

*Arcadia Missa* ii

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# FRIEZE

## Frieda Toranzo Jaeger Paints Christ Crucified by Capitalism

In her exhibition at Travesía Cuatro in Mexico City, the passion of Christ becomes a parable for the antihuman politics of the global gig economy

BY ANNA GOETZ IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS | 5 MAR 24

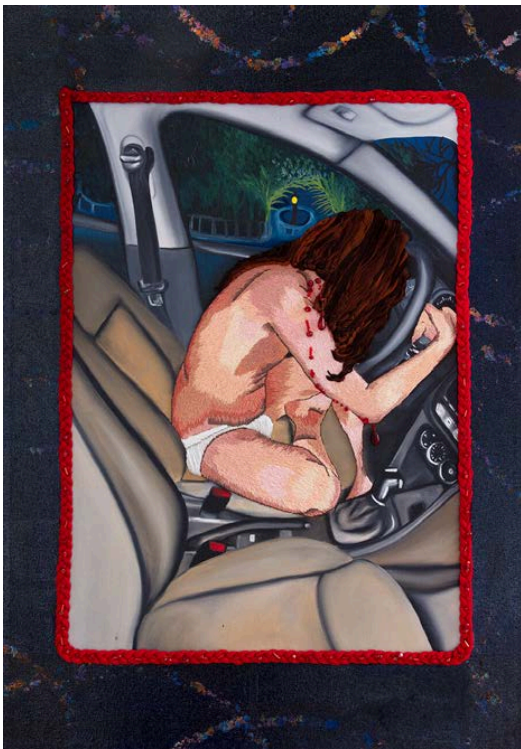


In recent years, Frieda Toranzo Jaeger has developed a unique practice that critically engages with the medium of painting and its historical and contemporary discourses. With her canvases she builds three-dimensional structures, often at large scale, which evoke both early Renaissance altar panels and futuristic-looking vehicles – such as rockets or cars with gull-wing doors – symbolizing capitalism’s essential drive toward ‘progress’. Her detailed imagery in oil paint, supplemented by traditional Mexican embroidery, depicts queer-erotic scenes within lush landscapes and high-tech car interiors. Telling of lust and pleasure, but also of control and domination, they are reminiscent of the 15th century paintings of Hieronymus Bosch and of works by 20th century Mexican artists, such as Francisco Toledo and José Clemente Orozco.



Frieda Toranzo Jaeger, *La supremacía más white de los whitexicans nos chupa a todos* (The Whitest Supremacy/the Whitexicans Gets Us All Sucked), 2023, 'Uber: Déjame entrar', 2024. Courtesy: Travesía Cuatro and Galerie Barbara Weiss; photograph: Ramiro Chaves

In 'Uber: Déjame entrar' ('Uber: Let Me In') at Travesía Cuatro in Mexico City, the artist – whose work will also be included in the main exhibition of the upcoming Venice Biennale – presents a new body of five, wall-hung works. Rather small by her standards, they are no less visually powerful and loaded with art-historical references. The title of this solo show – only her second in her native city – alludes to the twisted power dynamics of Uber, the quintessential proponent of the gig economy and informational capitalism, which promises an aspirational lifestyle combined with the illusion of self-management. In return, Uber demands not only our time but also the investment of our private infrastructure, such as our roadways and telecoms, while vampirically sucking our data – the capital of the modern world – during the transaction process.



Frieda Toranzo Jaeger, *Una serie de ausencias que, paradójicamente, nos hacen percibir nuestra propia presencia* (Series of Absences That, Paradoxically, Makes Us Aware of Our Own Presence), 2023, 'Déjame entrar', 2024. Courtesy: Travesía Cuatro and Galerie Barbara Weiss; photograph: Ramiro Chaves

Three of the works on display depict car interiors charged with Catholic iconography. Two feature the figure of Christ, based on Paolo Veronese's *Pietà* (c.1581), and the third shows calla lilies in a handbag – all embroidered onto the otherwise oil-painted background. The lilies echo a motif frequently used by Mexican muralist Diego Rivera to honour Indigenous labour and tradition. In the triptych *La supremacía más white de los whitexicans nos chupa a todes* (The Whitest Supremacy of the Whitexicans Gets Us All Sucked, 2023), Christ's body, as if freshly removed from the cross, lies in the back of an Uber. The wings of the triptych can be folded in and locked with hooks to reveal a kitschy, glittering image of an open coffin, referencing the workers' housing estate in Alejandro Jodorowsky's surrealist satire of consumerism, *The Holy Mountain* (1973). In the single-panel *Una serie de ausencias que, paradójicamente, nos hacen percibir nuestra propia presencia* (A Series of Absences That, Paradoxically, Makes Us Aware of Our Own Presence, 2023), Christ is in the driver's seat, leaning over the steering wheel, seemingly exhausted and disillusioned. In both works, blood, depicted in rhinestones, drips from his neck as if from a vampire bite – stigmata received from having been deceived and sucked dry by the ride-sharing company. As both passenger and driver, he is a victim of information capitalism and a casualty of the free-market system.



Frieda Toranzo Jaeger, 'Uber: Déjame entrar', 2024, installation view. Courtesy: Travesía

Cuatro and Galerie Barbara Weiss; photograph: Ramiro Chaves

Drawing on a wealth of references, Toranzo Jaeger once again takes on capitalism with acuity and wit in works whose titles are a scathing comment on classism in Mexican society. In *La supremacía más white de los whitexicans nos chupa a todes*, for example, she invokes the colloquial pejorative 'whitexicans' – white Mexicans who are unaware of the privileges they enjoy because of their skin colour and who emulate a Western concept of development – and denounces them as the cause of social and environmental ills in Mexico. For Toranzo Jaeger, the iconography of the beaten and bleeding Christ conveys the forceful penetration of an ideological occidental machinery that subsumes everything on its own terms and for its own profit.

Frieda Toranzo Jaeger on view at Travesía Cuatro, Mexico City, until 23 March

Main image: Frieda Toranzo Jaeger, 'Uber: Déjame entrar', 2024, installation view. Courtesy: Travesía Cuatro and Galerie Barbara Weiss; photograph: Ramiro Chaves

ANNA GOETZ

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# Los Angeles Times

With cars and kaiju, artists Umar Rashid and Frieda Toranzo Jaeger subvert American myth

BY CAROLINA A. MIRANDA COLUMNIST  
MARCH 20, 2023 10:30 AM PT



In a show at MoMA PS1, Umar Rashid toyed with the heroism of equestrian painting. (Steven Panecasio / MoMA PS1)

NEW YORK — In 1816, Kentucky-born portraitist William Edward West created a print depicting the battlefield death of British Maj. Gen. Edward Michael Pakenham at the Battle of New Orleans. At the time, the wounds of the 1815 conflict, the last of the War of 1812, were still fresh, and West did his best to convey the drama. In the background, U.S. soldiers in blue fight off invading British redcoats. In the foreground, a British officer holds the dying Pakenham in his arms. Gen. John Lambert, who assumed command after Pakenham died, is shown burying his face in a white handkerchief as he weeps.

But “Battle of New Orleans and Death of Major General Pakenham” — West misspelled the general’s surname — is more bizarre than it is cinematic. Horses and men are out of scale, and Pakenham’s body is awkwardly situated within the composition. Amid the war dead lies a horse on its back, presumably in a state of rigor mortis but better resembling a house pet in need of a belly rub. Ultimately, the most intriguing thing about the print is the way the artist revised it. Lambert, it appears, was not a fan of being shown in tears, because when West reissued the print in 1817, the handkerchief was gone. Instead, the general is shown drawing his index finger toward his brow, as if announcing a new pimple.

This absurd bit of revisionism was on my mind as I ambled through Umar Rashid’s solo exhibition “Ancien Regime Change 4, 5, and 6” at MoMA PS1 in Queens last month. The Los Angeles-based artist has long been preoccupied with the mythmaking embedded in historical painting. Such artists were generally not at the events portrayed in their works; in fact, in some cases they weren’t even on the same continent. Making things up was part of the deal. Rashid has taken that idea and *run* with it.

In drawings and paintings bearing some of the awkward poses and portentous titles of the genre, the artist has tracked the fictional battles of civilizations real and invented. In the Hammer Museum’s pandemic-delayed biennial, “Made in L.A. 2020: A Version,” he created a suite of paintings titled “The Battle for Malibu” that riffs on the history of Spanish missions in California — complete with a demon that shoots lasers out of its eyes.

The now-closed show at MoMA PS1 focused on the “history” of a land known as Novum Eboracum, a.k.a. New York. In a 6-foot-tall canvas from 2022 titled “Tales From Turtle Island #1. The secrets of the Onguiaahra (Niagara) Falls and the first death of Venus, in furs. Gamera be praised,” we see mermaids beckon as boatloads of Dutch and Indigenous men prepare to slip over the edge of the falls. Meanwhile, a Neptune-style god blows a conch as a snake faces off with Gamera, a turtle kaiju of Japanese film. In another painting, a pair of deities in a vintage convertible descend on a scene in which two soldiers, also lovers, are surrounded by enemy troops under a glowing sky.

If an overheated imagination worked for early printmakers, it works just as well for Rashid.



Umar Rashid, “Tales From Turtle Island #1. The secrets of the Onguiaahra (Niagara) Falls and the first death of Venus, in furs. Gamera be praised” (2022). (Umar Rashid / Blum & Poe)

“Ancien Regime Change 4, 5, and 6” was one of two solo shows on view at MoMA PS1 until earlier this month that offered an enjoyable jolt to the nervous system — not to mention the history of art and design. “Autonomous Drive,” the first major solo show in a U.S. museum by Mexican artist Frieda Toranzo Jaeger, subverted the machismo of car culture and reimagined 16th century religious painting in queer and sensual ways.

She used a hinged triptych — a format commonly employed in the creation of Christian altars — to render the dash of a late-model luxury car in acid shades of green. Another triptych, a 2019 painting titled “Sappho,” shows two women in flagrante delicto in the backseat of a vehicle that explodes with riotous nature.

One of the exhibition’s showstoppers was a large-scale hinged canvas that stood on the floor — more than 7 feet high at its tallest — titled “Hope the Air Conditioning Is On While Facing Global Warming (part I),” from 2017. The painting consists of four panels that have been assembled to evoke a BMW i8 and its flamboyant wing doors. Through the windows of this painterly vehicle, we see idyllic blue skies and delicate flowers, as well as a landscape in flames.

The freedom a car purportedly gives us is also at the root of our imminent destruction.



Frieda Toranzo Jaeger borrows from car culture and religious painting in “Hope the Air Conditioning Is On While Facing Global Warming (part I)” (2017). (MoMA PS1)

Other car-themed paintings included a handsome triptych from 2022 that shows a scramble of tailpipes, navigational systems and bits of landscape rendered in the austere color palette of a freeway. But as in Toranzo Jaeger's other work, there is a playful sensuality as well. To enter a car is to enter its body; to enter this triptych is to engage the elegant black vertical void at its center — along with a literal depiction, in one corner, of a trio engaged in ecstatic sex.

The artist's focus on transportation extends to the interstellar. The exploration of space has often been rooted in the language of colonialism — there is an entire Wikipedia page devoted to the "[colonization of Mars](#)," for example. And its symbols are often aggressively male. (Cue Jeff Bezos in a [penis rocket](#).)

Toranzo Jaeger appropriated the spaceship to new ends: In a three-dimensional painted work from 2022 titled "For new futures, we need new beginnings," she assembles a spacecraft out of painted canvas that features a blooming potato plant and patterns that evoke the labia — some rendered in embroidery. On one side of her imaginary rocket, two women strike the insouciant pose of Lucas Cranach the Elder's 1529 canvas, "[Venus standing in a landscape](#)."

Symbols of the past are repurposed in the present in service of imagining a fantastical future.



Frieda Toranzo Jaeger, "Sound system idea on 110 north, LA is a bad reality show" (2022). (Steven Paneccasio / MoMA PS1)

This is a tendency Toranzo Jaeger and Rashid share in their work.

Rashid gleefully smashes together styles from various eras, his canvases drawing from colonial-era manuscripts, Persian miniatures, Japanese screen painting, comic books and '80s wild style graffiti. In the final gallery of the show, he drew from the flamboyant aesthetics of Afrofuturism. There, a series of capes — of the sort [Sun Ra](#) might don at a performance — were displayed on a wall, each evoking the civilizations the artist depicts in his work. Also displayed was a sculpture of a Jumbotron that looked as if it had crashed into the room from outer space and commanded the viewer to "Sink" or "Synchronize."

Rashid's warped histories often extend, like Toranzo Jaeger's, into otherworldly realms.



An installation view shows Umar Rashid's capes and his sculpture "Sink or Synchronize: The voice from the outer realm of the cosmic overlord that compels you" (2022). (Steven Paneccasio / MoMA PS1)

In an artist conversation organized by the Getty Research Institute in 2021, Rashid said, “The biggest tragedy that happened to the African American was that we were cut off from our culture, we were cut off from our language, we were cut off from our religion, we were even cut off from our names. And when you lose your name and you lose your culture, you lose your identity.

“It’s a gap that can’t be filled,” he added. “The best way that I can fill that loss is ... create a parallel universe.”

His universe un-erases the erased, but it isn’t reactionary, nor is it a site of gauzy triumph. It is complicated and messy. Everyone — white, Black and brown — is implicated in the struggles for power.

The most compelling of these works are those inspired by European equestrian painting. Think of Jacques-Louis David’s majestic 1800 canvas of Napoleon gallivanting across the Alps in a billowing wrap worthy of an Oscars red carpet. It’s a form that has been tweaked before, perhaps most famously by painter Kehinde Wiley, who has regularly inserted the Black figure into these heroic poses.

Rashid borrows from the form and complicates it further — most intriguingly in a pair of larger-than-life canvases that figured early on in the MoMA PS1 show. One featured a mounted Black female figure in a robe brandishing a machete over two Black soldiers engulfed in a brutal sword fight. The sky is rendered in messy drips, and spray painted upside down above the scene in bright orange is the word “alive.”

It’s unclear who fights for whom, who has the moral high ground, who is the hero in this battle, who history will venerate. No matter which way you edit or revise it, war isn’t heroic. It’s an enterprise painted, ultimately, in blood.

# i-D



## The artist exploring queer bliss and the apocalypse through her paintings

*In her new show, 'Autonomous Drive', Frieda Toranzo Jaeger blends erotica with catastrophe.*

BY SARAH MOROZ 27.2.23

With work themed around driverless cars, cosmic travel, queer ecstasy and lush vegetation, Mexican painter Frieda Toranzo Jaeger enmeshes kitsch and catastrophe, erotica and agitation. Her vivid multi-paneled paintings, incorporating shapely ceramics and traditional Indigenous embroidery, jostle gendered tropes, turning absurd symbols of heteronormative virility into sanctums of queer bliss. Cars — an image traditionally approached with aggressive masculinity in art — are subverted: Frieda turns their backseats into sapphic divans and transforms dashboards into art historical riddles.

Her unconventional canvas shapes — hinged together and best experienced from many different angles — push against the art history rules that have so often excluded women, Indigenous voices, and queer identity. What's more, she integrates her family's proud lineage of craftsmanship into it, hiring them to embroider her canvases. ("They often think contemporary art is weird, so this is how I bring them closer to what I do," she once said.)

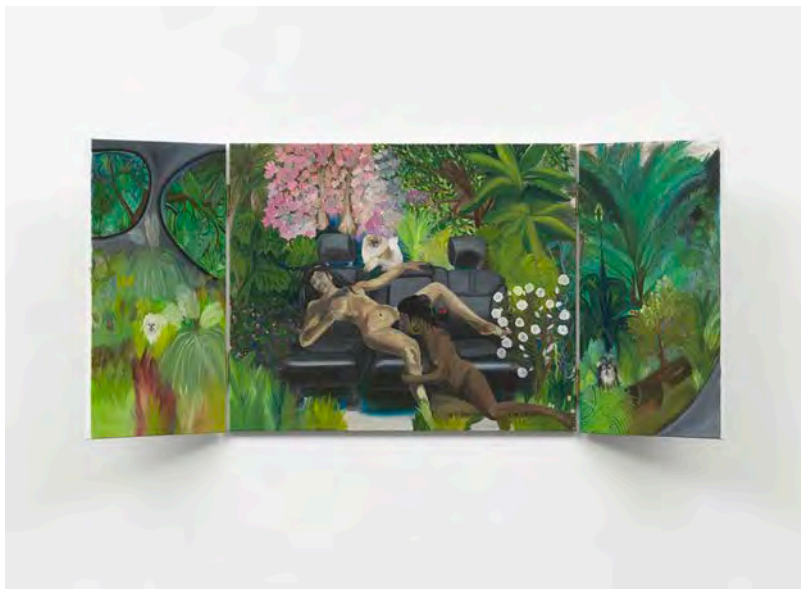


"Cybertruck," 2020.



“She's thinking about how altar paintings were also a tool for colonialism and the spread of Christianity and religion,” Ruba Katrib, the curator of *Autonomous Drive*, a MoMA PS1 exhibition of her recent work, says. “You see in the panel paintings the way that she's thinking through nonlinear narratives. They're sculptural: not a flat surface that you're reading. You need to move around and physically engage with it.”

Here, Ruba speaks about Frieda's work in depth: the LGBTQ sanctuaries she creates, the unexpected spin she puts on German Renaissance paintings and the potential that arises from destruction.



"Sappho," 2019.

**A sense of playfulness definitely comes across in Frieda's work. It feels like a little wink.**

It's not meant to be didactic at all. [She's] playing with the themes and turning them on their head, and there's so much history she's evoking too.

Frieda talks about the apocalypse. According to a lot of people, the apocalypse already happened or is happening. It's this idea of complete collapse and change happening all the time.

