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LATAMesa



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Pia Ortuño

PIA ORTUÑO

RHYTHMS OF NOW AND THEN, HERE AND THERE.

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



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PIA ORTUÑO

Rhythms of Now and Then, Here and There.

LATAMESA's initial encounter with Pia Ortuño's art transpired at her first solo show in 2022 at Incubator, London. The gallery space was imbued with the earthy and slightly tangy scent of salt and rust emanating from her paintings, creating a grounding sensation that contrasted well with the aura of devotion and ritual associated with her work.

Recently, we met once again at Pia Ortuño's East London studio. She shared her ongoing art projects with us and discussed the role of ritual, time, and sense of belonging in her artistic practice. Whether it's the explosive vibrancy of colours drawn from her Costa Rican heritage or the intricate interplay of materials and contrasts, her works assert an imposing presence that is hard to overlook. They exist in a realm where the sacred and ritual converge, where past, present, and future can simultaneously coexist, and perhaps even bridge the distance between territories.

Pia's journey as an artist began with her BA in Fine Arts from the University of Costa Rica. She later moved to Pietrasanta, Italy, to work and learn ancient marble and bronze techniques at Jimenez Deredia's studio, where she worked at the Fonderia Artistica Mariani in 2020. Pía also holds an MA in painting from the Royal College of Arts, London. Her artwork combines painting, installation, and sculpture disciplines. She expresses the syncretism between pre-Columbian and post-colonial religious iconography, colour, and architecture in an abstract and sensitive way. The materiality of her work challenges linear time and embeds surfaces with her own history and traditions.

Pia has participated in local and international exhibitions, including *Shadows* at Stables Gallery in Switzerland, *Books and Things* at Helen J. Gallery in Los Angeles, *New Ancients* at Guts Gallery, and *Matter* at Flowers Gallery in London. In 2022, she had her first solo show, *A Blue Fire*, at Incubator Gallery in London. She is currently preparing for her first solo show in Portugal at Duarte Sequeira Gallery.

Join us in this insightful interview as we unravel more layers of Pía Ortuño's artistic journey and step into her unique world.



Artist portrait at her studio in London, photo by Iona Wolff .

LATAMesa: You completed your BA in Fine Arts in Costa Rica, then you went to Pietra Santa, in Italy, for a residency with artist Jorge Jimenez, and later on, you came to London to study at RCA. How was that transition, and how did your experiences in those places inform your practice?

Pia Ortuño: I left Costa Rica because, unfortunately, it lacks the infrastructure for artists to develop a cultural practice comparable to the opportunities available in places like Europe, Mexico, or the United States. Pursuing an artistic career there felt challenging, with limited funding and opportunities. When I moved to Italy, artist Jorge Jimenez provided me with an amazing opportunity. He took me under his wing and introduced me – through his practice – to the world of sculpture, a departure from my background in painting. It was an entirely different practice that I was starting to approach.

Moving away from my family, going to Italy alone, and immersing myself in a whole different language, starting an entirely new background in a different artistic practice was quite challenging. However, at the same time, it made sense. Sculpture became a very engaging process for me, unlike painting, it involved my entire body in a very different manner . It clicked. I could easily translate what I had envisioned into a three-dimensional piece, something that had always eluded me in painting and was quite frustrating.

Moving to Italy showed me a different and powerful art scene. Italy, with its profound appreciation for the arts, is, however, somewhat confined by its past. They have their old masters and an incredible art history to which they have a deeply rooted attachment. So, for a foreigner and a contemporary artist, breaking through can be challenging in this context. So I moved to London, a city that exposed me to a more vibrant, dynamic artist community. Here, I found many peers like myself—young artists striving to establish their artistic practices and create their own worlds. Suddenly, I wasn't alone; I was learning from others. Each of these countries taught me valuable lessons about how the arts can function across the world, each with its own merits and challenges. While I am currently very happy in London, and I feel like it is the place for me to be right now, the reality is that I may find myself in another place in a few years—who knows.



Nuestra Señora, 2023. Salt, ink, pigments, oil paint and rusted nails on found wood with steel frame. 40.5 x 40 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Charity, 2023. Oil, pigments, marble dust and nails on wood with steel frame. 43 cm diameter. PH:@BJDeakinPhotography.

