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LATAMesa



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STORYTELLING WITH BRUSHSTROKES

FROM *THE* EDITOR

LATAMesa is a curatorial initiative founded in 2023 by Carolina Orlando and Pilar Seivane with a clear mission: to build and sustain a strong network among Latin American artists and art professionals based in London. Our objective is to foster connections among individuals rooted in Latin American identities, diaspora communities, and supportive structures. At our core, we prioritise collaborative work and embrace notions of community and solidarity.

Our recently launched editorial section is dedicated to featuring and showcasing one artist each month, amplifying Latin American voices in the process. We believe in the power of fostering a space for conversation among individuals, opening new discourses, and delving further into the professional art practices within LATAMesa's artistic network.

Caro & Pilar

LATAMesa's founders



ISSUE #4

ANTONIA CAICEDO HOLGUÍN

Storytelling with Brushstrokes

One of the components that shape Antonia Caicedo Holguin's practice is the playfulness of writing narratives with brush strokes. The characters she builds hold the same charm, depth and presence of literary protagonists in a captivating novel. Every figure or element she includes has a detailed backstory to tell. In this way, her work closely resembles that of a writer, as she constructs new narratives in a similar way as writing a book. She shapes her characters, drawing inspiration from those close to her, as well as from strangers or imagined figures. Influenced by the landscape of her home, Cali, Colombia, Antonia brings elements of her life to her paintings, using colour, memory, and imagination to connect with her intimate space. Her artworks spin around common settings and everyday actions, with a significant emphasis on human figures, all executed with remarkable skill.

We first encountered Antonia's work last June at the Slade Graduate Show 2023, where her big vibrant artworks featuring characters dancing rumba immediately hinted at her Latin American painting heritage. Later on we visited Antonia Caicedo Holguin at her studio, delving into her painting methodologies. Pastel sketches, created through observation with friends and family members as live models, adorned the space alongside finished and work-in-progress canvases. Intriguingly, small rocks with painted faces also caught our attention. During our visit, we engaged in an extensive conversation about her journey as an artist, her first encounter with painting, and the entire internal world she reveals in her beautiful painted stories.

Antonia's formation as an artist began with a BA in Fine Arts from the Bath School of Art and Design. She later moved to London to complete an MA in painting from the Slade School of Fine Art - UCL, London. She has participated in local and international exhibitions in London and Colombia. She is currently preparing for her first solo show in Seoul, South Korea and a group show at CasildaArt in London this month.



Artist portrait at her studio in London.

LATAMesa: Could you share about your journey in painting? When did you first start exploring this art form, and how has your approach evolved, especially through your MFA degree at The UCL Slade School of Fine Art?

Antonia Caicedo Holguín: I've always painted since I was a child. When I was about eight or nine years old, I mistakenly ended up in an after-school art class that my sister's friend attended. I remember falling in love with painting at Labrada Art Academy in Cali. I enjoyed it so much that I went there every weekend, and I would return home to paint even more. I was fascinated by the idea of painting people. There's something about painting someone you know, or even just a human figure, which becomes a meditation, a kind of self-reflection, self-examination – a very introspective process.

When I was around twelve years old, I started taking painting very seriously, perhaps too seriously. I wanted to learn how to paint the human figure comprehensively. I began with nudes; the most obvious was female nudes, as they were more readily available in books and in the old masters' paintings that the teacher would show me. I thought it was very cool, so I made copies of many of the images from these books.

My parents were always very supportive. I remember they framed the paintings of the nudes that I made at Labrada and hung them in the house. But when friends were invited to my place, I would ask my mother to hide them all, which she did, resulting in having funny empty walls with only nails on them. There was a part of me that thought that these paintings shouldn't be seen since they felt too personal, and I was vulnerable in showing those images. There's something about painting and representing the human figure that is significantly linked, and it feels very personal. So when a painting of mine goes out there, outside of the studio, it feels similar to when a writer publishes a book after working on it for a long time, and then people read it.

Slade School of Fine Art was fantastic. They pushed me to paint, and it was a bit like you have athletes that sometimes need a sports psychologist when they're stressed or blocked and cannot play properly. That was the MA for me. The tutors helped me build the skills and the tools to learn how to overcome artist's block, which was challenging my practice. That helped me significantly.