**But she makes it look like a utopia can be extricated from all the burning happening adjacently.**

Exactly. And if you look at “For New Futures We Need New Beginnings,” this column is quite ambitious. The work has a console on which you have all these different art historical references. You see how travel has been so key to globalization [and] the history of colonialism. And you see Eve and Eve instead of Adam and Eve.

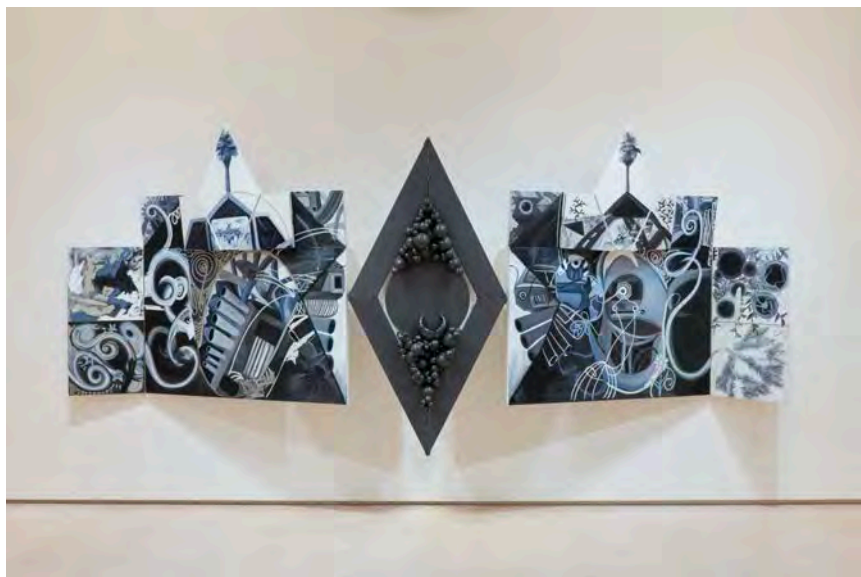


"For new futures we need new beginnings," 2022

**The vehicle motif — mostly cars, but here something more interstellar — is a constant through line.**

She's interested in the ontological shift that's taking place from this masculine driver to the more passive passenger role. “Sound System Idea on 110 North (LA is a Bad Reality Show)” is a new piece that she made for the exhibition. It's the first time she's bringing in even *more* sculptural materials: ceramic pieces that she made while she was in LA teaching for a semester. It's very much inspired by the time spent traveling in the car.

I think what she's doing with painting is so radical, breaking away from linear representation. I just have not seen painters working on canvases like this. Artists use shaped canvases, but I think she's really taking it to another level playing with the idea of sculpture, painting *and* craft by stitching or using fabric or other materials. It's this construction of the picture plane, decorating it.



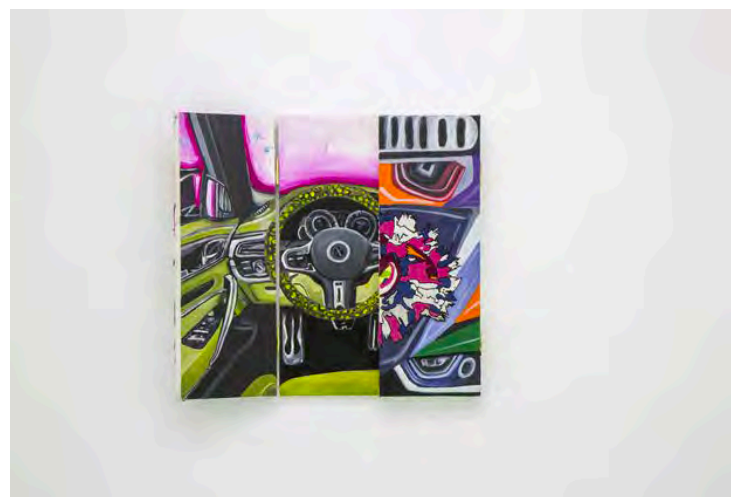
"Sound system idea on 110 north (LA is a bad reality show)," 2022

**As you mentioned, present and future are confounded, creating a kind of muddy timeline. Do you think her point of view is still hopeful?**

[Her point of view frames] destruction and reinvention as a continuous process. It's new possibilities that open when there is destruction or collapse. The queer futurity... there's all this projection of the idea that you're always *becoming*. I think that's a point that she's really invested in: this idea of continuous realization. It's never an end point.

**Although the cross-section of materials she's using is quite singular, who would you situate her amongst in terms of other artists?**

I would think of Nicole Eisenman or Leidy Churchman — people that are really playing with the medium of painting. But even the other show that's on that I organized in conversation with Frieda, Umar Rashid... they're two distinct shows, but sitting next to each other, there's a dialogue in some way. He's an artist who's from Chicago, based in Los Angeles. And he has a very specific narrative that he's working on: the French Empire and New York in the 1700s. But, again, looking through this idea of history painting and creating alternate stories, using history to talk about the present, to talk about the future. That kind of crossing through time, I think, is something they have in common.



"Retrato de lo Inocente [Portrait of Innocence]," 2018

**In previous interviews, Frieda talked about how she felt painting was maligned today as a medium with political potential. Do you also feel that's true?**

I think it's really true. I think that painting is always political, but it's the content — like putting a political message in the content — that's less common. I think she's doing something very distinct and fresh right now.

**Especially taking up so much space with her paintings...**

Frank Stella has these, like, crazy sculptural paintings. But these feel very different. There are some precedents, but she's literally turning the painting into, like, the shape of a car! The narrative is entering the form. That's what's so unique.



"Hope The Air Conditioning Is On While Facing Global Warming (part I)," 2017

**Especially for “Hope The Air Conditioning Is On While Facing Global Warming (Part I)”, there’s a kind of absurd 80s movie quality it evokes, although I can't pinpoint which one. Probably something with young Tom Cruise.**

It’s very “Back to the Future”.

**Oh yes — true!**

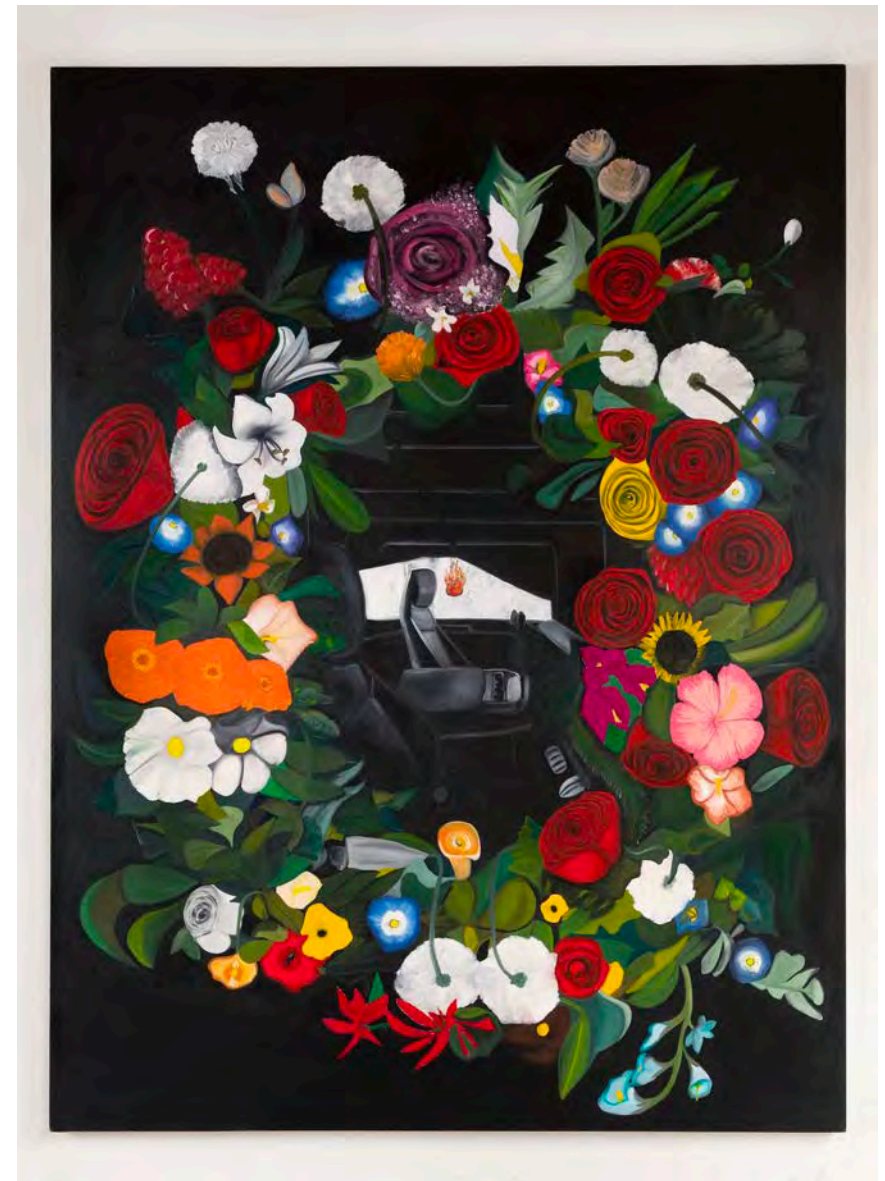
Every time I come in here, I see something different or notice something else with the work. It just keeps unfolding.



"Lesbische Liebe [Lesbian Love] ," 2019



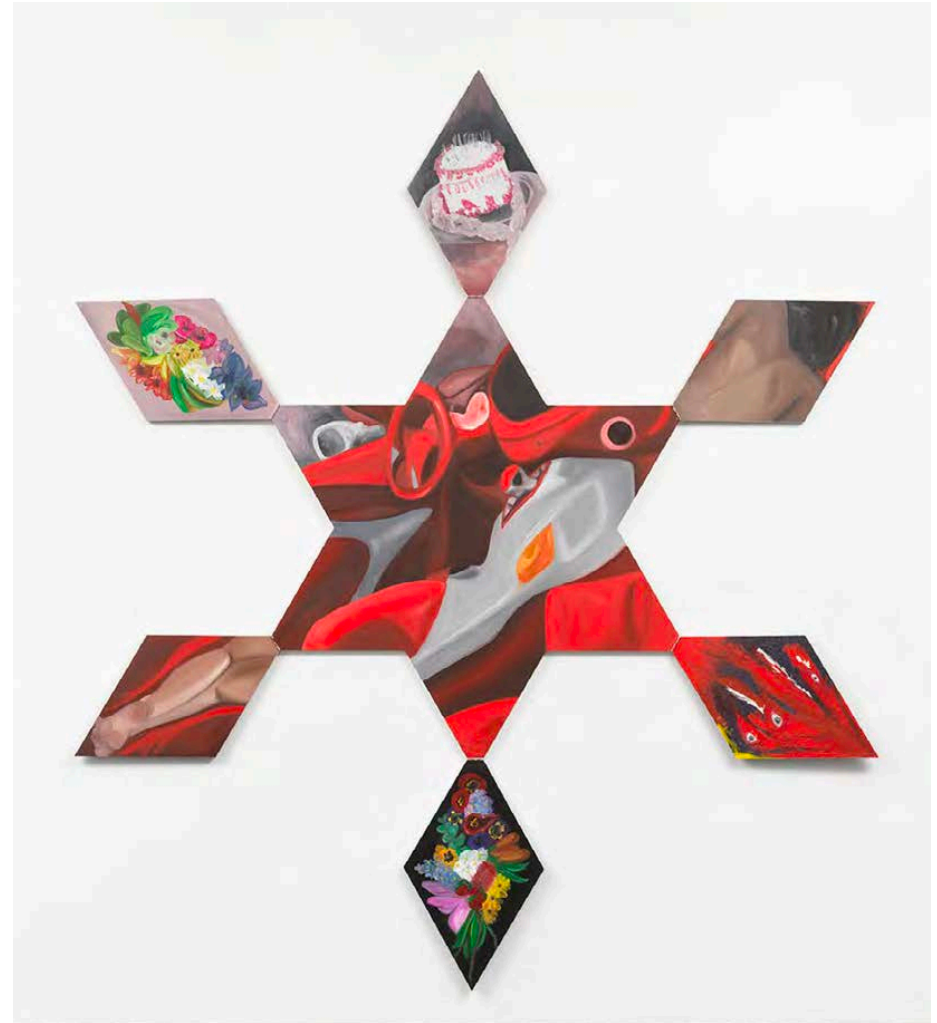
"End of Capitalism (the Fountain)," 2022



"The Beginning of the End," 2020.



"A fall view on tesla (the Berlin pattern)," 2019.



"Der Wert der Ware drückt sich am Besten in den Körpern der Anderenaus [The Value of Commodities Best Expresses Itself in the Bodies of Others]," 2019.

#### Credits

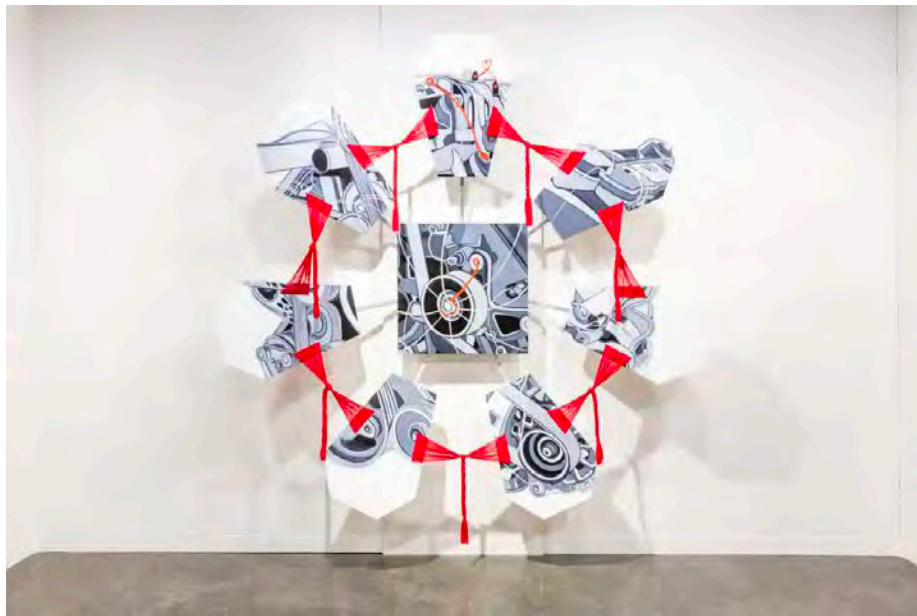
Images courtesy of MoMA PS1

Photos courtesy of the Artist, Tim Bowditch, Jens Ziehe, and Steven Panecasio

# The Guardian

## ‘Being queer is amazing’: LGBTQ+ artists take the stage at this year’s Art Basel Miami

In a state where anti-LGBTQ+ legislation has recently dominated the headlines, the annual gathering of artists sees queerness out in front



Frieda Toranzo Jaeger, *La intersección entre la sangre y la máquina*, 2022.  
Photograph: Courtesy the artist and Arcadia Missa

This year’s Art Basel Miami brings queer openness and potential to Florida, despite the best efforts of those who govern the state to do the exact opposite. In 2022, Florida became an epicenter of anti-LGBTQ+ hate legislation, with Governor Ron DeSantis and his Republican allies infamously passing a “Don’t Say Gay” law, virtually erasing LGBTQ+ identities throughout the state’s K-12 educational system. DeSantis also recently made it illegal to give transgender youth lifesaving gender-affirming medical care, and blocked trans people of any age from accessing such medical care via state health insurance.

Against this climate of state-sponsored hatred toward LGBTQ+ individuals, Art Basel Miami flaunts a vibrant, diverse group of queer artists. Envisioning alternatives to dominant ideas about religion, relationships, capitalism and gender, these artists embrace their personal stories and their queerness to fuel innovation.

Argentinian Carlos Herrera is a great example: reclaiming the religious and pastoral traditions central to his upbringing in the Santa Fe province of Argentina, Herrera uses Catholic iconography to explore the link between religion and queer sexuality. His booth at Art Basel Miami includes a minimalist bed that doubles as a representation of the stigmata of St Francis de Assisi. Another startling piece covers a wall of his booth in gigantic spider figurines hauling up lengths of bone and skull.

“In the gay community there are many, many religious people,” said Herrera, as interpreted by his gallerist Mora Bacal. “Religion and art are like a dual relationship that has allowed me to explore my own identity. Questions of sex, religion and death run through all of my process and my work.”

Similarly, Mexican artist Frieda Toranzo Jaeger works with what she calls “semiological vandalism” – by which she “vandalizes” dominant images and thus injects new, subversive meaning into them. Car engines have lately predominated her work, as she sees them as representative of the massive systems that govern the world. At Art Basel Miami, Toranzo Jaeger is exhibiting an image of a car engine deconstructed into the form of a flower, shot through with braided thread. By turning a car engine into a flower adorned with braids, she injects her queerness and womanhood into a traditionally patriarchal structure.

“I wanted to see what would happen to the meaning of these symbols if I as a queer woman stepped in and owned them,” she said. “What would happen if I gave myself the agency to do so. Being queer is amazing, and I don’t want an identity that’s just reduced to consumption. I love what José Esteban Muñoz says in *Cruising Utopia*, that queerness is something that we will never be, we will always be becoming queer.”

Queer performance artist rafa esparza takes on cars and cruising in a very different way: straddling intersectional aspects of his identity, he brings out the resonances between different kinds of cruising – gay cruising and low-rider cars – by turning himself into a low-rider vehicle and inviting select members of his community to jump on for a ride. “Gay cruising happens in a park,” he said. “It’s these very intimate sex acts that happen despite there always being the possibility of being seen. When you’re cruising in a car, you’re inside of a car in this very intimate space, yet you’re hopping around in hydraulics creating a spectacle, so you’re hypervisible.”