LATAMesa: Your work conveys an effort to integrate elements of the past and the sacred into contemporary life. For instance, your distinctive chisel marks and ritualistic gestures sometimes take the form of wooden triptychs reminiscent of religious devotional art. Can you delve deeper into the role of ritual and the sacred in your artistic expression? How do you actively incorporate and explore these themes? Additionally, are there specific cultural rites and influences that significantly inspire your work?

Pia Ortuño: It was very challenging for me to acknowledge the presence of a ritualistic practice in my artwork, mainly because of my Catholic upbringing. This implied confronting emotions that I wasn't ready to expose or understand through my work. Later, I realised that it had always been present, informing and residing within me. In my family, it was shared with a sense of love and respect, yet it wasn't something I felt prepared to physically express to the world, especially considering the complexities of discussing religion in art in our time.

As I understood that this was an integral part of my identity, something I couldn't escape from, I recognised that it wasn't confined to Catholicism alone. It represented a spiritual awakening in my work that I wanted to share because it did something for me – shaping how I live, perceive and respect others. It became a means of communicating my own spirituality that evolved and was influenced by various people, experiences, and learnings from different religions and the way I lived after leaving Costa Rica.



Ahora y en la hora, 2022. Salt, pigments, ink and rusted nails on wood. 30.5 x 30.5 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

Ritualistic practices, at their core, involve repetition. Whether it's saying the same meditation or performing identical prayers, the essence lies in doing the same thing repeatedly. This is reflected in my gestures—they follow a similar pattern. Placing one nail after the other, carving with a chisel countless times, it establishes a rhythm. These actions serve as the boundaries of ritual, informed by repetition yet creating their own language. It's akin to deciphering a binary code or rediscovering ancient scripts that were once forgotten, a language I once knew but am now remembering.

I suppose what currently shapes my practice is being away from home and experiencing a sense of belonging elsewhere. Whenever I return to Costa Rica, I struggle to work or create, as I feel too close to the source. It's upon coming back to London that everything seems to explode and gain more clarity. I absorb when I'm there and release when I'm here. It is like when we go into meditative spaces, like a church, and they allow us to release a lot of what we have inside. My studio has become my church, where I can liberate the frustrations, meditations, and significance related to various aspects of my life that I grapple with. So, at the moment, that's how I perceive this aspect of my practice. However, it's an ongoing learning process— That's life, and it unfolds in diverse ways, and the spirit undergoes constant transformation.

LATAMesa: These gestures that involve repetition and a sense of ritual also seem to be encompassing the recording and representation of time, particularly evident in the use of weathered and corroded metals. Could you delve deeper into the significance of these chisel marks and elaborate on how you conceptualise time within your artistic practice?

Pia Ortuño: The first thing that truly made me interested in exploring time in this way was when I was carving marble in Pietra Santa—a monotonous gesture where you continuously strike a chisel, hoping to unearth something from a rock. It's a process filled with potential mistakes, irreversible once made. You stay in a perpetual cloud of dust, trying to find your way through the stone. I then realised I was not only engaged in this corporeal movement but also a kind of dance, creating a rhythm with the chisel.



El Viejo- Becoming Ancestral, 2023. Marble dust, pigments and oil paint on wood with rusted steel frame. 131.5 x 130 cm. PH:@BJDeakinPhotography.

And not only that, as I extracted layers from the rock, I was unveiling the past. Going into the stone, I was carving through the external layers of the present, revealing past strata and sculpting them into the future. This process was allowing the piece of history captured in the stone to breathe the air of the present. This experience ignited my passion for sculpture and its rhythmic engagement with the body, mind, and meditation. It is quite astonishing breaking a piece of stone, and how it reveals its own unique life, and when shattered, irretrievably transformed into dust, and no matter what, it will never be the same. This realisation marked the beginning of my exploration of the concept of time in my artistic practice and when I decided to portray or capture time on surfaces.