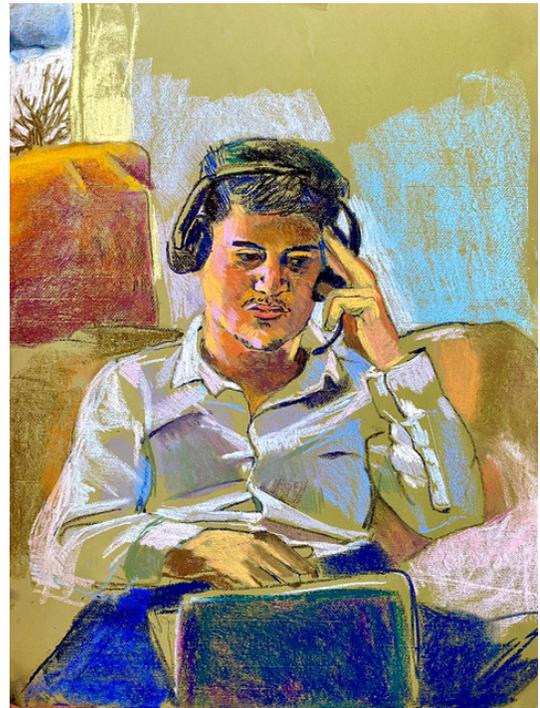
In the spirit of creativity, oil on canvas , 200 x 160 cm.
Courtesy of the artists.

LATAMesa: Your artwork prominently features Colombian traditions, scenes and close people from your personal life. Has living abroad changed this influence on representation? How does your migratory experience impact your practice now? Which are the main conceptual themes you aim to explore through the painting?

Antonia Caicedo Holguín: The intimate images of my family and depictions of where I come from were not something I was particularly interested in when I was living back home. It became very central once I was away. I guess that happens to many people. You become hugely aware of where you come from and try to make sense of it all when you suddenly find yourself in a different context.



Studio shoes, soft pastel on paper.



Telepatía, soft pastel on paper

I always compare my painting process to the way writers work because I believe this analogy helps explain how I think about painting. People often ask me the reason why I paint the things I paint, or If I know the people I portray. I think that maybe not all writers, but some of them, tend to make a mix of things they've heard, stories they've lived, or anecdotes of their own family. They often include places they've lived that are close to their heart. And I've lived the longest in Colombia, where I grew up. So, I also reach to what I know; I make use of photographs that I've taken, newspaper clippings, and my own imagination. I also work a lot from observation; sometimes, I make portraits of people, my friends from London. Other times, I represent my friends and family from back home.