In addition to being a very playful way to draw out new ways of seeing familiar concepts, esparza also sees his performance as intentionally subverting dominant ideas that tend to shut out queer, non-white identities.

“My relationship to the culture has informed what this project looks like,” he said. “I’m thinking about time and technology, but grounding it in a conversation that wants to be less about dominant white hetero culture, and more about my own culture.”

Respecting the unique forms of queer culture is also important to Oren Pinhassi, who works with queer spaces. As recently seen with the mass shooting of patrons at Club Q in Colorado Springs, safe spaces are integral to queer communities, and Pinhassi uses their value and potential as a central metaphor in his art. He sees queer spaces as areas where things don’t sit exactly right, where individuals can become porous and vulnerable in ways that aren’t possible in heteronormative spaces. In this space of becoming, Pinhassi makes art.

“Queerness has to do with staying in the uncomfortable or ambiguous spaces,” he said.

“It’s almost like a sacred state of being that could provide new structures, if we’re able to stay in these uncomfortable, ambiguous spaces. I’m interested in providing structures that are slower, kinder and more vulnerable.”

Reflecting that search for a more open space, Pinhassi has brought to Art Basel Miami sculptures made out of sand, a material, he notes, that is adaptable, “being this and that, versus this or that”. Pinhassi values the sense of precarity that sand injects into his work, and he also appreciates how the material brings in a note of mourning – a central theme of his art – as it reminds us of our ultimate fate to return to the Earth.

Trans artist Leslie Martinez has also explored ambiguous spaces – living in Texas and managing the border between the US and Mexico as both a trans person and a Latinx individual. Pondering questions inherent to borders, their paintings at Art Basel Miami search out a space between fragmentation and wholeness, what they describe as invoking “notions of continental drift, Pangea, cosmic formations and explosions”. Intentionally open-ended, the colors and textures in Martinez’s work are vibrant and entrancing, drawing in viewers and inviting them to use their senses in unfamiliar ways: “I want people to be able to touch with their eyes and see with their fingertips,” Martinez said.

While they have been excited to share their work at the art fair, the queer artists at Art Basel Miami were very aware of the contradiction of celebrating queerness in a state that has literally made mentioning the existence of queer people a crime. Referencing the “Don’t Say Gay” law, esparza struck a personal note: “I knew that I was gay when I was in the first grade. Shit, if people were more encouraged to talk about that and have those conversations in safe places like school, I think I would have had a very different upbringing.”

Martinez channeled the chords of resilience and determination common to this group of artists, saying: “To be here in Florida at a time that is so fraught and so violent to us, there’s nothing more important than to be here with it. What DeSantis is doing is this constant pushing out and erasing, so to come in is an act that is based in connection and love. All we want is to be alive and for our humanity to be recognized and not be erased.”

# Art in America

## Seeing & Believing: Christian Imagery in Painting Now

By Emily Watlington December 1, 2022 9:00am



Frieda Toranzo Jaeger: *End of Capitalism, the Future*, 2022, oil on canvas and embroidery, 7 by 8¾ feet. Queer desire reigns in this updated version of a quasi-religious Renaissance painting. COURTESY MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

Christian iconography and compositional schemes are deeply ingrained in the history of Western painting. They all but monopolized the medium for about a dozen of its formative centuries—from the Byzantine era through the Renaissance—during which techniques and traditions were being figured out and established. To consider the legacy of this symbolism today, *A.i.A.* brought together four painters from around the world who grapple with Christian imagery consciously and critically in their work.

Some offer queer and decolonial perspectives on the moral beliefs that were spread through colonization by Europeans. Some search for new forms of spirituality. And some are interested in how images both persist and change throughout history. All twist and update Christian imagery to give it new unorthodox meaning.

**EMILY WATLINGTON** How does Christian imagery appear in your work? None of you are making work *about* Christianity per se, but rather borrow from its visual repertoire to take on other topics.

**FRIEDA TORANZO JAEGER** The way Christian imagery functions—especially in the 15th and 16th centuries—fascinates me. Christianity gave us hermeneutics; it’s something that can be interpreted and then reinterpreted, that generates endless meaning and values. Through this religion, painting became an epistemological artifact. Christian imagery visualizes certain fantasies and connects you with something spiritual. I really want to use that function of painting in my work, to connect with something more abstract than myself—something that changes in various historical contexts. I paint driverless cars and queer utopias, often appropriating Gothic and medieval altarpiece formats, displaying canvases on hinges, like altar panels, to give them a sculptural presence.

**TAMMY NGUYEN** In my practice, I’m interested in exploring confusion as it relates to postcolonialism and geopolitics. I like combining histories and narratives that don’t always seem like they should make sense together but that, in reality, exist in parallel. There are so many examples, especially when we’re talking about diaspora, war, etc. My series of 14 paintings depicting the stations of the cross, which I made for the most recent Berlin Biennale, was inspired by my visit to an island in Indonesia called Pulau Galang. It was near where my parents went as Vietnamese refugees—an island called Kuku Island. That camp was decommissioned, but Pulau Galang is now a tourist site for folks who want to visit this history. The Vietnamese refugee camp, which was quite large, was divided into sections for the major three nonindigenous religions in Vietnam—it had a Buddhist area, a Protestant area, and a Catholic area. I was really struck by the Catholic worship area because it was so large—it was a whole forest. Inside, there were giant, beautiful statues depicting the stations of the cross. These golden statues were so striking, and so passionate.



I don't have a memory of war; I'm a postwar child of the Vietnamese diaspora. And a lot of my imagining of the Vietnam War was inspired by this collection of statues. I started to think about the role of faith in circumstances of trauma and grief. I thought about how Christian statues were brought over to Vietnam through a colonial campaign mainly orchestrated by the French. In the tropical wilderness of Indonesia, nature is cannibalizing the statues. So I created a body of paintings depicting each of the 14 stations, and in each of those paintings you can see the tropics eating away at the figures. In a way, they tell a narrative that's wholly new and very wild.

**ALINA PEREZ** There are definitely lots of storytelling tools in Catholicism, and they are inseparable from certain compositional elements. There are reasons why certain frescoes are revered and people travel to Europe to look at them. Renaissance painters were mastering the tools of light and shadow, and perfecting how these elements combine to make figures.

Catholicism is embedded in the history of painting, but also in my psyche. My work certainly bears traces of my upbringing. I was surrounded by saint cards on the fridge and rosaries in the cupholder in the car. Saint cards are all over Miami. I grew up going to church. We had an event where everyone would dress like a saint—the one whose name was closest to yours. And I designed this whole outfit to become Saint Philomena [the patron saint of babies], which was a bizarre experience. Also, I would come home and see fruit in the corner of the house and then be told, "Don't touch that; it's an offering." This had a way of turning stationary things into something almost alive.

*Papi with Lizard Earrings Smooshing Cocuyos* [2020] is a figurative drawing based on my father. It captures the experience of being young and watching my dad catch these lightning bugs he called cogwheels. He would smash them in his hands, and then his palms would glow. I remember being so enchanted, and I wanted to capture that with the lighting in my work. I wanted to explore the overlaps between religious or otherworldly experiences and everyday reality.

**JANNIS MARWITZ** Before I was drawn to Christian imagery, I was drawn to something older—images from antiquity, especially those of sarcophagi, which I painted for a while. I was interested in how sarcophagi have changed their forms and embellishments throughout history, eventually changing their meaning and adopting very Christian motifs. That is something that interests me: how, when you look at images and process them, they resurface in multiple ways. I tend to work with fragments that I find in paintings and prints, or that I draw from memory.

In an untitled painting of mine from 2021, you can see this colliding of image fragments. The top part is a stage, and the lower part shows a burning house. I relate to what Alina said about light, and here I wanted to have two sources of light in the painting. One spotlight illuminates the upper part of the stage, and the burning house illuminates the city in the lower part. Light makes images present and helps us see color. I'm definitely influenced by folk miniature paintings and illuminated manuscripts.

You can see the same figure in two of my paintings—the untitled one I just mentioned, and *The Raid* [2021]. In one, he's in the foreground, and in the other, he's underneath a table. I wanted to have this figure looking both into and out of the picture; I think of him as helping the viewer regard the image. In a way, it references Caravaggio's *Madonna di Loreto* [1604], where you see two people from behind as they worship the Christ child that the Virgin Mary is holding. It's almost as if you are looking at someone else who is looking at the painting's main subject—they are telling you how to perceive Mary and her son.

**WATLINGTON** Do you see this religious imagery as a historical burden to be overcome, or as a trove of treasures to draw upon?

**TORANZO JAEGER** I didn't grow up with Christianity, even though I was born in a Christian country [Mexico]. Coming from a shamanistic, Indigenous background, I was always terrified of Christianity, because of the way many of its values are ingrained in society. These values often create huge obstacles that need to be overcome. But when it comes to painting, revisiting and repurposing history is, to me, a core practice of decolonization. As Edward Said said, history is not an indestructible authority. I love that idea because, obviously, history is full of depressing narratives; but there's so much more to it than that. Yes, the history of Christianity is one of oppression, but it's also extremely complex. So I give myself the agency to revisit histories that don't relate to my background—especially those of the European Middle Ages.

**WATLINGTON** You also approach the future in a similar way, taking the autonomous car as one of your main motifs.

**TORANZO JAEGER** Exactly. I often think about how modernity has always come from the West, and because of this, the West has always been the owner of the future. So, I thought: No! I'm gonna think up my own future! I'm going to establish queer decolonial worlds in these artifacts that I'm making. I want to give myself this agency that was taken away from me. This is very important—even if there's not a future, even if we totally fuck up the planet tomorrow, I want to give myself this agency anyway. For me, this involves appropriating one of the most futuristic things out there—driverless cars—and imposing my postcolonial and queer utopias onto them, as I do with historical imagery.

**NGUYEN** I'm really excited by how generative using Christian imagery has been, and humbled by how immense the history is. I'm also really cautious about invoking the power of this symbolism. But I do find it exhilarating to watch all the complexities unfold as I work with the imagery. I made all the paintings in the series I mentioned in the tradition of illuminated manuscripts, but at a much larger scale. I used watercolor, vinyl paint, pastel, and metal leaf on paper that has been laminated and stretched over board. I came to work with these materials after taking a class on making illuminated manuscripts with Karen Gorst, who's a living illuminator.

While in the class, I wasn't thinking about Christian imagery, but I was curious about the craft of making illuminations, and also the craft of historical bookbinding. I was really moved by the function of metal leaf. Alina and Jannis have talked about light already—metal leaf offers this very unique kind of light in sacred depictions. Not only does its glow represent a kind of sacredness, but I also found it interesting that metal is at once opaque and radiant. It's a beautiful contradiction. That formal quality of the medium has provided many ways of depicting spirituality and religiosity. Exploring Christianity, I also often think about how the economy is conflated with certain ideas of faith—when gold is applied to a painting, the work's value automatically increases. How striking it is that this same gold also evokes something high in spiritual value.

**MARWITZ** When I went to art school in Germany, there was always an insistence on a break from what came before, an emphasis on modernity. But the writings of Aby Warburg opened a totally different world for me. He pointed out all the possibilities that come with thinking about images—how they appear and reappear—and talked about the forces that drag them through history. That's something fascinating about imagery in general, but you can see it clearly in Christian imagery specifically.

One example is a lamb. The Greek god Hermes [Mercury to the Romans] was often depicted as bearing a lamb, which comes from an ancient ritual. But as Rome transitioned to Christianity, the image turned into Jesus carrying the lamb [Jesus, the Good Shepherd who seeks out and saves the one who goes astray]. Then in the 18th century, you might have a pastoral scene where the lamb has no religious meaning at all.

**PEREZ** For me, it's less about specific images than about the power behind them. Recently, I've been really invested in questioning the power of belief, and in figuring out just how powerful the images we carry in our minds can be. I used to make a lot of drawings that were about my childhood—familial, formative experiences. And then I had this epiphany that the images in your mind are what make your memories so real. It's maybe less important that certain things happened a long time ago; their power lies instead in the constant ritual of remembering and replaying the image you create of them. As Frieda said, there isn't just one version of the past that's set in stone. I started to think: Perhaps if I draw memories or symbols in a different way, I can start to change the narratives and the beliefs I derived from them.

If you look at Christian iconography, you can really see how the relationship between imagery and belief plays out. There's lots of beautiful imagery, but also many painful depictions of hell used to scare the shit out of people. Paintings were used to make you see and believe, which is scary—but it's also very inspiring to think that you could perhaps create images that have a place in the future, as many of you have been saying.

**NGUYEN** I don't know if any of you feel this way, but I find that Christian imagery has a tremendous power, because there's such a large, common public that at least recognizes the cross. This makes Christianity a useful shared ground to start talking about other things that are lesser known. In the past, I've drawn from things like Vietnamese mythology, where the iconography is so niche that a big portion of the public can't really enter into the work as easily. As someone who wants to engage in conversation about various intersections of cultures, histories, diasporas, and geopolitics, I notice these kinds of differences.

**PEREZ** Christianity also borrowed a great deal from other cultures and religions, so I wonder if that's part of why its iconography is so familiar and recognizable.

**WATLINGTON** Are there particular paintings that have left a big impression on you?

**TORANZO JAEGER** Lately, my favorite painter is Enguerrand Quarton, who made the *Pietà of Villeneuve-lès-Avignon* [ca. 1455]. I think it's one of the most interesting paintings of the medieval era. It was shown at the Louvre in an exhibition called "French Primitives." What a title—obviously, that show was a long time ago [1904]. Quarton was categorized as "primitive" because of his flatness. My works are also really flat, and I think they resemble Byzantine art in many ways. He was working shortly after the fall of the Byzantine Empire [1453], but he was really painting as someone would in the Byzantine era—without much depth. And also, some art historians speculate that he had never seen this composition before—the *Pietà* wasn't really a common motif in France. So, in a way, he wrote his own version of the scene, coming up with his own composition—one that some people saw as stiff or lacking emotion, since this scene is usually full of drama. I love everything that has to do with Byzantine art especially, because it's where people were still figuring out what painting is. Obviously, later, when linear perspective takes over, everything changes; but I love these attempts that Quarton carries on, because they're so weird. You might have figures floating in a painting that's trying to depict something serious from the biblical canon.

In the painting, Mary is in the middle, but she's not crying. Yet you can find her tears if you look into Christ's wound. I thought this moment was really dramatic and full of lament. Some people still talk about this painting as one of the most mysterious of its time. I am trying to use these early styles in my work to ask: What kinds of painting practices do I want to exist in the world? I'm fascinated by people who were establishing the history of painting in their own time.

**MARWITZ** The architecture in the background looks totally made up. Flemish painters around this time would have painted Flemish cities, but these buildings are totally wild.

**TORANZO JAEGER** Some speculate that the city is supposed to be Constantinople. Apparently, Quarton was referring to the fact that the Byzantines lost Constantinople to the Ottoman Empire. So he was painting the historic loss of the city alongside the *Pietà*. But he never visited Constantinople; he just painted it based on descriptions.

**NGUYEN** I'm mesmerized by all this! *The Man of Sorrows* [ca. 1525] from the Workshop of Aelbert Bouts, is a very popular painting in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art that has been really important to me.

**PEREZ** It has the most intense stigmata I've ever seen!

**NGUYEN** It's so intense! Another reason I'm so drawn to it is because I love thinking about portraiture or figurative painting as landscape; I'm always playing with those categories. This portrait seems to evoke a place beyond. Jesus's crown of thorns really comes across as some sort of a thicket, and the teardrops reminded me of water systems. I actually created my own version of it. Making my own *Man of Sorrows* [2022] was a wonderful opportunity for me to think about hands, hair, and other things that many painters obsess over.

**PEREZ** It's interesting too that portraiture of Jesus, or any deity, was never about capturing a specific likeness. With a lot of figurative art now, everyone is talking about specificity and likeness; but Jesus was made recognizable through symbols and body language.

The main religious painting that made an impact on me is maybe not overtly Christian: Frida Kahlo's *The Two Fridas* [1939]. It deals with identity and what it means to be different versions of yourself. It's about internal human struggles, and the never-ending struggle to communicate our desires and our fears in healthy ways. It's about who we want to be when we wake up, and then finding we're someone else at the end of the night. To me, all religion and spirituality comes back to the inside of you. I think that's why this painting really scared me when I first saw it as a little kid. Christianity can scare you, too—it can be very intense to realize what your choices are.

**MARWITZ** For me, it was *The Flight into Egypt* by Adam Elsheimer, a painting from the beginning of the 17th century. Elsheimer was a German painter who emigrated to Rome, where he died quite young. And this is a rather small painting—oil on copper, 12 by 16 inches. He usually worked in small formats—some panels are something like 9 by 7 centimeters—so you really have to view them up close. These are paintings made for one person to look at. On the journey to Egypt, Mary is in the center, next to Joseph and baby Jesus. Most artists painted this as a daytime scene, but Elsheimer made it a night scene with amazing lighting. It's almost proto-Romantic, with the moon hovering above the water. A torch lights the main figures in the center. In most other depictions of this event, you see Joseph leading the way; but here he doesn't—it seems like he's talking to Jesus. It's a very intimate, tender portrayal. I find it incredible that this interaction happens at such a small scale. This painting is also considered the first accurate, naturalistic depiction of a night sky—so you see the Milky Way and different constellations.

**TORANZO JAEGER** It's almost pastoral!

**MARWITZ** Absolutely. It's also astonishing that it predates the paintings of artists like Poussin [1594–1665] or Lorrain [1600–1682], who were so important for establishing the genre of landscape painting, gradually emphasizing the natural settings in which various figurative scenes took place. Yet it's on the same level in the way it mixes figures and landscape.