So when I came to RCA, that was what was on my mind: how to capture time. Due to different circumstances in life, I couldn't continue marble working in London in my flat during Covid. However, I used, for example, marble dust as a way to continue this material practice and maintain the connection with the material. I used the chisel as a way to keep my body in that same state of remembrance of how I discovered time. I use nails that I collect from the Thames, which have been part of the city's history for hundreds of years and have their own time. All these elements come together, forming a completely different surface with accumulations from many different times. They all have their own spirit, their own previous life, and they're going together into their next life – once they leave my studio.

This is what I've come up with to create a visual language for how I perceive time. I view time through that repetition in those gestures or in the different colours. It's also about telling stories. For example, my paintings have names in Spanish as well as in English because one represents the memory of a feeling, and the other is the more literal version in English. So, one is the emotional aspect, and the other is more logical. This connection bridges those two passages.



Untitled, 2024. Detail modular painting. Courtesy of the artist.

"I INTEND MY WORKS TO BE A FUSION BETWEEN SCULPTURE AND PAINTING, DESIGNED TO EXIST AS AN OBJECT RATHER THAN MERELY SOMETHING ON THE WALL. THEY CAN INHABIT A SPACE ON THEIR OWN."

LATAMesa: What about this new corpus of work that is more modular?

Pia Ortuño: Well, the modular approach aligns with this sense of repetition. But also, these artworks were prepared for a show in Portugal, and I aimed to address two challenges. Firstly, the weight of the pieces, as they can become quite heavy. Secondly, there's the transportation issue. Working between the floor and the walls involves constant lifting and lowering, and lifting a 5 x 2.5 mt piece of wood alone in the studio would be nearly impossible for me. Breaking the pieces apart and constructing them from these modular components made them more manageable. It has also enabled me to use thicker wood, which imparts a more substantial weight and presence. They are no longer thin pieces of wood that need steel structures to become objects. Because after all, I intend my works to be a fusion between sculpture and painting, designed to exist as an object rather than merely something on the wall. They can inhabit a space on their own.

This modular approach has allowed for greater creative play. The modular nature permits them to bend and traverse corners, being hinged and adaptable to various surfaces. They can protrude or integrate further into the wall, depending on how I hang them from the back. I can carve them thinly or add to them, making it an expansive practice. It provides me with the opportunity to play with architecture a bit more, which has been informing my work, mainly because the first place I would go to see artworks back in Costa Rica was in churches. It was our main source of any kind of painting, mural, or stained glass windows, having the most beautiful collections in Costa Rica. I was always taken aback by the incredible architecture of an altar. That's why my altar pieces are based on that type of architecture. I love when there's an opportunity for touch in the works. Now, these modular pieces can produce their own architecture; they don't have to be rectangular; they can be cut and changed to form their own altar spaces.

LATAMesa: Do you source any materials from Costa Rica?

Pia Ortuño: Oh, it's quite difficult. I've considered importing wood from Costa Rica, but it's exceptionally expensive. Ultimately, what resonates with me about Costa Rica is the memory of it and the emotions that come with the distance —the stories my grandma shared when I was little, the yearning for Costa Rica's nature and its colours. I try to absorb as much as I can during my visits, capturing moments through photography and reminiscing more than bringing physical pieces to London due to the prohibitive costs.

LATAMesa: So all these nails are from the Thames? Do you use a mudlarking machine?

Pia Ortuño: Yes, the large nails are from the Thames, and I don't use a machine; you can easily spot them as they get washed up. However, finding thousands of the same size is very difficult. Typically, they are big, rusted, and filled with debris. So, when I gather a certain amount, I engage in a sort of cross-contamination process, transferring a clean nail and one from the Thames into a pan with salt and water, the water will then get contaminated and therefore the clean one as well. It's like a method of transferring time from one object to another or a form of embedding one thing into the other.

This is also something that has been happening with my paintings. I tried to incorporate certain modules of one painting into another one and play with that. So, it's like that cross-contamination again or a painting migration from one place to another. For example, pieces that were now out of one painting moved onto the top of another painting. And the top of that painting has moved to this other painting. So, there's a pilgrimage between each other.