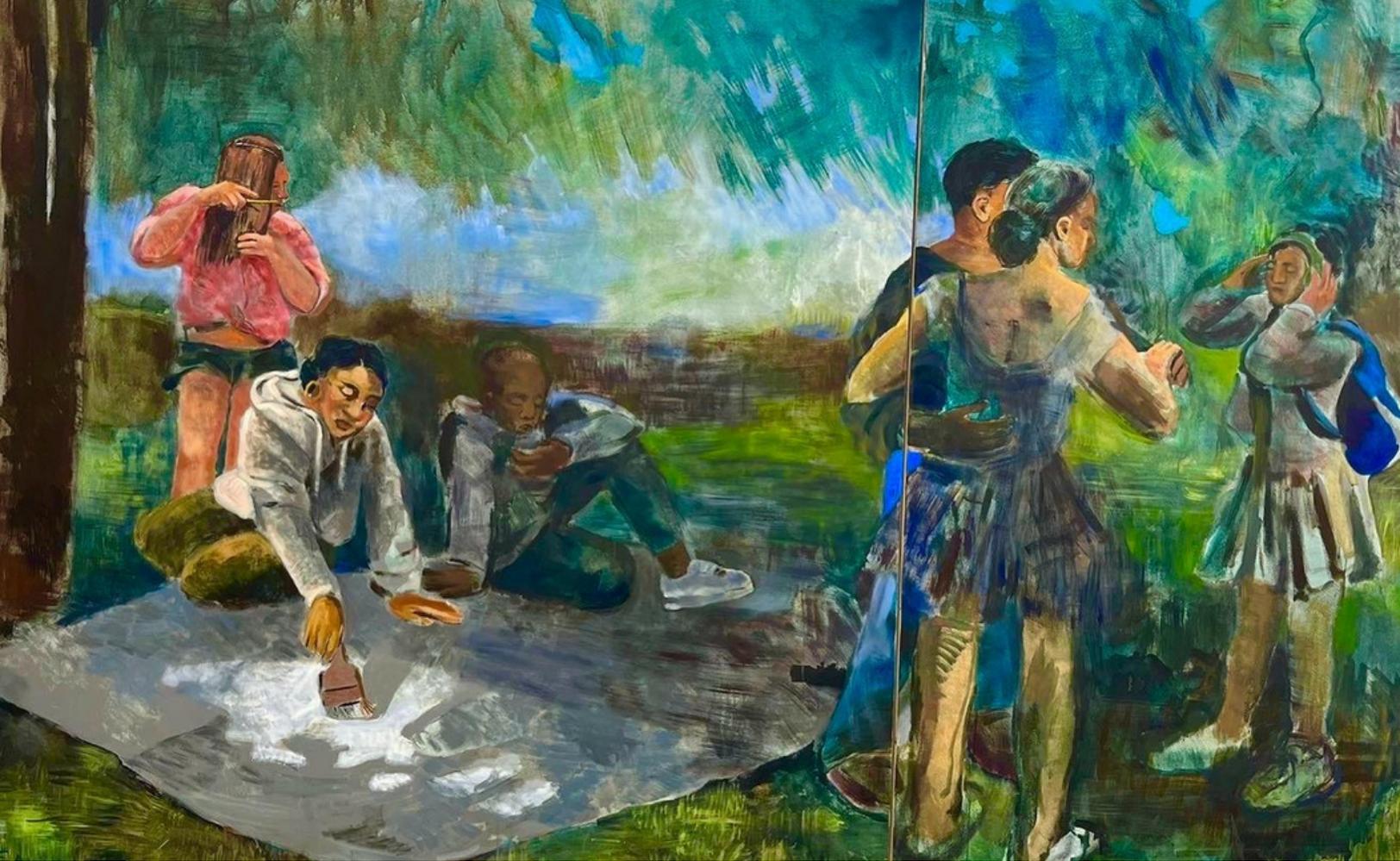
I build a painting like you would build a character for a book. Everything is important: the way they sit, the way they carry themselves, what they wear and the space they occupy. It is all very relevant. It tells you something about the character. What is important is what remains within the painting and what that tells you. Sometimes, because the characters I portray are close to me and they hold that intimate connection, you can tell they've been built with a lot of care, love, or sometimes even anger, but not all of them are people I know. In that way, I treat each painting as a short story. Where there are elements that tell you something about it. The title is crucial as well. It's something that I think about very deeply since it helps to put the painting in context, and it can completely change it.

LATAMesa: I see you also include your own portrait in your paintings.

Antonia Caicedo Holguín: I do. Again, when writers choose one of their characters, it's not necessarily that they're them, but they hold elements that are close to how they are. So, I do include a sense of myself. I don't intend to look identical, and it's not meant to be a self-portrait, but it's more about the idea of placing myself there, or perhaps it's a way for me to project myself differently. Alfred Hitchcock comes to mind; for example, he made 40 cameo appearances from his 53 films. So, in my paintings, I may make a sort of cameo appearance, as when directors pass by their film, and you can recognise them.



The Flipper Hat, oil on canvas, 50 x 50 cm. Courtesy of the artists.



The Disappearance of the Sun, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artists.

LATAMesa: In your paintings, you sometimes use anachronisms of different stories happening simultaneously. One example of this is “The Disappearance of the Sun,” which you showed at The Slade Degree Show. Could you elaborate a bit on this particular work? What’s the meaning behind that title? And what’s your interest in using this resource or device in your practice?

Antonia Caicedo Holguín: Anachronisms can make a painting very powerful. It can be in terms of the colour, the narrative, or it can be psychological, about people interacting and not interacting. I loved giving a title to that painting, “The Disappearance of the Sun”. I chose it because in Cali, where I am from, there is a moment during sunset when everything feels like it becomes blue. Especially if you’re near the countryside, the blue with the trees and the mountains does something so powerful and beautiful, and I really wanted to capture that. It also has to do with my feeling of London’s contemporary life. I believe London is such a fun place, but at the same time, when taking the tube, for example, there are so many people around you and yet such a deep disconnection among everyone. Of course, this also happens in Latin America, but you don’t feel it the same way. For instance, if you take a bus in the capital, you may not talk to everyone, but people will be very polite and notice you there. The experience is very different. So, in the painting, there is an aspect of this commentary on how contemporary life in London has shocked me. “The Disappearance of the Sun” is almost like a dream because it’s set back home. The characters are a bit like a dream, too. Some of them represent people I miss from back home, and some of them are friends I met here. But there’s something in the atmosphere of that artwork that is disjointed.