**WATLINGTON** Most of the examples you brought up were commissioned by the church or by patrons for the purpose of explaining specific stories to an audience, often an illiterate one. The beauty of these works was meant to induce some sort of spiritual experience—so the painters were, in effect, channeling God to the people. They had a limited, if not prescribed, set of subjects to work with. But you're not working for churches or patrons. Do those tasks, like storytelling, or creating some sort of transcendent experience, resonate with you, or is your goal something else entirely? I realize that's kind of a big existential question, but I also imagine you've thought about it.

**TORANZO JAEGER** I think my intentions are somewhat irrelevant. I'm more interested in the history my paintings leave behind. Painting is a historical medium. Today I can have certain specific things that I want to do in painting—but maybe in 10 years, or even in a month, they'll change. My desires are complicated; they change all the time. So I'd rather let history decide the purpose of my work.

**MARWITZ** You say that painting belongs to history. But something I find interesting, especially with religious painting, is that every time an image appears in front of us, it restages something that we might already know. Most of the scenes that we see in religious paintings are familiar to us, in various degrees of detail. But in using them, we're not really illustrating those stories. Religious imagery has changed drastically, but there are still Christian attitudes embedded in things like the emotion a color evokes. Today, ideas like transcendence are more ingrained in things like color.

**TORANZO JAEGER** Totally. With color, we sublimate spiritual desires into something material. We restage certain scenes when we have an urge to say that something has changed. It's the same crucifixion, but it's new times, so we have to rewrite it.

**PEREZ** I think we have become, in effect, the church that commissions the pieces. We're all just channeling parts of ourselves into the work for the greater good—or not...

**NGUYEN** I like the idea of just seeing how history will embrace our work. The idea of patronage is so ordered; with the paintings that we're making now, systems are very fluid and changing, and notions of value are definitely in flux. But the recognizability of Christian imagery affords us a certain deeply ingrained order and predictability.

# Art in America

## Frieda Toranzo Jaeger on Semiological Vandalism and Decolonial Futures

By [Frieda Toranzo Jaeger](#)  
June 25, 2021 7:00am



Frieda Toranzo Jaeger in front of her painting *The Perpetual Sense of Redness*, 2021.  
PHOTO GEORGIANNA CHIANG

*For her one work exhibition “The Perpetual Sense of Redness,” on view at the Baltimore Museum of Art through October 3, the Mexican painter **Frieda Toranzo Jaeger** has created a kind of modern-day altarpiece, her largest work to date. Featuring eleven embroidered canvases of varying shapes and sizes hinged together into a silolike form, the work is, like most of her sculptural paintings, a winking homage to driverless cars—a symbol of the future. Below, the artist discusses her emphatic infusion of Indigenous techniques with Western ones, and explains why cars came to be her central motif.*

I made this work specifically for the museum’s rotunda, which connects three rooms. I wanted the painting to be experienced from many different angles. Two sides show car interiors painted to scale. The third side shows a laptop on a bed, and the fourth is a graveyard scene. The work is about the different spaces where we imagine the future—I think this is the most important task of decolonization. But I also wanted to include a reminder that death is always with us. The relationship Mexicans have to death—exemplified nowadays by the Day of the Dead—is a remnant of our pre-Columbian past. Still, the painting of the bed is surrounded by these embroidered blood vessels that extend from a heart and into all of the panels. The work isn’t meant to be read in a linear way; it doesn’t have a beginning and an end. I’m borrowing pre-Colombian compositions, which are often round and expand from the center. So it’s more of a cosmology of different interior worlds, places where we dream. I made this work specifically for the museum’s rotunda, which connects three rooms. I wanted the painting to be experienced from many different angles. Two sides show car interiors painted to scale. The third side shows a laptop on a bed, and the fourth is a graveyard scene. The work is about the different spaces where we imagine the future—I think this is the most important task of decolonization. But I also wanted to include a reminder that death is always with us. The relationship Mexicans have to death—exemplified nowadays by the Day of the Dead—is a remnant of our pre-Columbian past. Still, the painting of the bed is surrounded by these embroidered blood vessels that extend from a heart and into all of the panels. The work isn’t meant to be read in a linear way; it doesn’t have a beginning and an end. I’m borrowing pre-Colombian compositions, which are often round and expand from the center. So it’s more of a cosmology of different interior worlds, places where we dream.

All the embroidery is done in bright red because I want to emphasize that I’m inserting an Indigenous tradition into a Western one—that I’m destroying the preciousness of this painting. My family is trained in traditional Mexican embroidery, and I hire them to work on my pieces. They often think contemporary art is weird, so this is how I bring them closer to what I do.

In one vignette, above the bed, I copied a composition from a Matisse painting in the museum's collection, *Still Life, Compote, Apples, and Oranges* (1899). I borrow other paintings frequently in my work, alluding to the artists in the colonies who just copied European paintings when they were learning. Postcolonial identities have formed from copies of copies of copies. Visitors can go find the original in the building.



View of Frieda Toranzo Jaeger's exhibition "The Perpetual Sense of Redness" at the Baltimore Museum of Art, 2021.  
PHOTO MITRO HOOD

I titled the work *The Perpetual Sense of Redness*. I have Indigenous heritage, and Indigenous (or "red") people are often, for good reason, very concerned about preservation. But unfortunately, this puts us in this perpetual state of just hanging onto what we already have, never being able to construct a future. This tendency isn't exclusively Indigenous, but it crops up among Indigenous people in the most perverse ways. Sometimes it feels like all we can do is resist the pervasive efforts to erase our traditions. That's why it's important to me to focus on the future.

I often think of my work as semiological vandalism. Most of my paintings are of cars. I'm also trying to use cars—especially self-driving cars—as a space to imagine this decolonial future. As people from the colonies, I think we tend to exoticize ourselves, so I wanted to have a symbol that was not expected of me. I often paint the cars at a one-to-one scale, inviting viewers to sit down and take a ride.



View of Frieda Toranzo Jaeger's exhibition "The Perpetual Sense of Redness" at the Baltimore Museum of Art, 2021.  
PHOTO MITRO HOOD

In the background of one of the car panels, you can see that the car is in outer space—there's a satellite and some stars. I wanted to gesture toward the people who are thinking about colonizing new planets, and warn that colonization isn't only a thing of the past. On the other car panel, it's unclear whether the orange and red backdrop is a sunset, a sunrise, or a fiery apocalypse. For me, that sums up the state we are in now amid all these ecological collapses and the pandemic—maybe we do need a catastrophe to really change things. Maybe something that seems like the end can be a new beginning.

You can probably see that I'm not trained in painting; I studied in Hamburg, and the program there was super theoretical. I don't even want to learn; I'm not interested in the Western ideas of intense labor or of making illusions. My instructors emphasized talking about painting and understanding the medium's possibilities instead of technique. This was amazing for me, because I don't think it's happening in a lot of painting circles—at least not in Mexico. Painting is often seen not as a political tool, but rather dismissed as a commodity. I came to understand the power of painting from the women who taught me: instead of wanting recognition from the male critics of their generation, they created their own system of critique and validation, which was so inspiring.

—As told to Emily Watlington



Text by Natalia Sielewicz  
Portrait by Georgianna Chiang

I was introduced to Frieda Toranzo Jaeger's ecstatic and exuberant vehicle paintings several years ago at her former studio. While discussing with the artist the various forms of entrapment enforced on our bodies and minds by contemporary capitalism, I found myself intimately nestled between two of her triptych structures, whose paneled wings opened to disclose the worlds within, just like devotional altars. Through the rhetoric of concealment and epiphany that played out in front of me, the painted works exposed the anatomy of the interiors of Toranzo Jaeger's futuristic machines, the erotic topography of chassis, engines, pipe work. Hidden within these revelatory bodies were interwoven iconographies. The first one, a lavish cockpit of a spaceship, adorned with ornaments and miniatures of refashioned portraits by Old Masters, Georgia O'Keeffe plant paintings, and abstract compositions, stood in contrast to the womb-like interior of the sensual electric car. Suspended between past and future, these works pointed towards new concepts of space and time, perhaps what one might call, queer and decolonial temporalities. If decoloniality always occurs too late, as Kara Keeling has argued after Frantz Fanon, then what would it mean to visualize the process of manipulation of space-time in order to see into possible futures?

Through her artistic practice, Toranzo Jaeger has consistently challenged the overtly masculinized, white and often misogynist tradition of painting, proposing instead autonomous scenarios of desire and visibility. In her figurative works, the artist boldly explores queer kinship and sensuality as a political category, suggesting ways of thinking about pleasure that can afford agency and disrupt the colonial constructs of humanism. The electric car that features so often as a central motif and an aesthetic form on her canvases, is more importantly a placeholder for a social alliance that has the potential to destabilize sexual, gender and racial norms. Unlike many sites where Black, queer and Indigenous bodies are subject to constant containment and surveillance through racialized and gendered practices, the cars in Toranzo Jaeger's imagery become safe spaces for the performance of autonomy. Simultaneously, these quiet, driverless enclaves offer the promise of ecstatic delight; at times they even plunge into an autoerotic exploration of their own carnality.

What does it mean to feel the ma-

chine and its movements, to sense its trembling and whistling? How do we approach machines' agency and their sentience? For Toranzo Jaeger a car is not a machine as fetish locked in a binary feedback loop with humans. Rather, one could think of it as a vibrant actant that deserves an empathic engagement. Jane Bennett, writing about the political ecology of things and assemblages, sees the potentiality of vibrant actants in their mode to never act alone. As she writes in *Vibrant Matter*, an actant's efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces. Bodies grind together and *interfere* with one another in Toranzo Jaeger's intimate car escapades. They embrace vulnerability and are open to sexual adventure. They come undone and move beyond their own sense of self. Hot human flesh on a leather seat. Leaves, florals and grass often grow out of the cyborg body of the machine, blurring the dichotomy between the natural and the artificial. By saturating her large format canvases with sensuality, Toranzo Jaeger distills the bodily nature of the composition and brings her paintings to boiling point. Towards this end she uses an intensive palette of colors, and creates dense compositions rife with surprising textures. Through her interrogation of the erotic, the artist argues for a liquid sexuality, a sexuality situated on the plane of a multitude of perspectives, one that is subject to constant changes and permutations, an experience that could be at once euphoric, community forming and integrating. Such recognition of the power of the erotic brings the promise of reorganization and re-arranging one self anew because, as Emma Pérez has argued in *The Decolonial Imaginary*, desire rubs against colonial repressions to construct resistant, oppositional, transformative, diasporic subjectivities that erupt and move into decolonial desires.

It is important to note that, while Toranzo Jaeger points us towards reimagined scenarios of the future, she is equally preoccupied with the celebration of her ancestral indigeneity and its material representations. Because indigeneity can be perceived as a perpetual state of suspension between threat and survival, the act of embodying indigenous kinship is something that needs to be constantly anticipated, rehearsed and practiced in order to produce sustainable results. The artist resurrects her indigenous roots by implementing into her canvas the embroidery and textile making traditions that her relatives practice till this day. This

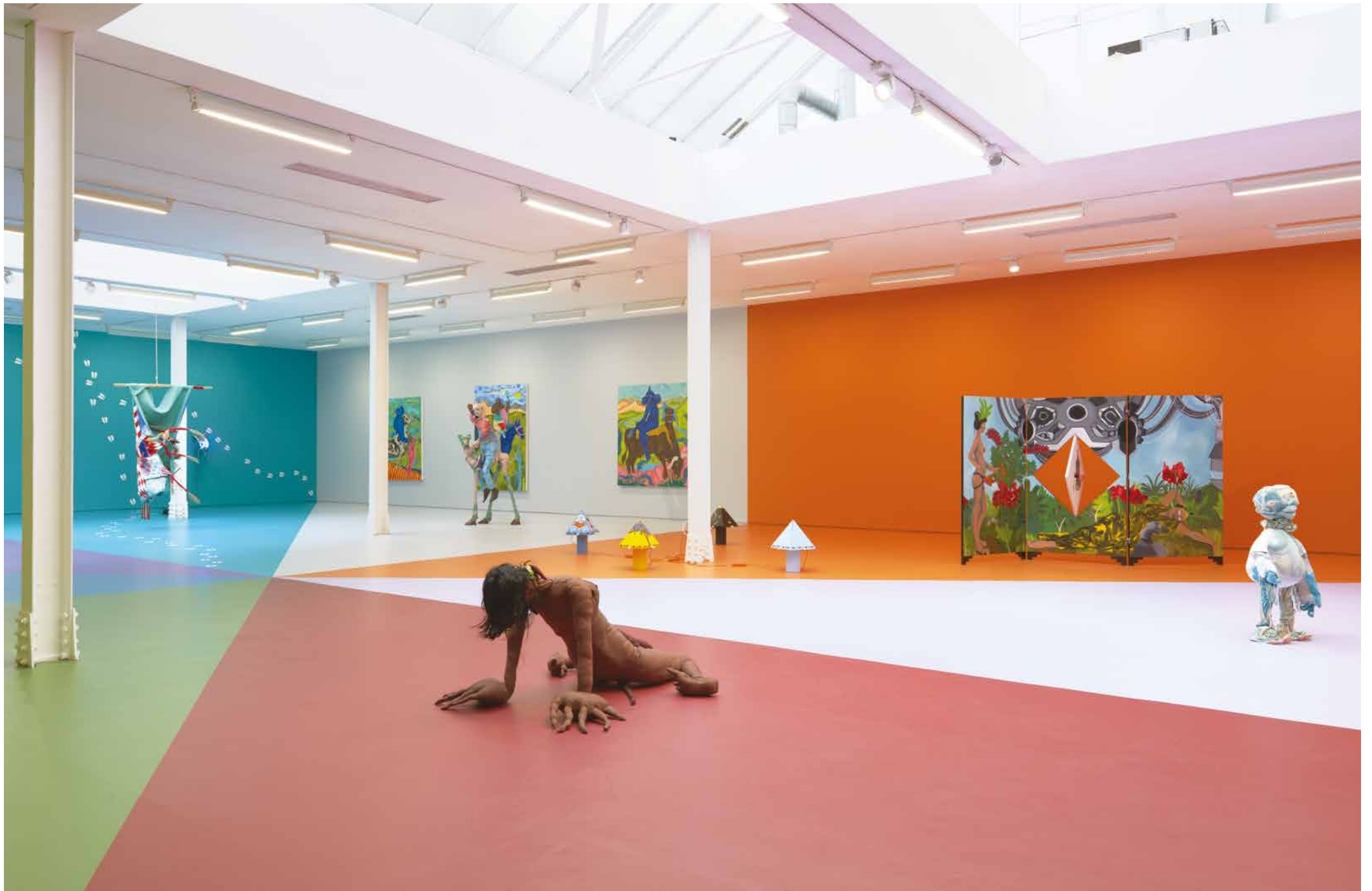
act of intimate, feminized labor which she performs with her family members generates solidarity and mutual recognition, as well as new modes of togetherness.

Importantly, while interrogating the pictorial plane with embroidery and textile work, the artist resists the binary categorizations of Western art history such as handcraft or painting. Instead, she sometimes offers to call her objects negative bodies, which through the act of support become an affective scaffolding for visual and psychological operations that manifest themselves on canvas. Marlene Dumas famously wrote that a painting needs a wall to object to. Toranzo Jaeger's paintings seem to destabilize such protocols of dependency in order to assert their own autonomy in the gallery space and art history itself. In the process of uprooting the painting from its material support, namely, the wall, her freestanding altars open themselves up to their own wants and desires and unabashedly invite spectatorship.

# Toranzo Jaeger



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WHAT DO YOU SEE, YOU PEOPLE, GAZING AT ME: installation view, Sudio Coles HQ, London, 2021 Photo: Robert Glowski; Courtesy: Sudio Coles HQ, London, 2021 Photo: Robert Glowski; Courtesy: Sudio Coles HQ, London, 2021  
installation view, Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, 2018 Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Barbara Weiss (p.27)



# PURPLE

## purple MAGAZINE

— *The Mexico Issue* #36 F/W 2021

FRIEDA TORANZO JAEGER  
ART  
interview by FABIOLA TALAVERA  
portraits by OLIVIER ZAHM



FRIEDA TORANZO JAEGER, THE PERPETUAL SENSE OF REDNESS, 2021, OIL AND EMBROIDERY ON CANVAS PANELS, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND REENA SPAULINGS FINE ART, BARBARA WEISS GALLERY, AND ARCADIA MISSA, PHOTO MITRO HOOD AND BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART

*women engaging in acts of love, lavish interiors of fast cars, tropical landscapes, modern machines, altar-like triptychs hiding secret images, and canvases in the shape of stars and lamborghini doors: mexican artist frieda toranzo jaeger combines a diverse array of motifs and mediums in her work, introducing queerness to design and decor*

FABIOLA TALAVERA — *You were based in Berlin for many years. Why did you move there, and how did it influence your practice?*

FRIEDA TORANZO JAEGER — I lived a total of eight years between Berlin and Hamburg, studying in the latter city under the mentorship of Jutta Koether. To be honest, I went to Germany because I wasn't accepted at La Esmeralda [the National School of Painting, Sculpture, and Printmaking in Mexico City] and had the great privilege of having a German passport from my mother's side of the family. Studying in Germany wasn't my favorite option as I was born and raised here, but I think the experience was very informative. Even though the European school system isn't perfect, I think that over there, there's an empowerment of women in art — which is also happening in Latin America, but not on the same level. It was very inspiring having the guidance of women painters who, already in the '80s, completely understood that this was a medium dominated by men, and who created strategies like starting their own magazines and writing texts about each other — and by doing so, empowered themselves by creating a critical, academic, and practical network around painting. I think that's what mainly influenced my practice: to say that I come from a women-made discourse and also that the painters I find the most inspiring are women.

