. “You have the feeling of ‘Wow, what a colonial place this is,’” she said. “How can we subvert this idea? How

can we have these brown and black queer bodies inhabit this colonial space in ways it’s never been inhabited?”

In the video a group of dancers, choreographed by frequent collaborator Marina Magalhães, moves throughout the grounds of the Huntington, from its magnificent gardens to its stately galleries. They convulse in a manner that seems at once spiritual, sensual, and ritualistic. They stare directly into the camera, holding the viewer’s gaze. “The idea is that these dancers are entities of the past that have existed there and are coming to haunt the present.”

Titled *Apariciones / Apparitions*, the piece is based on an aphorism of the Aymara people of the Andes: *Qhip nayr uñtasis sarnaqapxañani* (“looking back to move forward”). “In Indigenous time considerations,” Caycedo said, “the past is what is in front of you because you know it and you can see it, and the future is behind you because you don’t know what’s going to happen, so it’s something you can’t see.”