I had the idea for the painting when I went to Paris, visited the Orsay, and saw Monet’s “Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe.” He never finished it, so it’s cut up into two pieces, and one of them is larger than the other one. It’s very odd, and it’s being exhibited next to Manet’s “Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe,” but Monet’s characters are all dressed up. The composition captivated me, and something about that painting was the starting point for mine.



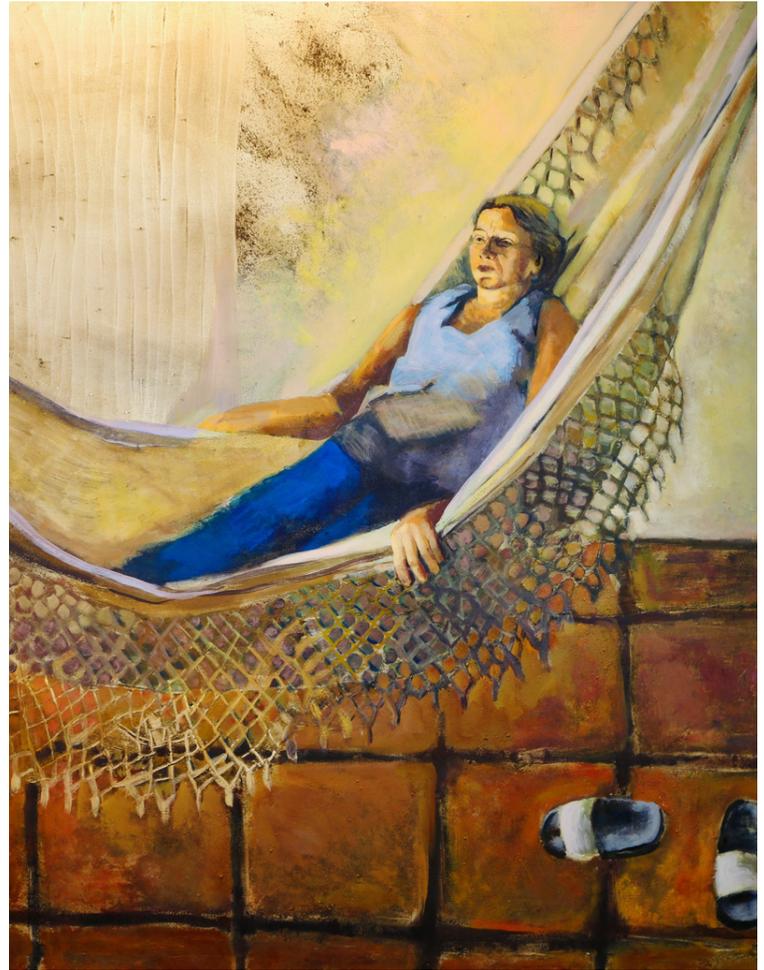
The Documentation of Time, triptych, charcoal on paper at The Slade Graduate Show, 2023.
Courtesy of the artists.

"I WAS FASCINATED BY THE IDEA OF PAINTING PEOPLE. THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT PAINTING SOMEONE YOU KNOW, OR EVEN JUST A HUMAN FIGURE, WHICH BECOMES A MEDITATION, A KIND OF SELF-REFLECTION, SELF-EXAMINATION – A VERY INTROSPECTIVE PROCESS"

LATAMesa: The exploration and use of materiality play a significant role in your work, as seen in your use of natural pigments and coffee beans. What significance do these materials hold for you, and is there any symbolism associated with them?

Antonia Caicedo Holguín: I love experimenting, whether it is the application of paint or new materials. There was a tree a street away from my house in Colombia that grew Achiote seeds, and I wanted to paint with them. The seeds have many uses, they are employed commercially as natural food colouring, as well as commonly used as an ingredient for seasoning. They also hold great significance in various indigenous tribes in Colombia; for example, the Quechua tribe is known for painting their faces with achiote as it is “the colour of blood”. Another example is the extraordinary prehistoric mural made on a vertical rock in the wilderness in Chiribiquete National Park, which is thought to have been painted with achiote, but unfortunately, there is very little literature regarding the paint preparation process. I started experimenting with this pigment around 2019 and continued for three more years. Natural pigments are gorgeous, but they require a lot of trial and error. So I did a lot of testing with the pigment, and still, sometimes, it can go wrong. After a lot of experimentation, I was satisfied with the recipe I ended up with. Yet, I forgot to make this natural pigment a lake pigment, which consists of a chemical process where you fix it. I made many paintings with this pigment, but then, they began to disappear within a year, so I had to repaint them with reliable conventional materials and had to abandon the Achiote project, or at least for now.

