



Smithsonian
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Carolina Caycedo Interview

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Transcript

Preface

Prefacio

La siguiente transcripción de historia oral es el resultado de una entrevista grabada en español con Carolina Caycedo. Fue realizada por Fernanda Espinosa como parte del In Colors Project. Carolina Caycedo y Fernanda Espinosa han revisado la transcripción y sus correcciones y enmiendas aparecen a continuación.

Esta transcripción ha sido ligeramente editada por el In Colors Project para facilitar su lectura. Los lectores deben tener en cuenta que el documento y medio original de esta entrevista es la lengua hablada y que la grabación de sonido debe considerarse la fuente original, con su correspondiente tono y gramática. A continuación encontrarán la transcripción en su idioma original, español, seguida por la traducción al inglés.

In Colors es un proyecto de Fernanda Espinosa, becaria del premio de historia oral del 2022 de la Asociación de Historia Oral (OHA, por sus siglas en inglés) a través del Fondo Nacional para las Humanidades (NEH, por sus siglas en inglés). Esta es una de las entrevistas realizadas en el marco de esta beca y en colaboración con los Archivos de Arte Americano (estadounidense), Instituto Smithsonian. Las opiniones, resultados, conclusiones o recomendaciones expresadas en esta entrevista no reflejan necesariamente las de la Asociación de Historia Oral ni las del Fondo Nacional para las Humanidades.

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview in Spanish with Carolina Caycedo. It was conducted by Fernanda Espinosa as part of the In Colors Project. Carolina Caycedo and Fernanda Espinosa have reviewed the transcript, and their corrections and emendations appear below.

This transcript has been lightly edited by the In Colors Project for readability. Readers should bear in mind that the original document and medium of this interview is the spoken language and that the audio recording should be considered the original source, with its particular tone and grammar.

Below, you will find the transcript in Spanish, followed by the English translation.

In Colors is a project by Fernanda Espinosa, a 2022 Oral History Association oral history fellow funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. This is one of several interviews conducted under this fellowship and in collaboration with the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this interview, do not necessarily reflect those of the Oral History Association or National Endowment for the Humanities.

Interview

there is a very important point of dialogue with him. We have been together. And we've been working, and we have a recent body of work which we did together. It's a collaboration between David and I called *Blessings of the Mystery* [originally in English]. It's a body of work that began with a commission from Ballroom Marfa. And we started traveling to Texas at the invitation of Ballroom Marfa. Since then, we have developed this body of work that analyzes how colonization continues to unfold in southwest Texas through extractive processes such as the construction of dams, the establishment of universities and study centers such as observatories of extraction, and the entire Texas natural oil and gas industry, broadly speaking.

It is very important work for me, not only because I collaborate with David, with my partner, but because it is also work that is rooted in the United States and, if you think about Texas as a little *footprint* [originally in English] of what the United States is and the hierarchical relations between the *colonial settler* [originally in English] and the native in the United States. An important part of the work is also to analyze, study, and learn from the pictograms that exist in Texas, which many people do not know that there is a repository of

ancestral pictograms in Texas—the largest in the United States and the most complex, world-class. It's an incredible thing. It's called Lower Pecos Rock Art. So we spent quite a bit of time studying that. But, also, listening and understanding and learning generally from all the interpretations, from the *colonial settlers* [originally in English] to the natives, to the unrecognized natives.

But well, creating this body of work with David is very nice because it is a moment of falling in love again. When you are in a relationship for years practical things begin. You have a daughter: Who cooks? Who washes? Who picks up? Who carries? And you forget a little about how the relationship begins, ours was a little on an intellectual and ethical level, you know? And to have the opportunity to work together again on a whole body of work where we produced two films. There are several installations, there is two-dimensional work. It's like reactivating those conversations that you have at the beginning of the relationship where you are discovering and connecting intellectually. And that led to me getting pregnant [laughs.] We made a movie and a child; we made a body of work and a son. I didn't expect that. In other words, both of my pregnancies have been unplanned. They have been the only two pregnancies of my life. And I am grateful for them.

This does not mean that I am against abortion. No: motherhood is desired or not. And I got pregnant. Well, I have to tell you, I have to add that Niko came at a very special time. Niko—he's already two and a half years old—was born in September 2020 in the middle of the pandemic. But, I found out that I was pregnant in December 2019 when I was preparing for the first very important institutional show in a large museum. That was at the ICA Boston which was dedicated to the *Cosmotarrayas* and opened in January 2020. After that, I was going to go to an NTU residence in Singapore, which is a residence space within the University of Singapore. I was going to go with Una, I was going to go to Singapore for three months when I found out that I was pregnant because I went to get the necessary vaccines for the trip to Singapore. And I was a little late. I asked the nurse if they would give me a pregnancy test and they told me, Oh! congratulations.