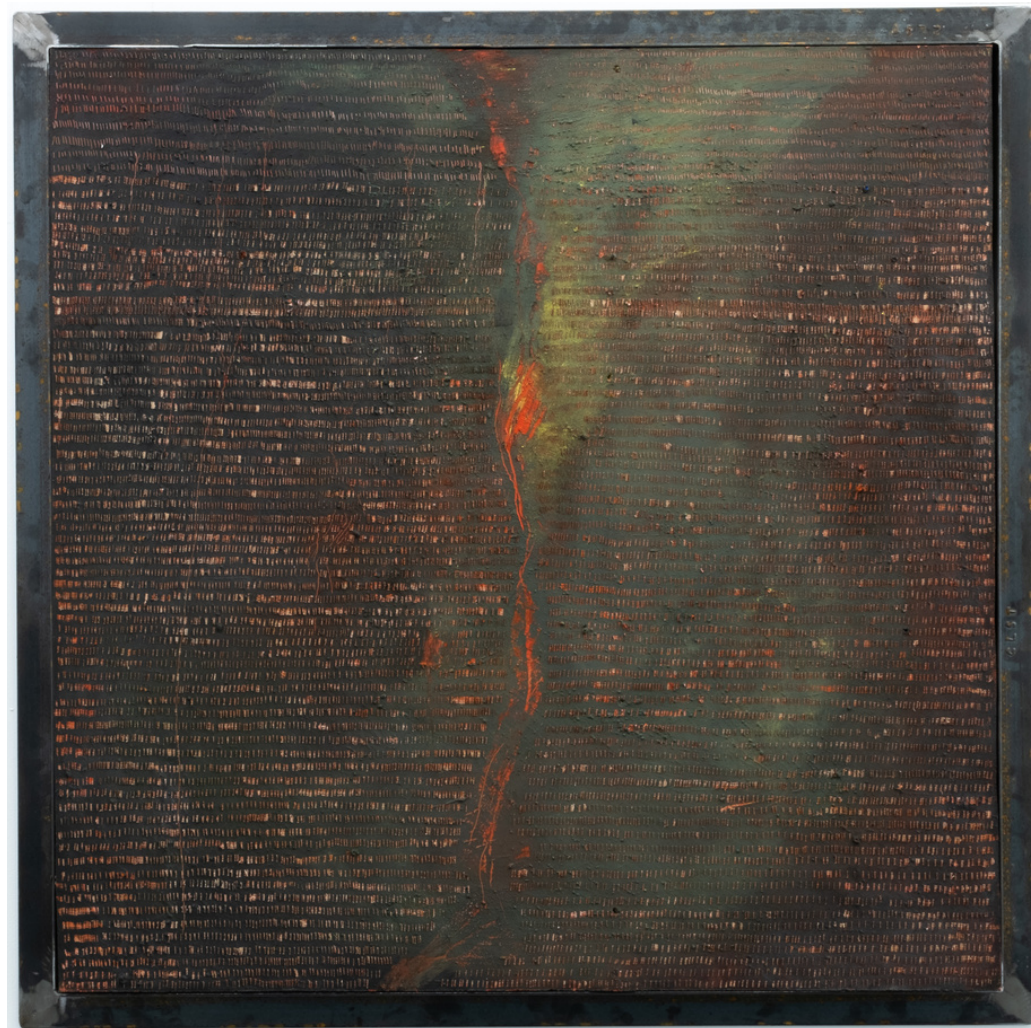
Dentro de la caldera del trapiche - a reason to leave, 2023.
Salt, pigments and oil paint on wood with rusted steel frame.
175 x 132 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

"ULTIMATELY, WHAT RESONATES WITH ME ABOUT COSTA RICA IS THE MEMORY OF IT AND THE EMOTIONS THAT COME WITH THE DISTANCE —THE STORIES MY GRANDMA SHARED WHEN I WAS LITTLE, THE YEARNING FOR COSTA RICA'S NATURE AND ITS COLOURS."

They become kind of infected by what the other one has to inform. There's a historical aspect because, obviously, one was made before the other, but you don't know where one piece is going to land. You might have something from the past that is coming into the present or something from the present that's moving into the past. That's kind of what I was interested in at the beginning when exploring time because I wasn't sure that time, in a way, could be seen as linear. I wanted to see time not as a line with a past, present, and future but as a plane that you can see from above. So you can pinpoint different moments in time but see them all at once. I guess this is what I've been trying to find in the paintings—a combination of past, present, and future all condensed into one surface. And again, it's something great that allows this modular way of working. It's so playful, really fun to work with.