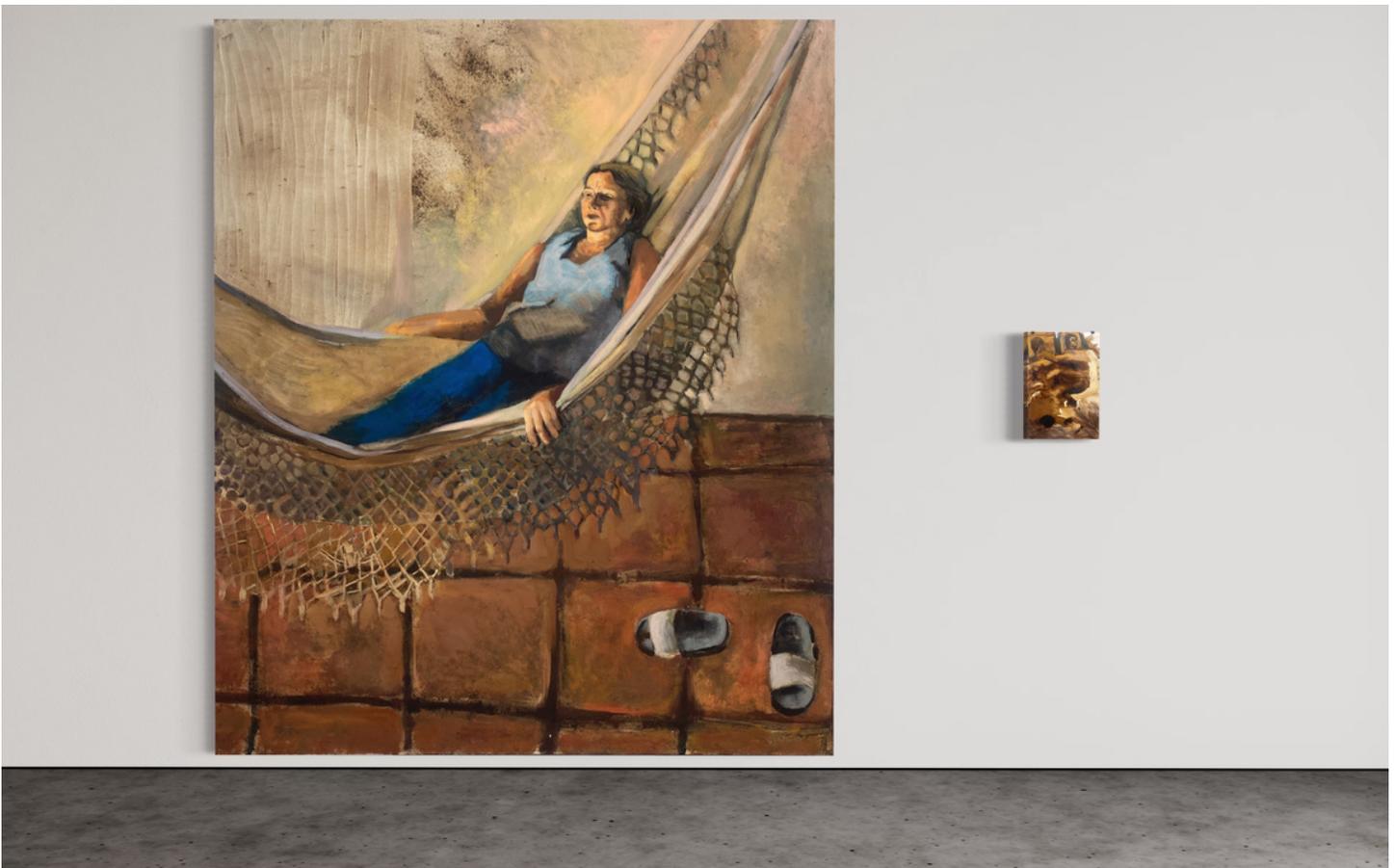
“I BUILD A PAINTING LIKE YOU WOULD BUILD A CHARACTER FOR A BOOK. EVERYTHING IS IMPORTANT: THE WAY THEY SIT, THE WAY THEY CARRY THEMSELVES, WHAT THEY WEAR AND THE SPACE THEY OCCUPY”



Suspensión, acrylic on canvas, 200 x 200 cm.
Courtesy of the artists.