FABIOLA TALAVERA – *What has changed, now that you're back in Mexico City?*

FRIEDA TORANZO JAEGER – I'm happy to be back. I love Mexico, and I think it's important for me to be here for my postcolonial investigations. I feel there's a lot of potential and extraordinary things happening here that don't happen elsewhere. The people who are constructing the most interesting discourses are not necessarily from first-world countries or the West. As my work has been exhibited mostly in Europe and the United States, I'm a bit of an outsider to the art scene in Mexico, but if all turns out well, and I have the opportunity to do so, I'd love to stay. We come from a very rich and complex imaginary world that simply hasn't been academically exploited, so I feel there's a lot of space for opportunity, to explore new ideas around painting while converging with those of Western Europe.

FABIOLA TALAVERA – *On the differences you mentioned between how painting is understood in Germany and in Mexico: up until several years ago, contemporary artists in Mexico distanced themselves from painting to take up other mediums. Why do you think that happened?*

FRIEDA TORANZO JAEGER – I feel it was rejected here because there's a thought that painting can't be political or have a real focused political weight – it has a bourgeois commodity status attached to it from several old philosophical and critical positions. For me, it's quite the contrary – any medium can be as political as the next.



FRIEDA TORANZO JAEGER, TAPICERIA NOCTURNA, 2017, OIL PAINT ON EMBROIDERED CANVAS, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND REENA SPAULINGS FINE ART, PRIVATE COLLECTION

FABIOLA TALAVERA – *As for the mediums that you use, painting and embroidery, painting has been dominated by the male gaze, while embroidery has historically been considered a minor art made by women. Why did you choose to work with those two?*

FRIEDA TORANZO JAEGER – It was important for me to try to break the preciousness and historiography of painting by creating these hybrid fusions of both mediums in my work. When I place a craft such as embroidery in my paintings, there's a questioning of which history it belongs to. We've always seen history as being linear, but it isn't; neither is it indestructible – we now know it's a fabrication of those in power. My paintings either have embroidery or they are freestanding, off the walls. For me, that's my way to find autonomy from painting. Embroidery tells the history of women, always having artisanal status but never more than that. It's a craft that shows how many women have resisted oppression to be able to express themselves in some way. It's as valid as painting to me. Embroidery is a family tradition; I only work on it with my family.

FABIOLA TALAVERA – *Your work often deals with contrapositions, not only in its mediums, but also in what you choose to depict. At the same time, you reveal the blurred borders of how we categorize things. What can you tell us about that?*



FRIEDA TORANZO JAEGER – I think categorizations and even identity politics can be quite puritanical. Latinos are a hybrid of races: to me, it's very important to express those complexities and not be scared of them. I can use, for example, a self-driving German car prototype to talk about queer theory, even if it's usually thought of as a completely heteronormative space. I can use those subjects because while investigating them, I do what I call semiological vandalism. Instead of using certain clichéd Mexican culture motifs, I have the agency to reuse and create my discourse with something that might not necessarily belong to me. I feel it's very important to be exposed to these kinds of complexities and not fall into our own stereotypes.

FABIOLA TALAVERA – *Mexican art has well-established, untouchable historical art figures that are always referenced and recycled. Do you feel your work is influenced by Mexican art history or culture?*

FRIEDA TORANZO JAEGER – My influences come from everywhere and are completely eclectic – and even more so nowadays, with the Internet. I'm not afraid to reference Mexican art. I often cite David Alfaro Siqueiros: I think his work is great. And I don't want to completely deny influence from works relating to Neomexicanismo [Neo-Mexicanism], such as with Julio Galán – he's a great icon for me. But within my style, I'm more interested in how Siqueiros understood painting and movement, translating those teachings into my practice. As for Mexican culture, one can't fight geography and the problems and fears that carved your thoughts and way of being. For a foreign woman, walking alone at night might not represent a threat, simply because she was not taught to fear that. I can't deny that I've lived under certain sociopolitical conditions that made me the person I am today.

FABIOLA TALAVERA – *I certainly see the influence of Siqueiros's thick, dynamic lines in your work, and the way he understood how painting could be experienced from a moving car, but he would never have imagined that a queer woman in the 21st century would appropriate his teachings. He was pretty upfront on his views of what he called "effeminate sentimentalist" artists. Did growing up in a city landscape influence the car motifs in your work?*

FRIEDA TORANZO JAEGER – When I was growing up in Mexico City, cars were always a fundamental part of my life – having to commute to school every day, which took two hours. At the same time, it's clear to me that having a car is a privilege in itself. I like to explore cars as ontological objects, which are indeed patriarchal and capitalist. It's hard to think of a way that we can liberate ourselves from cars completely: they define architecture, landscape, and the way we move. They're very interesting to me as a queer person for their relation to masculinity, questioning how those clichés were formed, studying masculinity outside gender: how does it work? Why is it like that? Why would someone need a machine that makes that much noise and takes up that much space to affirm his or her identity? The study and questioning of masculinity, enforced by men or women, are pretty straightforward in my work.

FABIOLA TALAVERA – *Going back to what you were mentioning about how you aim for your painting to have autonomy from painting's history, your works are often made in unconventional canvas shapes. What do you think stepping away from two-dimensionality has given you?*

FRIEDA TORANZO JAEGER – I'm very interested in the performance of painting, so I think that by giving it these new shapes, painting becomes a performance. With this gesture, theatricality is highlighted. I like making paintings that can't be put together in just one fixed image. I might need five or six photos to show you this painting. It allows a liveliness and, of course, a way of trying to find autonomy from painting's cannons that, in one way or another, are still very prominent.



FRIEDA TORANZO JAEGER, SAPPHO, 2019, OIL PAINT ON CANVAS, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND BARBARA WEISS GALLERY, PRIVATE COLLECTION

FABIOLA TALAVERA – *You just inaugurated your first institutional solo show at the Baltimore Museum of Art. How was the process of working on it different, compared with previous shows?*

FRIEDA TORANZO JAEGER – This show was made entirely during the pandemic in Mexico City; it's very intimate. I feel artists were even more isolated than usual – from the collective and from working together. People rarely come to my studio, maybe just a couple of close friends. Being here in Mexico, I have a much bigger network of friends and family to call if I need help with something.

FABIOLA TALAVERA – *What are your thoughts on being a queer woman artist in Mexico today?*

FRIEDA TORANZO JAEGER – My work is about exploring the possibilities of painting within itself as an expression and, as a Mexican queer woman, showing other Mexican queer woman that they can do it, too. When I was growing up here, Mexican women having successful art careers was something unheard of, even less so for explicitly queer women. It was very empowering to have strong women around me during my artistic formation. Believing that it was possible was really important for me.

FABIOLA TALAVERA – *Is Mexico City a place of opportunity for the queer artists of your generation?*

FRIEDA TORANZO JAEGER – Even though my access to exhibitions and other events has been limited due to the pandemic, I find that what the queer community is doing here is most interesting. At the same time, they're gaining more attention outside of the country. From DJ collectives to music and fashion, I see lots of talent and potential in the expressions being made. The problem here is there's a lot of potential and little financing and visibility.

END



# HFBK

## Hamburg

### Grand Theft Auto. Kristian Vistrup Madsen about Frieda Toranzo Jaeger's artworks



Hot, wet women caressing cars with soapy sponges, and sweaty mechanics in dirty tank tops, their wrenches and pliers symbolic substitutes for the phallus—these are the protagonists of our culture's widely held erotic fixation with cars. At the center of it, of course, is the engine, the heir to the horse's age-old status as the ultimate emblem of virility. Frieda Toranzo Jaeger's work can be understood as a vandalization of this semantic field: she keys the paint of the car and takes it for a ride.

Auto-eroticism could be the title of a great many of her works, though, so far, it is the title only of one: a tripartite painting of the underbelly of a car, with its various tubes and parts sensuously fingered by pink hands. In its straightforward sense we could translate auto-eroticism simply as "car sex," a motif—two people, women, fucking on the back seat—that appears in several of Jaeger's works, for instance *Tapicería Nocturna* (2017) and *Sappho* (2019). To use the term of the scholar José Esteban Muñoz, we could call this a form of disidentification: to mobilize, or even luxuriate in, the power of long-established notions—say, the relationship between the virile and the phallus, or otherness and the exotic—but in doing so, rewiring their logic. The car appears in Jaeger's works with all the horsepower of cultural hegemony, but to other, more ambivalent ends.

And, as in anything even vaguely related to psychoanalysis—the language of which Jaeger's work is steeped in—ambivalence is key. Auto derives from the Greek word for self, while Eros has to do with desire, something usually aimed at what the self is not. But also, as Sigmund Freud so famously posited, the erotic is powered by death drive. The roar of an engine, speed, is sexy because it connotes danger, anticipates destruction. Sex cannot be disentangled from self-annihilation, whether of a romantic or sadomasochistic nature. There is a contradiction, then, between the car as a form of self that moves through the world and the presence of the erotic, which simultaneously affirms the self and negates it by making it at once the subject and the object of desire. And so we can understand the interior of the car as a complex psychological sphere, and Jaeger's painting *Autoeroticism* as a portrait of the circuitous ways of the subconscious.

Free-standing and divided into several panels, Jaeger's paintings are often reminiscent of altarpieces. At a time when most painting was done directly on the wall, the altarpiece was autonomous—like a car, it moves. But whereas a gothic painting would traditionally be read like a book, from left to right, birth to death, Christmas to Easter, Jaeger's are circular. In *Autofellatio* (2020) the viewer's gaze begins with the mechanical contraption at its center and moves outwards in a spiral. *Hope the Air Conditioning Is On While Facing Global Warming (Part 1)* is another car interior and another point of access to the subconscious. Like a Rorschach test, it opens diagonally upward to both sides, producing a dynamic mirror effect that is enhanced by the supple curves of the car. *Autoeroticism* repeats this composition, but manically, the dense undergrowth of the car, with its twisting tubes, making a flurry of circles. Here is a closed circuit that endlessly feeds back into itself. This is part of what makes it a self and secures its autonomy. It is also what closes it off to the world. Again: ambivalence.

In Freud, auto-eroticism refers to a stage in the development of infant sexuality in which desire does not have an object but is oriented toward the subject's own genitals. The Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler used Freud's theory as the basis for his now so prevalent definition of autism, however, crucially excising the erotic, thus causing great dispute with Freud, who would never concede that the two could be separated. Autofellatio reads as a manifesto of masculine auto-eroticism: an autistic circle-jerk of toxic virility, which, in a bold gesture of disidentification, Jaeger signs with her name in great lightning bolt-yellow script. But at the same time, in this picture, every rod is also a hole, every line loops back to itself. The phallus is always also not.

The autofellationist is someone who can suck his own cock, a maneuver that will bend his body into a circle not unlike those that repeat throughout Jaeger's oeuvre. It is at once autistic, narcissistic, as well as a non-reproductive sexual act that breaks with a heteronormative pattern—more than ambivalent, it is multivalent. A 2001 article in the US porn magazine *Hustler* suggests the practice might actually be illegal:

Eighteen states have sodomy laws on the books, banning oral sex between two consenting adults. Could an overzealous district attorney extend the blowjob ban to a single consenting adult? "You never know; it might fly," says a criminal defense attorney, who wishes to remain anonymous. "I wouldn't be surprised in the least if a law prohibiting autofellatio were upheld by the present Supreme Court."

Though somewhat far-fetched, the example does point to the subversive aspects of the auto-erotic: how it breaks with linearity and dismantles the boundaries of subject and object. We see this when in several of Jaeger's works the high-tech aesthetic of artifice and mechanics associated with cars blends at its edges with unruly natural elements like fern leaves and thorny branches. Where the auto points inward, the ex- of exotic, like the ex- of existence, refers to the outside. A tension which Jaeger very often sustains in her works is that between the private and public spheres.

The decision of the US Supreme Court in *Bowers v. Hardwick* (1986), which put into effect the sodomy laws mentioned in the *Hustler* article, and would not be overturned until 2003, Muñoz reminds us, "efficiently dissolved the right to privacy of all gays and lesbians, in essence opening all our bedrooms to the state." Transgressions of the private sphere are structural and political; they are part of how the system works. The solution that Muñoz proposes, and which we see enacted with such force and humor in Jaeger, is to disidentify, and drive the eros in your auto to the exos on your own terms.

The power of transgressing the private sphere relies on the scandal of revelation: that there would be a shameless secret to uncover, an illusion to break. Jaeger's works are three-dimensional set pieces, asking the viewer to move around them in order to see their empty backsides, and see that the depth they purport is literal, produced like on a theater stage. In *Autofellatio* the central component hangs directly on the wall, while the smaller panels which form a circle around it are suspended from the ceiling at a distance. The integrity of the work does not hinge on the illusion of a unified plane being maintained—quite the opposite. Jaeger bares its construction as a vampire bares their fangs, in a mode at once confrontational and flirtatious. Others are like folding screens, alluding to a sense of bashfulness entirely misplaced in the world of these works where the inside of the car is the outside of the painting, and sex is always already both private and public. In Jaeger's works there is no scandalous return of the repressed. More than merely honest, they are frank, and demonstratively so; they take pleasure in no nonsense. And this is also what guarantees their fierce autonomy.

Still, the very idea of autonomy in painting, as well as the automatism of a car, remains a source of conflict in the works. The fact of the auto as a self, effectuated in the promise of the driverless cars of the near future, is a challenge precisely to the autonomy of those inside it—a threat to the Freudian drives, to desire and virility. Does the car’s agency strip us of our own? *Sappho* (2019) is the work in which ultimate interiority, the auto-erotic space of the car, most completely collapses into the ex- of the exotic, eclipsing the relation of self to other. Two women have oral sex, sprawled across three car seats in black leather, thick and taught like the torsos of gorillas. They are surrounded by a lush junglescape reminiscent of Henri Rousseau’s fantasies of the wild, and joined, absurdly, by several Pomeranian lapdogs. Here Jaeger offers a rather sober response to panicked questions about castration anxiety and the waning of libido posed by the self-driving car: When no one has to worry about steering the car, surely that just leaves us with more time to get on with the task at hand. *Sappho* portrays activity and passivity dissolved into a murky in-between: a fucking which is not aimed at ejaculation, a trip without a destination, without end.

Such a picture puts pressure on the distinction Freud so wanted to maintain between wanting the other and wanting to be the other—that is, between desire and identification. In *Identification Papers*, Diana Fuss marks that distinction as “precarious” at best. She revises Freud’s theory by proposing instead “vampirism” as a mode, which is

both other-incorporating and self-producing; it delimits a more ambiguous space where desire and identification appear less opposed than coterminous, where the desire to be the other (identification) draws its very sustenance from the desire to have the other.

This vampiric style of agency is not endangered by the contradiction between auto and eros. Rather, it understands autonomy as something that does not require authoritarian transgressions such as *Bowers v. Hardwick* in order to sustain itself, but in fact thrives on mutual contamination. This logic unlocks the vast amount of energy and dynamism we see in Jaeger’s works, with their circular compositions and strong sense of velocity. “Speed is not very often applied in painting,” Jaeger said to me, “I wanted to know: how do you make a painting fast?” It has to do with getting the wheels of desire moving—to hijack the biggest car you can find and push it down a hill.

Text by Kristian Vistrup Madsen. It will be published in the catalogue accompanying the Finkenwerder Art Prize exhibition 2022.

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# ARTFORUM



Frieda Toranzo Jaeger, *Life fears*, 2019, oil on canvas, 11 3/4 x 11 3/4".

LONDON

**Frieda Toranzo Jaeger**

ARCADIA MISSA

35 Duke Street

September 7–October 26, 2019

Fragmented women sink into their setting as angelic heads, floating torsos, and disembodied groins melt into the gilded entrails of a sports car; two ladies kiss as they time-warp through Mars-black ether. Titled *virgin machines* and *The window seat* (all works 2019), respectively, these pieces are two of five paintings by the Berlin-based artist Frieda Toranzo Jaeger on view here, each of which employs a visual metaphor for the mechanization of female bodies under capitalism. “Fantasies of Autonomy” also extends Toranzo Jaeger’s exploration of automobiles as flagrant displays of wealth: In *Life fears*, a fluffy, ivory lapdog slides cartoonishly down a crimson leather passenger seat toward a smoldering furnace. Luxurious vehicular tragedy rings throughout the gallery.

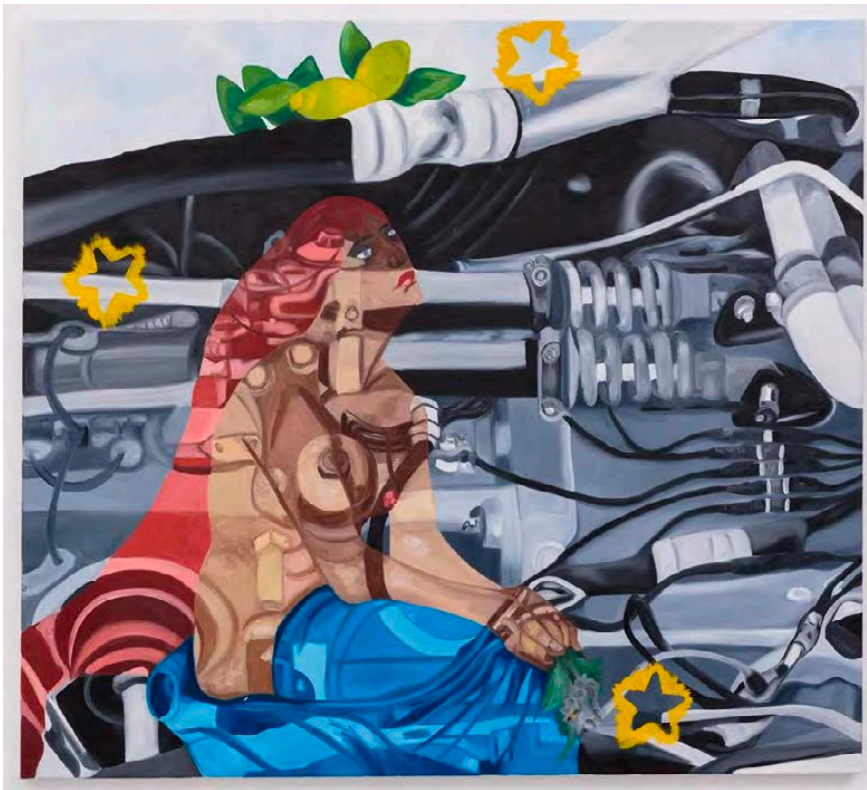
Through graceful compositional lifting, Toranzo Jaeger subtly flays racial and gendered art-historical hierarchies. The woman at the center of *waiting for fully Automated Luxury communism* rhymes with the female subject of Symbolist painter Pierre Puvis de Chavannes’s *La toilette*, 1883. Rendered by Toranzo Jaeger with comparable ambrosial sentimentality, Chavannes’s figure returns from the grave darker and seemingly infected with metal. The composition of *virgin machines* recalls Gustav Klimt with its layering and fracturing of the female form, yet its variegated corporeality throbs with a queer sensuality absent from the Austrian master’s oeuvre. Elsewhere, in a nod to Mexican muralism, an engine rendered in oil paint and embroidery dribbles over the edges of a canvas to occupy an entire wall. Rather than smacking the viewer in the face, Toranzo Jaeger’s political commentary creeps up from behind and taps her lightly on the shoulder.