LATAMesa: Some of your artworks titles, such as *Toda la Piel de América en mi Piel – Records of the Ones Before* and *Las marcas de la Siembra – Encroaching of the Land* seem to unveil hidden histories and landscapes from Latin America. Where are the references here? Is there any aim to allude to socio ecological struggles?

Pia Ortuño: The thing with Latin America is that we have a very complex history. It feels like we're constantly in a battle for our own image, our resources, and our people. We've been through conquests and so many changes that it feels like we've never settled. For example, when thinking about the image of Costa Rica, it still feels like it's boiling and hasn't quite settled into something specific. What's beautiful here in London is that if I meet any other person from Latin America, they immediately feel like family. You don't have to be from my country; if we're from Latin America, you are a part of me. It's strange to feel nationalistic about one country when you feel like you belong to so many others. That sense of belonging—where do I belong? Do I belong there? Have I started to belong more here?—has been one of my biggest struggles.



"I GUESS THIS IS WHAT I'VE BEEN TRYING TO FIND IN THE PAINTINGS—A COMBINATION OF PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE ALL CONDENSED INTO ONE SURFACE."

Overmorrow, 2023
Salt, pigments, ink
and oil on wood with
rusted steel frame.
102 x 102 cm.
Courtesy of the
artist.



Toda la piel de América en mi piel- Records of the ones before, 2023. Salt rusted nails, pigments and oil paint on found wood with rusted steel. 132 x 71 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

There are so many social and political problems; it's very difficult to pinpoint just one all the time. There are so many causes that you can fight for, provoke with a painting, or express through your line of thought. To me, it's most important to emphasise the significance of Latin American people in our contemporary society. We have so many great artists, thinkers, and philosophers who are worth the world's time and attention. At least for me, it feels like we tend to always look to Europe, the United States, or some other places in the world to search for the greatest minds, but not in our own home, in our own countries. And I guess that's what's most important for me to say: we are great people: it's about having that memory that we come from great civilisations as well.

Titles such as *Toda la piel de América en mi Piel* are about that sense of family with so many other Latin American people. *Las Marcas de la Siembra* is about where I grew up—in a farm with sugar cane as a main crop. The memory of the people working and those sugar cane fields that seemed to be dancing in the wind—it's about those feelings of home. However, sugar, banana and coffee plantations also hold a very intense and bloody history in my country and Latin America. Those stories feel very attached to me, and that's why I see them as part of my work as well. They inform the work from every point of view. I guess that's what I was referencing—the Spanish part is about the feeling of the work, about home, belonging, memory, individuality, and the image that I see of myself as a Latin American woman here. It's about what I remember of Latin America and what I don't want to forget. The English side of it is more literal. *Las marcas de la siembra* is about the reason why I would have stayed back home rather than leaving. I love the land, I love my home, and it was a very hard decision for me to leave. That would have been my reason to stay, but I decided to go.

LATAMesa: What is next for you?

Pia Ortuño: Well, I have a show coming up in April that I'm very excited about at Duarte Sequeira Gallery in Portugal. Most of these works at my studio will be featured in the exhibition. Sequeira is an incredible art space that has given me the opportunity to take over the entire gallery and just have fun with it. My idea for the show is to build a quarry inside the gallery. The paintings themselves will represent the explosions that would occur inside, alluding to the historical method of extracting marble with dynamite, resulting in spectacular explosions. Then, pieces of marble would be shipped out to all corners of the world. These paintings simulate those pieces that have been put back together, forming sculptures or works that all come from the same original place. It's a very exciting exhibition that I've been working on for a while.

Looking ahead, I will have a show here in London with Jo Dennis at Pictorum Gallery, which is very exciting. I have a few more projects down the line, but to be honest, I've been focusing more on developing my work. I prefer to keep it in the studio a bit longer, putting thought into how I want to present it rather than exhibiting it extensively. It takes time to live with the work, learn from it, and then release it into the world. So, those two things are particularly exciting for me this year.



Artist portrait at her studio in London, photo by Iona Wolff .