Regarding the coffee ones, I love those works. Some of them are very strong. They came about when I was in Bogota visiting family, we went to a cafe, and it started pouring rain. I had a sudden intense urge to paint, but no one had a pen or anything with them. So, I came up with the idea of painting with coffee on the paper tablecloth, and I started thinking about coffee stains and how the pigment could stay. Then, I researched at Slade and spoke with a chemistry professor who gave me tips on preserving coffee because it's something people haven't really done yet. There have been some coffee paintings done with the ink, but not with the coffee grounds, which is what I was doing. People who paint with coffee tend to be fine about the short longevity of the work, but for me, this was something that I was worried about. It's for that reason I am sticking to oil paint and pastels and keeping the coffee works not for sale.

Anyway, the idea of painting with coffee came from this experience in Bogota. However, there was also something to do with the smell. I remember my coursemates from Slade would ask me whether I was doing any commentary on coffee production in Colombia and its consumption in London, which I was not. For me, it was something more personal. It reminded me of a smell that brought me back to my childhood, particularly my *abuela*, my grandma's house. So, I did a lot of artworks with coffee, and now I keep doing them, but just for myself.



Suspensión, coffee and acrylic on canvas and under the blankets, coffee and oil pastel on paper. Courtesy of the artists.

LATAMesa: How about these paintings done with little stones that you have here at your studio?

Antonia Caicedo Holguín: There's something about experimenting that I think is crucial for any artist. If I stumble on something like a tile or a rock which gives me an idea for doing something, I will use it. Sometimes, you have to follow an intuitive feeling when working with unconventional materials. They can introduce you to new possibilities for making new images.



“I ENJOY PAINTING IMAGES THAT EVOKE ELEMENTS OF MY COLOMBIAN LIFE AND HERITAGE WHILE ALSO REFLECTING MY EXPERIENCES LIVING IN LONDON AS A COLOMBIAN”

Passing the Baton, oil on canvas, 180 x 170 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

LATAMesa: So, what’s next?

Antonia Caicedo Holguín: Next up, a solo show in South Korea and a group show at CasildArt in London this March. I’m also keeping the artistic flow going and have my eyes set on London, too. I’m working on a bunch of new pieces, aiming for a big London exhibit, but I am also interested in broader horizons.

I would love to exhibit those large canvases, you know? I’m planning to mix them up with some smaller ones, creating a contrast. I want this body of work to come together as if all these paintings were stitched by the same thread, like a story connecting all the pieces together.

LATAMesa: And is there any kind of topic you would like or want to explore?

Antonia Caicedo Holguín: Right now, I’m doing a series of paintings inspired by my dad. He always jokes and says, “Oh Antonia, you’re going to be like Picasso” So I thought, I have to paint him reading a book on Picasso, and it has to be set in Colombia. There’s something about having someone who believes completely in what you do, and that is pure inspiration. It gives you a lot of mental fuel to keep going.

But then, I started thinking of referencing other artists. Colombia is not a country that is famous for painters; still, we do have some great ones, such as Beatriz González, Botero, Oscar Muñoz, and Oscar Murillo. However, not many women painters or at least renowned internationally. I think that is also why I paint about Colombia, things that, for me, are very characteristic of my culture, and I wish to see more represented. I'm proud of it, we have so much beauty, and it has to be celebrated. For me, London is the place to do so, is such a fantastic city with such immense diversity,

I am currently working on a piece where I am painting a cameo appearance and is referencing Frieze Magazine's 2018 edition which has Beatriz González on the cover. I remember seeing it online and thought, "Oh my God, it's the first time I've seen a Frieze cover with a Colombian painter on it". So, I started that painting with the idea of making references to books and emphasising the significance of certain kinds of publications or artists. That's what I'm delving into. I am also painting my social circle in London, my life here, and especially touching upon people and spaces in London that are close to my heart. Salsa dancing in London will continue to be part of my paintings, as well.

I enjoy painting images that evoke elements of my Colombian life and heritage while also reflecting my experiences living in London as a Colombian.



Artist portrait at her studio in London. Courtesy of the artists.