— Gabriella Pounds

# TANK

## ONE WORK | waiting for fully Automated Luxury communism

The desire for the mechanical and the mechanisms of our desire. By Guy Mackinnon-Little



Frieda Toranzo Jaeger, *waiting for fully Automated Luxury communism*, 2019. Photograph by Tim Bowditch. Courtesy the artist and Arcadia Missa, London

Frieda Toranzo Jaeger's *waiting for fully Automated Luxury communism* (2019) shows a longing figure, just out the bath, superimposed over the polished anatomy of a chrome engine, its seductive cylinders and pistons blurring into the folds of her own body. Her face holds an expression of floating imprecision which might be despair, disinterest or absolute devotion. She awaits an engineered solution to her apparent indecision, hanging around like a phone plugged in and left to charge (the awkward capitalisation of the title reads a little like a Sent From My iPhone email).

Here we see the body reduced to pure mechanism, a compliant cyborg with angelic patience. Jaeger's bather, lifted from Pierre Puvis de Chavannes's *La Toilette* (1883), is shown in a moment of self-assembly, about to get dressed and finish drawing on her eyeliner. Layering these rituals against the linear functionality of the engine, Jaeger alerts us to both their rote mechanism and the pure functionality they aspire to.

*waiting for fully Automated Luxury communism* forms part of a show titled *Fantasies of Autonomy*. To achieve autonomy is to operate as a self-contained circuit, a closed diagram of inputs and outputs. To want these things is to want a smooth existence with predictable outcomes, where all glitches have been ironed out and all uncertainty has been eliminated. Mostly however, this wanting conceals an imperfect reality where we need and are needed by others, and where automation is often a codeword for unrecognised labour. This is a painting about the desire for the mechanical and what it obscures. ●

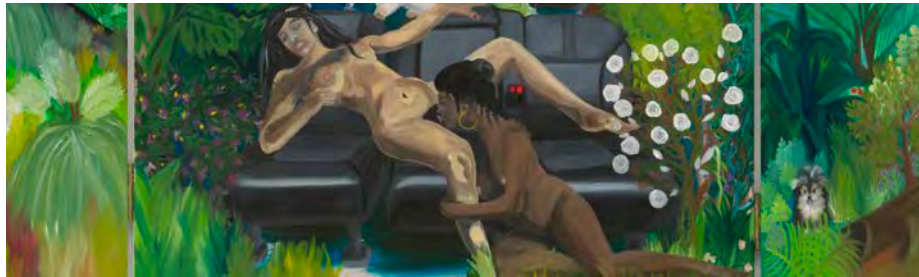
**Frieda Toranzo Jaeger's *Fantasies of Autonomy* is on show at Arcadia Missa until 26 October.**

# FRIEZE

## Frieda Toranzo Jaeger's Closed Circuits of Desire

The artist's new series of paintings at Berlin's Galerie Barbara Weiss unseats our fantasies of concealment

BY [GREG NISSAN IN REVIEWS](#) | 28 JUN 19



In 'Deep Adaptation' at Galerie Barbara Weiss, Frieda Toranzo Jaeger paints cars in static states – as if displayed on a dealership platform or parked at some teenage make-out destination. Taking cues from car assembly, the 12 oil paintings (all works 2019) use hinged and folding canvases that open outward like suicide doors. The car is separated from the oversaturated symbol of the open road in order to show how the glossy interior itself is a site for playing with depth and space – not unlike the act of painting.

*Sappho* depicts two women having sex on a standalone backseat in a jungle. Three Pomeranian dogs stare directly at the viewer from each panel of the triptych, as if to domesticate the overgrowth. In the background, car window frames peek out from under blurry ferns, as the wild jungle further flattens into a wallpaper-like interior. While the sex act disrupts the car as a phallic symbol, the decorative setting also questions the overdetermined fantasy spaces, say, of lapdogs and plants. Like the glittering stars outside the windows in other works,



Frieda Toranzo Jaeger, *Deep adaptation on Audi Aicon 2020 costume design by H. Memling*, 2019, oil on canvas, 2 × 4 m. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin

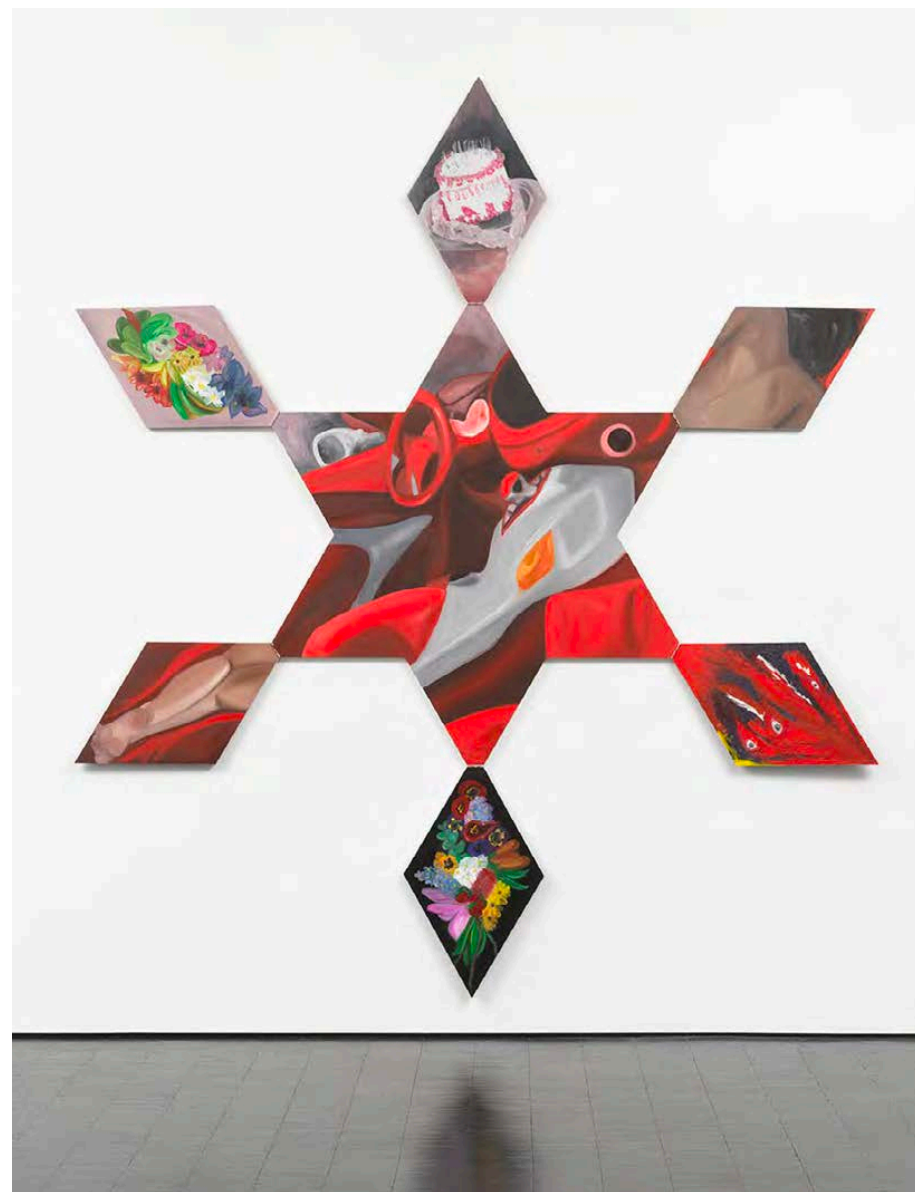
*Die Wunden sind tiefer im Rolls-Royce* (Wounds are Deeper in the Rolls-Royce) features an empty interior of a car; the blue carpeted floor is electric like a summer evening sky. The canvas is embroidered with a blotchy pattern of white, red and yellow. While Toranzo Jaeger deconstructs the male, fantasizing gaze in *Sappho*, here she employs a formal intervention on the canvas to collapse the car's space. The stitching not only cites craft traditions long kept outside the great halls of art – and the gender politics behind this exclusion – but also works to short-circuit the car's deep gradient, revealing its depth as another gimmick.

Folded into the windows and rearview mirrors of *Deep Adaption on Audi Aicon 2020 costume design* by H. Memling are scenes from 15th-century painter Hans Memling's triptychs. With inflated, soft brushstrokes, they appear as if viewed through a prism. Here the car's spatial parceling is not just the domain of industry but of artistic representation. The triptych is coded from left to right: trumpets of heaven phase into a horizonless hell. In contrast, the suicide doors beckon with an uncanny symmetry. The car is mirrored, a palindrome of luxury. A single reclining seat holds the centre. Does Toranzo Jaeger herald the self-driving age by collapsing the distinction between driver and passenger, front and back? Like Narcissus gazing at his own image, the car becomes a closed circuit of desire, sealed off from the world.

Built from diamond-shaped canvases arranged into a logo-like star, *Der Wert der Ware drückt sich am besten in den Körpern der Anderen aus* (The Value of Commodities Best Expresses Itself in the Bodies of Others), which cribs its title from Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* (Capital, 1867), reveals the backs of black and brown women's bodies (nude, or with thongs halfway down their thighs), patent leather surfaces, a steering wheel and a chrome rim. Zoomed in and abstracted, the car is no longer depicted as a space we can enter, but transforms into a series of joined alluring surfaces and modal parts. In this way, Toranzo Jaeger uses the car's mode of assembly to push back against its canonical image. She suggests that the car's fantasy of concealment is only ever accomplished through a tricking out of surfaces and an endless game of expanding perspectives. When segmented, these bodies remain tied to acts of desire, while the car parts flatten without their frame. What thresholds do we cross, what distortions do we perform, to approach them?

***Frieda Toranzo Jaeger, 'Deep Adaptation'*** is on view at *Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin, Germany, until 29 June.*

*Main image: Frieda Toranzo Jaeger, Sappho (detail), 2019, oil on canvas, 75 × 178 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin*



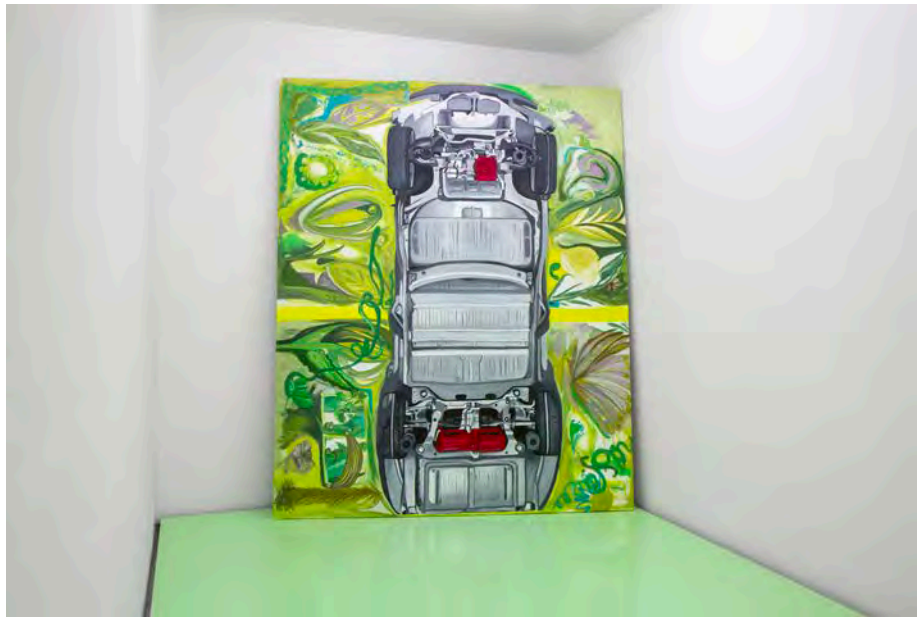
*Frieda Toranzo Jaeger, Der Wert der Ware drückt sich am Besten in den Körpern der Anderen aus (The Value of Commodities Best Expresses Itself in the Bodies of Others), 2019, oil on canvas, 2.8 × 2.8 m. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin*

# MOUSSE

Frieda Toranzo Jaeger “Choque Cultural” at Lulu,  
Mexico City  
by Nika Simone Chilewich

10.08.2018

READING TIME 6'



Frieda Toranzo Jaeger “Choque Cultural” at Lulu, Mexico City, 2018  
Courtesy: the artist and Lulu, Mexico City

The paintings in *Choque Cultural*, by Mexican artist Frieda Toranzo Jaeger, are a different breed of animal. They constitute something rare within the Mexico City art scene: a painting show that literally stops you in your tracks.



Frieda Toranzo Jaeger “Choque Cultural” at Lulu, Mexico City, 2018  
Courtesy: the artist and Lulu, Mexico City

In the front gallery of the independent space Lulu in Mexico City, a beast of a painting, *Tesla*, looks out onto the street. The bold, erotic composition is a dense and deliberate layering of gestural, natural, and mechanical forms that are somewhere between Georgia O’Keeffe’s sexualized depiction of nature, the somber curation of Dutch vanitas painting, and the dramatic, mythological qualities of a Baroque altarpiece. Mounted on a thick, yellow horizontal line—the work’s most decidedly abstract form—an electric luxury car sits overturned. The hyperrealistic, anatomical structure cuts vertically through the pictorial plane, forming a crucifix that the artist constructs out of a reference to abstract form and a capsized symbol of masculinity. It is organic but not at all natural, feminine but by no means soft. The painting is explicit, didactic even, and the canvas is saturated. In it lies a layering of codes that reference the gendered history of painting as well as the spiritual nature of contemporary capitalist culture. The canvas pushes up against the painted medium, but placed on the floor, it resists falling into a purely representational state. *Tesla* contains a tapestry of figurative and abstract elements, but Toranzo Jaeger achieves a rare painterly synthesis between the subject of the work and its expressive form.





Frieda Toranzo Jaeger "Choque Cultural" at Lulu, Mexico City, 2018  
Courtesy: the artist and Lulu, Mexico City

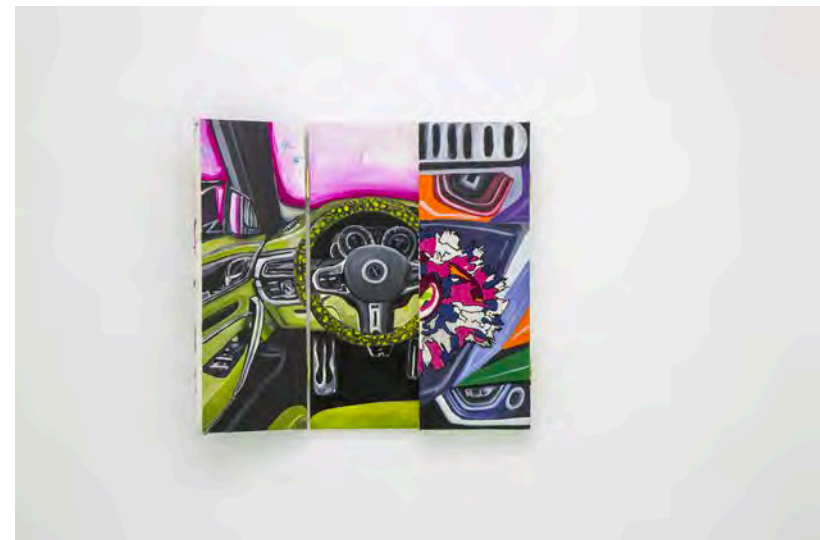
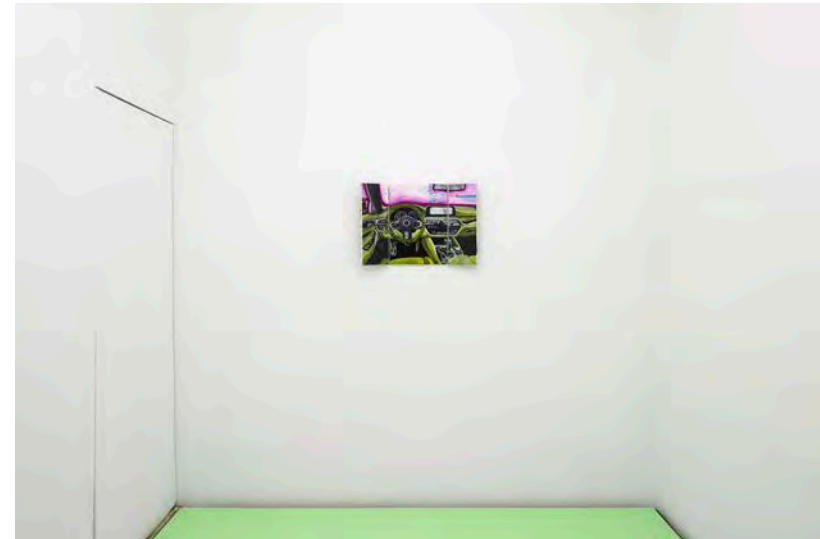
The exhibition, on view through August 18, is the Berlin-based artist's first solo show in her home country. For the exhibition, curated by Lulu cofounder Chris Sharp, Toranzo Jaeger traveled to Mexico City to produce work specifically for the space. The artist, who is currently completing her MFA at the Kunstakademie Hamburg, makes work that addresses issues of gender and sexuality through an approach that melds a semiotics of capitalist visual culture with a methodical approach to painting. Each of the works in *Choque Cultural* constitutes a deliberate and varied deconstruction of the painted form and the pictorial plane. Toranzo Jaeger uses the car, particularly the electric car, as a symbol of masculinity and a motif that addresses the neocapitalist ideals of sustainability and renewability. In her work, the car becomes a means by which to confront cultural norms and to expose the varied histories embedded in Mexican art, in the history of painting, and in the gendered, hierarchical distinctions between popular and fine art traditions.

Toranzo Jaeger's work is singular, unlike anything else in the Mexico City art scene. It is grotesque and seductive, familiar yet strange, and in *Choque Cultural*, Toranzo Jaeger establishes herself as a force to be reckoned with—as a painter, a Mexican artist, and a female cultural voice. In particular, her painterly treatment of Mexico's visual culture breaks away from an artistic language tied to the country's nationalistic pursuits and dominated by a male-driven tradition of didactic, sociopolitical, and economically motivated artistic narratives. Instead, Toranzo Jaeger integrates a vocabulary that is as global as it is embedded in contemporary Mexican culture. She effortlessly weaves together the country's visual codes.

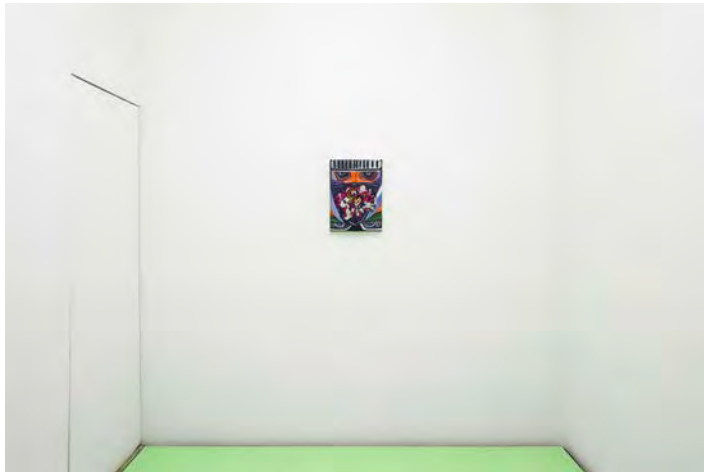
In particular, it is her brazen ability to capture the Baroque qualities of Mexican culture, especially that of the norteño tradition, that makes her pictorial landscapes of car interiors and electrically polluted skylines so dynamic and uniquely contemporary. This ability is apparent in the three smaller works in the exhibition: *Retrato de lo inocente*, *Sola y mala acompañada*, and *Y la Cheyenne apa'?*

*Retrato de lo inocente* and *Sola y mala acompañada* hang opposite each other in Lulu's interior gallery. The two car interiors play like a mise-en-scène of driving north on the highway toward the Mexico/US border. The triptych *Retrato de lo inocente* depicts the neon interior of an electric BMW, complete with what looks like an animal-print steering-wheel cover. The windshield looks out onto a Technicolor sunset, and in the rearview mirror, the interior of the Prius in *Sola y mala acompañada* is reflected, indicating to the viewer that the cars are, in fact, in one lane of traffic. When closed, the two outer panels of *Retrato de lo inocente* contain an angular and abstractly depicted car hood and muffler. In what could be seen as a reference to Mexican Geometrismo painting, Toranzo Jaeger has filled the frame with gauche colors typical of rancharo car culture.

In *Retrato de lo inocente*, the artist has also penetrated the painting's surface with embroidered elements. This integration of embroidery is also present in the clouds that hang over the fading urban landscape being left behind by the car in *Sola y mala acompañada*. Embroidery is one characteristic of the artist's work that overturns the pejorative notions of folk and craft underlying the patriarchal nature of Mexico's and Latin America's cultural norms. Whereas in *Tesla*, Toranzo Jaeger uses abstraction to expose the painting's surface, in these two works, as well as in *Y la Cheyenne apa'?*, she literally breaks open the pictorial plane to a traditionally female practice, placing it above, over, and through the painted form.



Frieda Toranzo Jaeger "Choque Cultural" at Lulu, Mexico City, 2018  
Courtesy: the artist and Lulu, Mexico City



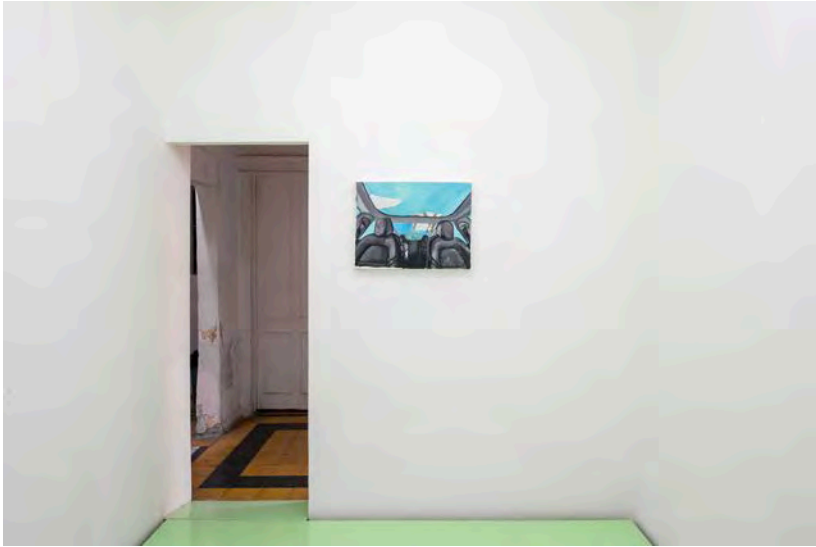
In *Y la Cheyenne apa'?*, Toranzo Jaeger again plays with the pictorial plane. The artist employs a dense use of color and a flatly constructed element in the top right corner of the canvas. That component, textile-like, is in contrast to the rest of the work, which is gestural, the paint applied in thin layers and the canvas exposed. In the main part of the work, she develops a scene common to the northern desert cities of Mexico: the palm tree and the pickup truck. However, the truck is totaled, and with it, its masculine connotations. The truck serves instead as the platform for an explicit lesbian group-sex scene. Displayed under an arch in the gallery, *Y la Cheyenne apa'?* is an altar to female sexuality, one in which masculinity is not just subverted, it is entirely beside the point.

Together, the works in *Choque Cultural* express a sort of decadent optimism within the grotesque state of late-capitalist culture. Their protagonist, whether the artist or the viewer, is the empowered female subject

at Lulu, Mexico City  
until 18 August 2018



Frieda Toranzo Jaeger "Choque Cultural" at Lulu, Mexico City, 2018  
Courtesy: the artist and Lulu, Mexico City



Frieda Toranzo Jaeger "Choque Cultural" at Lulu, Mexico City, 2018  
Courtesy: the artist and Lulu, Mexico City



Frieda Toranzo Jaeger "Choque Cultural" at Lulu, Mexico City, 2018  
Courtesy: the artist and Lulu, Mexico City

## Art in America

### FRIEDA TORANZO JAEGER

By Geoffrey Mak

February 1, 2018 4:45pm

The automobile has long epitomized notions of capitalism as alienation—the opposite of public transit’s grimy socialism. The five oil paintings in Frieda Toranzo Jaeger’s show at Reena Spaulings (all 2017) depict interior views of cars: one looks onto the electric engine of a Formula E racing car, and the other four—alluding to a future in which cars will drive themselves—focus on passenger seats in various electric models designed for the consumer market. In an interview with Mousse, Toranzo Jaeger described electric cars as “female” machines, unlike their gas-powered counterparts, whose engine revving, she said, functions as a signifier for male sexual performance.

Three of the works include hand-embroidered sections depicting nude bodies. Had I not read the press release, I wouldn’t have known that these were lesbian sex scenes. In the foreground of Rear Passenger Entrance are what appear to be a woman’s buttocks; a single leg in pink fishnet tights stretches from the seat to the center console, though it’s unclear where the rest of its body is located or even if there is one.

The multi-panel painting *Hope the Air Conditioning Is on While Facing Global Warming (part 1)* stood at the gallery’s center. Calling to mind altarpieces removed from churches and presented in museums as freestanding objects, the work consists of four car-door-shaped canvases hinged together, two of them opened upward like wings. Outside the car windows we see buildings on fire beneath open blue skies, the view conjuring apocalyptic religious visions. But the car’s interior world—like that of a casino or shopping mall—seems divorced from such any sense of these threats, its hermeticism reinforced by the panels’ folding quality. The car’s dashboards, seats, and glove compartments have been painted in an exaggerated chiaroscuro. The effect of stasis and interiority recalls the central mechanics of advertising, where the desire for intimacy is partly gratified and ultimately thwarted.

“Advertising does not liberate drives,” writes Baudrillard. “Primarily, it mobilizes phantasms which block these drives.” So do these paintings. But if there is any disruption to the phantasmagoria, it comes from the literal puncturing of canvas with the needle in the works with embroidered sections. Historically relegated to domesticity and decorative arts, embroidery is a warm, tactile system of representation, and here it stands in contrast to the cold painted simulacra. It wakes you up from the stupor of the paintings, if not by queering the masculine semiotics of the automobile, then by incorporating a tradition that doesn’t pretend to have anything to do with the rest of the enterprise.

## Curated by Zoë Claire Miller and Eva Wilson

*and what good does all the research of the Impressionists do them  
when they never got the right person to stand near the tree when the sun sank*

Works and writing by: Iphgenia Baal, Caitlin Berrigan, Gerry Bibby, Chelsea Culprit, Joseph Grigely/Gregory Battcock, Petrit Halilaj and Alvaro Urbano, Kolbeinn Hugi, Dorothy Iannone, Frieda Toranzo Jaeger, Hanne Lippard, Víctor del Moral, José Esteban Muñoz, Frank O’Hara, Heather Phillipson, Paula Piedra, Paul B. Preciado, Manuel Solano and Linda Stupart

Curated by Zoë Claire Miller and Eva Wilson

Red lines mark the out of bounds of the squash court, forming an odd horizon that signals the limits of the playing field. Contained in the here and now of the court and the back and forth between the players, each body reacts to the movements of the other. Instead of facing one another on opposing sides, the players share the same space; they challenge the same wall: rebounding off the sweaty confines of the court, their game culminates in a perpetually concussed flirtation of rubber balls with the then and there of the out-of-bounds.

The sixth exhibition at Squash Editions explores the out-of-bounds, the indeterminacy and potentiality of what queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz has called queer futurity: “To see queerness as horizon is to perceive it as a modality of ecstatic time in which the temporal stranglehold that I describe as straight time is interrupted or stepped out of. Ecstatic time is signaled at the moment one feels ecstasy, announced perhaps in a scream or grunt of pleasure, and more importantly during moments of contemplation when one looks back at a scene from one’s past, present, or future.” (José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 2009)

The works in the exhibition are interested in queered encounters with adversaries/companions within common (but often displaced) spaces and temporalities—whether these are shared in solidarity, in ecstasy, by violation, in resistance or by encroachment. Separate from the outside world, the squash court offers a kind of exclusion zone where space and time is renegotiated, where bodies can collide into each other or narrowly avoid collision.

The three-day show, with pieces by international artists working in diverse media and across different times, takes place at Squash Editions—a court at Squash Ciprés in Santa María La Ribera, CDMX. It is accompanied by a zine which offers an “anthology” of texts and images by artists and writers alongside theory and other literary and visual formats that speak to ecstatic queer temporalities, arranged as excerpts and fragments, in English and Spanish.



**BERLIN**

**Frieda Toranzo Jaeger**  
**"Deep Adaptation"**  
 Galerie Barbara Weiss  
 27 April–15 June 2019

Frieda Toranzo Jaeger's first exhibition at Galerie Barbara Weiss is an exhibition of paintings, through and through. This is so although various aspects of the show might suggest otherwise: it is, at first, not immediately apparent. Its title, "Deep Adaptation" – borrowed from a paper by the scientist Jem Bendell that circulated widely thanks to its dramatic and alarmist picture of climate catastrophe – points to a much bigger endgame than the eternal endgame of painting. With its depictions of self-driving cars, it takes on the next big tech disruption. And finally, its depictions of sexual encounters between people of the same sex and/or different ethnic backgrounds bring it, in the present climate, into the realm of representation and identity politics. This is a painting show, however, precisely in those respects in which it goes beyond painting, and where it succeeds, with sensitivity and tact, in drawing connections between the real world of this "beyond" and the self-sufficiency and artificiality of the technique and the discourse known as painting.

After all the buzz about "painting beside itself" and Zombie Formalism, painting seemed, somehow, to have checked out. It seemed to have been swept off the field after the Dana Schutz controversy, through the sheer force of arguments that were decidedly about identity politics, which appeared, at least initially, to take priority over aesthetic questions, leaving painting, with its endless self-referentiality, its intensely introspective formalism and its nerdy specialised questioning, holding the short straw. But is that all there is to it? Jaeger's works (all 2019) leave no doubt that this context is the background against which they are to be understood.

The paintings in this exhibition not only from time to time feature in performances that Jaeger organizes with them; they actively refer to contexts, charged situations, attributions, and circulations of all kinds. They have adopted mobility and their own performativity into their material DNA in a way that is impossible to miss. Three of the eight works on view are made up of hinged panels, which sometimes recall classical altarpieces and thus remind us of one of the ritual uses of painting prior to its autonomy: three parts in the

case of *Sappho*; five parts in the case of *Untitled*, where they are arranged so that the work stands on its own; and even seven parts in the case of *Der Wert der Ware drückt sich am Besten in den Körpern der Anderen aus* (The Value of the Commodity Expresses Itself Best in the Bodies of Others) – a wall work with diamond-shaped panels painted on both sides that mean it can be unfolded into a star.

The remaining works do not offer traditional, hermetic pictorial spaces either. Those that do not already consist of fragmented canvases are perforated with needles and thread: an embroidered broken heart on the painting of an engine bay in *The individual differences in the post-traumatic response to eco trauma*; an embroidered spot of deep-red blood in *Die Wunden sind tiefer im Rolls-Royce* (The Wounds Are Deeper in the Rolls-Royce), which seems to drop from outside into the driver's compartment of a car.

And with that we have arrived at the subject-matter of these works. Ultimately, Jaeger's paintings are explicitly representational. If painterly figuration was a few years ago often rendered literal as grotesque comic-style overdrawn, it here seems, by contrast, to be

Photos: Jens Ziehe, Courtesy the artist and Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin



Frieda Toranzo Jaeger  
*Deep adaptation on Audi Aicon 2020*  
 costume design by H. Memling, 2019  
 Oil on canvas, 200 x 400 cm

**BERLIN**



Frieda Toranzo Jaeger  
*Nach dem Spuckschluck*, 2019  
 Oil and embroidery on canvas 30 x 40 cm

taken entirely seriously, which itself also adds to the sense of this practice being anchored in the present. *Sappho*, for example, presents an oral-sex scene with two women with differently coloured skin on a car seat in the middle of an exuberantly paradisiacal South Sea backdrop à la Gauguin, including small lapdogs. Within the car interiors and cockpits on view, specific imagery from the history of painting is reproduced

– presented as a kind of interior decor.

In these cockpits and interiors Jaeger has found a fantastic image, a metaphor for her own medium. Self-contained but mobile spaces: spaces in which traditionally male-connoted subjectivity plays out as domination and autonomy, but also spaces where, in the near future, no driver will any longer sit, which means not that these spaces will be eliminated but that

they will be radically transformed. They are spaces that can be opened again and again, into which the outside can penetrate, whose windows offer a view onto the outside. And they are ambivalent spaces that are self-sufficient and closed-off but always only seemingly separated from their surroundings. Each is a part of the world, and a world in itself.

**Dominikus Müller**



Frieda Toranzo Jaeger  
*Sappho*, 2019  
 Oil on canvas,  
 75 x 178 cm

Translated by Steven Lindberg

# TOTAL IMMERSION

FRIEDA TORANZO JAEGER AND  
CHRIS SHARP IN CONVERSATION

Frieda Toranzo Jaeger is a Mexican painter based in Hamburg where she recently finished her studies. I was turned on to her work by the young American artist Myles Starr, who lived in Mexico City for a spell, and who exhibited a painting of her's at his Vienna-based project space, SORT, in 2016. Initially surprised and even a little put off by the work, I found it strange, aggressive, unaccountably sexy, and anything but "Mexican." It did not take me long to realize that I really liked it, and Frieda and I started what has turned into an ongoing conversation about her work, the craft and stakes of painting in general, and Mexico City, among other things. Below is a more formalized version of what we have been talking about.

## CHRIS SHARP

Let's start with cars, since they play such a prominent role in your practice. Depicting mostly their interiors, you manage to communicate something very aggressive, claustrophobic, and weirdly sexy about cars. You seem to feminize what is typically construed as the acme of manhood or masculinity while ramping up its macho-ness to an almost intolerable degree. At the same time, you seem to be playing with perceived stereotypes regarding the depiction of cars—exterior views, often accompanied by bikini-clad women, tend to betoken male possession or ownership, while interior views (not including the engine, which is all about muscle) generally suggest luxury, comfort, safety, an almost domestic quality, and you are most certainly scrambling these codes. Can you say a few words about this subject matter and how you portray it?

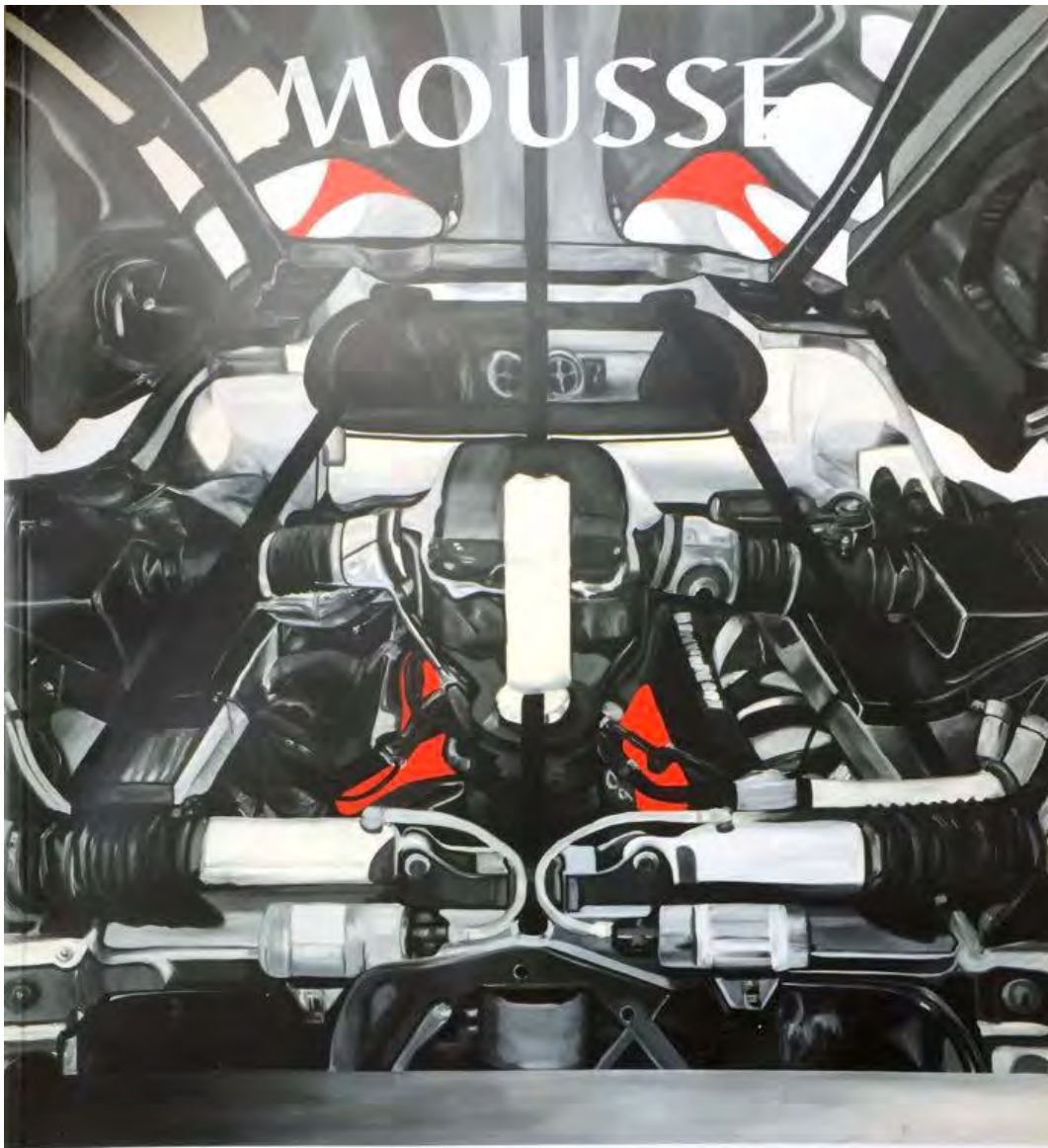
## FRIEDA TORANZO JAEGER

I first became interested in machines when I started to write my thesis on postcolonial theory. I was fascinated with how Gustave Flaubert, who was very influential in forming Western ideas of "the other," describes for instance the Orientals. In one of his letters to Louise Colet, he wrote: "The oriental woman is no more than a machine who makes no distinction between one man or another man." This became the source of my investigation—how machines can take your individuality away, how and why machines are related to masculinity, and how it would feel to be this female machine that takes away the individuality of Western men. I wanted to explore this concept more in my practice. And the car struck me as the perfect machine for this investigation. Plus, it possess a certain baseline universality. Almost everybody is forced to interact with these machines in one way or another on a daily basis since our landscapes are shaped around them, and in growing up in Mexico City, the average time that I would spend in a car every day was about three to four hours just to go to school and back. The car becomes a very domestic and private space, which you fill up with your own private rituals.

Then there's the essentially exploratory nature of painting, which takes you through the inevitable process of locating yourself in relation to everything. The car is a place where you also have to locate yourself constantly, from the inside. In this sense I am talking about painting itself and the nature of my own practice. But I am also fascinated by the semiotics of the "car" as a symbol that is so related to men and masculinity, as you already pointed out. I am interested in how control over the potency (engine revving) of this machine becomes an extension of a man's imaginary intrinsic male potency and domination fantasies that enable him to perform a form of masculinity. It is for this reason that I chose exclusively electric cars: they are almost completely silent, and they will soon be able to drive themselves. So by disassociating these two conventions from traditional notions of control and potency, I am trying to re-genderize the function of their semiotics.

CS How does this relate to the way your paintings tend to be fully saturated with information? It's as if there is no space—which is ironic, if you think about it, because the car traditionally signifies space and freedom, at least in the myths of the United States (for instance Route 66). But not necessarily in Mexico City (or anywhere in Latin America, for that matter), where you are liable to spend hours trapped inside a car stuck in traffic cursing the day you were born.

FT [Laughs] It's true! I am trying to transmit a sense of total immersion, a disruptive one that obstructs you from interacting fully with your surroundings, like looking at the landscape through the car window. You're isolated, the air conditioner is on. Trapped. But I guess the claustrophobic feeling comes from the fact that at the same time the commodity value of such cars is a trap. Assurances of freedom, of liberating the world from pollution, and representing some kind of neo-capitalist progress that promises to save the



Andrew Berardini, Timothée Calame, Barbara Chase-Riboud, Yann Chateigné Tytelman, Luc Chessel, Liz Craft, Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Aria Dean, Sara Deraedt, Denise Ferreira da Silva, Hendrik Folkerts, Juan A. Gaitán, Hanna Girma, Anna Gritz, Rana Hamadeh, Jens Hoffmann, Candice Hopkins, Alexander Iadarola, Stanya Kahn, Nora N. Khan, Yuki Kihara, Alvin Li, Lin Ke, Chus Martínez, Nick Mauss, Ingo Niemann, Kathy Noble, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Carolina Rito, Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, Chris Sharp, Jakob Steensen, Jamie Stevens, Sofia Stevi, Yasunao Tone, Frieda Toranzo Jaeger, Wu Tsang, Katharine Vega, Ben Vickers, Catherine Wood, Vivian Zihlerl, Heimo Zobernig, and more

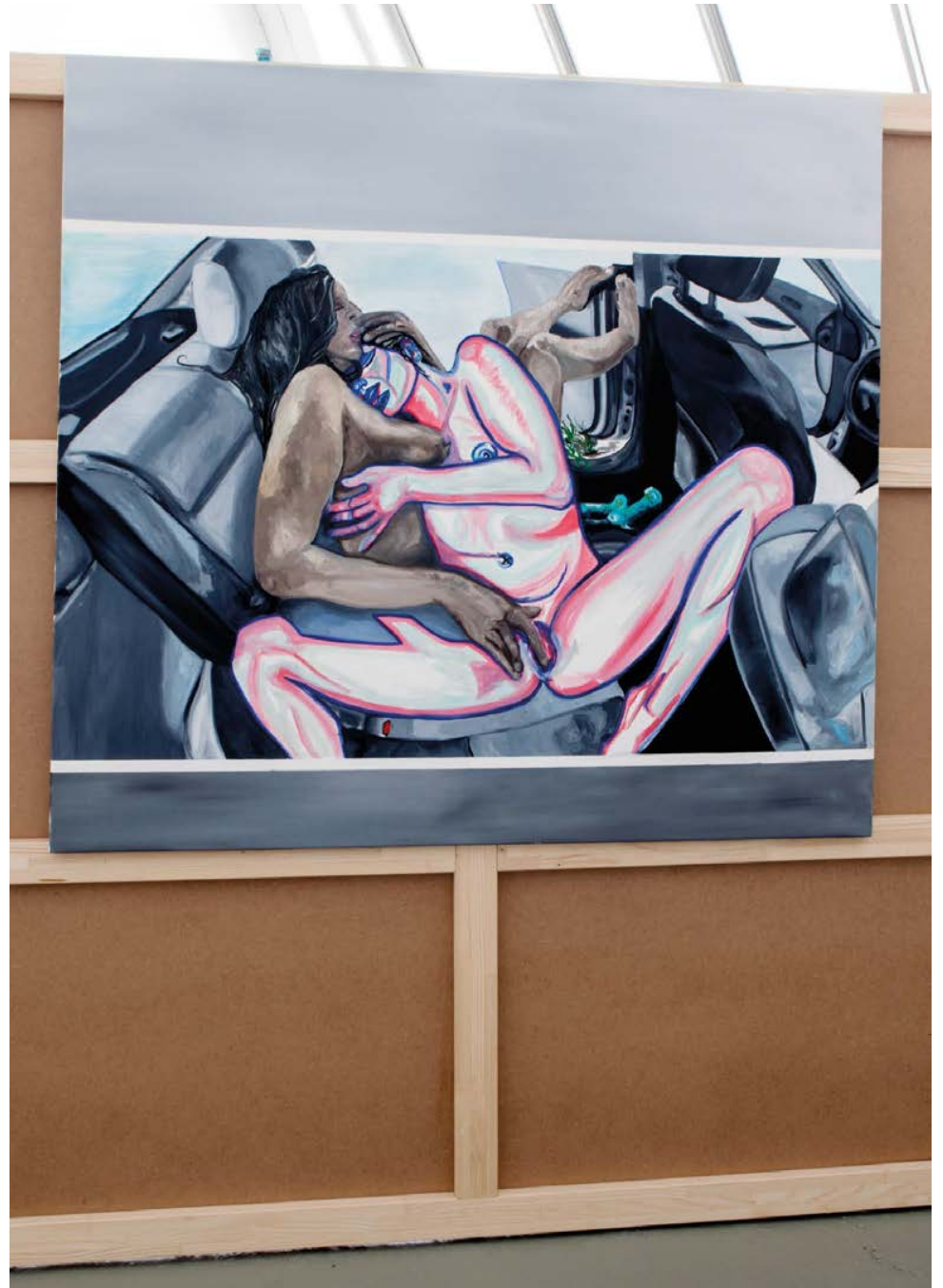


**Mousse**  
Contemporary Art Magazine

**Issue #60**  
October – November 2017



Above - *The Net Courtin*, 2017. Courtesy: the artist  
Below - *The Net* (front view), 2017. Courtesy: the artist  
Opposite - *The Net* (back view), 2017. Courtesy: the artist







Above - *Autocontrol as a form of landscape* (view as closed), 2016, HISCOX art prize 2016, Hamburg 2016. Courtesy: the artist

Below - *Autocontrol as a form of landscape*, 2016, Lerchenfeld 1 installation view at Kunstverein Schwerin, Schwerin, 2017. Courtesy: the artist  
Opposite - *puppy pilot*, 2017. Courtesy: Private collection



world. When we are facing mass extinction, in our flying-electric-vegan-leather-interior cars, with nothing to eat because the soil is dead, we will curse the day we first got into one of these vehicles.

**CS**ystopian to the max. I feel you. Indeed, I love how one can feel all this aggression, angst, and even contradiction within the work. You are seeking to upset and rewire the semiotic coding of what is essentially an object of mass extinction (hereafter known as OME). But these are not merely symbolic or conceptual paintings. There is obviously a profound love of and serious commitment to painting in what you do. It is not a means, but an actual end in itself. It is possible to talk about your work both vis-à-vis a specific tradition, which includes car paintings (for instance Peter Cain) and painting more generally. I am tempted to broadly situate it somewhere between, say, classical Flemish still life, in which there is no hierarchy of information, and Jana Euler, whose work is similarly claustrophobic. There is also a sense of “painting beside itself,” what with your unusual installations and incorporation of sculptural elements. Indeed, painting is rarely an inert, two-dimensional object in what you do. Maybe you could talk a bit about your thinking behind this?

**FTJ** think once the work is inserted into the stream of history it inevitably find its own origins. And of course I totally see my work relating to the artists/ work you mention. It’s really interesting how one’s work is always read in relation to that of others. And of course my commitment to painting is central to what I do. Engaging in the formal aspect of applying paint and contemplating it, the immersion, is what definitely brings me the most joy and satisfaction in my work, even if sometimes I have to work against it in order to bring the content and form together. I have to get out of my comfort zone. This happens in the way I install my paintings, like you said; right now I am investigating the concept of autonomy. I am trying to transgress the act of painting in itself by separating myself from it and adding sculptural and performative aspects to it. I am fighting against the two-dimensional nature of painting, against pleasing my own taste. I mean, for example, I do not have a car fetish. I don’t even have a car! But I am focusing all my aesthetic ambitions into this motif, and I do all of this via the very essential materiality of painting: oil paint on canvas. So I guess you are right. There are not only conceptual paintings because then the commitment to the form would be unnecessary, like not adding anything to the content, but in this case it is the medium through which content is transmitted.

**CS** totally agree. It’s a bit of a proverbial no-brainer, but, in a post-conceptual art world in which “research” and “artistic research” are increasingly codified terms, the importance of the medium and its capacity to transmit content is often marginalized. In some contexts you get the feeling that it’s as if painting were liable to exist ex nihilo, as if it were ahistorical, as opposed to completely dependent on a couple thousand years of history. I have often encountered this attitude in Mexico and Latin America in general, where the medium is seriously fraught with unresolved contradictions. I have seen a lot of work that on the one hand takes the stretcher, and its history, entirely for granted, assuming that placing something thereon automatically makes it if not painting, then art, and on the other hand preemptively dismisses painting as unserious by virtue of its alleged complicity with the market. As a Mexican painter you have a lot to negotiate, never mind that you are a woman who comes from a male-dominated art context. I guess what I am trying to say is that being a Mexican (woman) painter comes both with some very specific baggage and yet, at the same time, a kind of tabula rasa, given how essentially taboo it, as a medium, is.

**FTJ** agree with what you say about the current state of painting in Latin America. There is a lack of contemporary discourse due to the many prejudices that dog the medium there. Also the fact that there is almost no history of contemporary Mexican painting because, at least in my opinion, there is a melancholia for a kind of political conceptual art that every contemporary artist should do to be contemporary, together with the wish to detach from handicrafts, because by working in other media or miming more Western aesthetics you’re closer to a fictional internationality, and you don’t want to be reduced to some kind of local craft maker.

I mean, I know I’m being a bit reductive here, but generally speaking, we still have a profound postcolonial trauma. And just the fact that I, as a female painter, would never be taken seriously as a legitimate contemporary artist if I painted flowers is an example of it. That is one of the reasons why I felt obliged to leave Latin America and study in Germany. The second is that, as you say, being a female painter in Mexico becomes a brutal fight for validation. The lack of painting discourse also means that there is a lack of professionals and institutions who validate painting, write about it, or even just take it seriously. I mean, you have Lulu, which is maybe the first space that I know of that consistently brings contemporary painting into the city, and hopefully recharging the art scene in this respect. We have to create a discursive community around it—painting—in which female artists play a crucial role, in order to continue the endless fight against a macho/male-dominated art context and relieve ourselves of the exhausting burden of being a female (Mexican) artist in Mexico.

**CS** can you say a few words about you’re working on now?

**FTJ** right now I am still working on the concept of autonomy, and the question of display and its effects on the content of painting. I have been obsessed with altar paintings, since they are the first pieces that claimed for themselves a form of autonomy. They transformed the nature and function of the Christian image from a sited one (as in fresco) to an autonomous one, and took on a legitimate position at the center of Christian worship. The history of their display and performativity has inspired me to work a lot with triptychs, so this is what I am thinking about, while also of course always trying to engage in the process of painting and deepen my understanding of feminist and decolonizing practices. Preparing for my upcoming shows—so, basically, painting!

**Frieda Toranzo Jaeger** (1988, Mexico City) is a Mexican artist based in Hamburg. In 2017, she finished her studies at the HBK, Hamburg, and she is currently preparing a solo exhibition at Resna Spaulings New York, scheduled to open this coming November. In 2016, she was the recipient of the HISCOX art prize, and has participated in exhibitions at the Kunstverein Schwerin; SORT Vienna; and Achterhause Hamburg, among others.

**Chris Sharp** is a writer and independent curator based in Mexico City, where co-runs the project space Lulu. He is currently preparing a survey of the work of Tom Wesselmann, entitled *La Promise du Bonheur*, for the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco, and the group exhibition, *Dwelling Poetically: Mexico City, A Case Study* for the Australian Center for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, both 2018. His writing has appeared in many magazines, journals, catalogs, and online forums.



Opposite - *Autocontrol one*, 2015. Courtesy: the artist

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