[02:05:00]

And I was like.... I mean, well, I'm not going to go to Singapore pregnant, I'm never going to do that. I got back, I discussed it at home with David and Una and we immediately decided to have it. There is almost no question of—obviously we said well, there is the possibility of having an abortion or no—we are not going to do that. I had dreamed several times that I had a boy with David. Yes, I mean, Nico had already appeared in my dreams several times. And finally, he materializes. In December 2019, I canceled my trip to Singapore, and thank goodness, because if I hadn't, I would have been trapped in the pandemic with my daughter, for who knows how long.

So, David and I had already been looking for a way to buy a house in Los Angeles. And knowing that we were—we had been searching for a year, but ugh, real estate speculation in Los Angeles is always out of control, you know?—and then everything kind of aligned. I found out that I was pregnant. I canceled the trip to Singapore. We found a house that we liked. We offer, and they accept it. The purchasing process takes place. We moved the day before the city of Los Angeles closed. Yeah, we settled in this current house, in February, end of February 2020 or mid-March 2020. I was already three months pregnant. Obviously, Una is studying from home, quite a traumatic process for all teenagers in the world. And we have this little house, which has a patio in the front and back. And we began to establish a garden. And that was our pandemic process.

I mean, it's really quite paradoxical because while there was death and pain all over the world, we, in this family unit, were building and adapting to this new house. And this new space, this domesticity, growing this life in my belly and getting ready to receive it into the world and giving life. And that was a bit of that first year of the pandemic. He was born in September 2020, he was born at home, I worked with a midwife, and he was born here at home. David and Una were present; nobody had a problem.

Yeah. And that's Nico. Nico is a very happy person, very talkative. He is already bilingual too. He is already going to *daycare* [originally in English], there is a *daycare* [originally in English] here walking from home. So, a little bit of life happens when we leave him at the *daycare* [originally in English], I go to my studio. My studio is in Chinatown. I live in a neighborhood called El Sereno, in Los Angeles, which is east of the city, east of the river, and it takes me 15 minutes to drive to my studio in Chinatown. I go to my studio every day,

Monday to Friday. Usually, Una is finishing her high school classes. We're already in the process of choosing which university she wants to go to. She wants to continue studying here in California, she wants to study public policy, or community studies.

And that's it. The pandemic process was very paradoxical because it was about life-giving. While it was a process to bring to life—it was to do the joint work with David—the entire body of work *Blessing of the mystery* we won a very important grant called the VIA Art Fund. So, it was also a time of economic slack to do what we liked. It was also a moment when all the rest of my work started because, fortunately, my exhibitions were not canceled, but they were postponed. In the meantime, we had the opportunity to finish editing the film. The baby continued to grow. We gave birth, then we resumed the exhibitions little by little. In other words, the pandemic, I must say that things were not bad for us in this family. It went well for us. There is a very Latino saying that says that: Every baby comes with a loaf of bread under his arm. We say that Nico came with a bakery under his arm. That has brought us good things.

[02:10:00]

So, obviously, I say all of this being very aware of all the pain and all the trauma. I mean, the pandemic was also traumatic, especially for my daughter. We had some moments of intense family crisis there with my teenage daughter during the pandemic, in terms of mental health. Yes. And also, at the family level. Well, from my partner's family in Spain, his grandparents. His grandfather probably died of Covid, although not everything was rosy during the pandemic. At the work level, fortunately, good. And in that sense, it was good because I was able to share a little of that well-being with family or people who needed it. So, I've felt, good.

And it was also very important for me to give birth at a time in my career when it is taking on more dimensions and more attention. Since 2023, I think a little before until now, I can say that the art world *catches up* [originally in English] with environmental things, we obviously have historical figures who have worked on environmental issues throughout their lives for many years. Contemporary artists, perhaps from my generation have been working on this topic and accompanying environmental processes for a long time, too. But yes, we can say that there has been an environmental *turn* [originally in English] within the world of the arts in the last five years—Pretty impressive. We have publications and exhibitions. I don't know how many exhibitions I have participated in that are called *River, water*, I don't know what—okay, now.

So, there was a lot of attention on my work and giving birth to Nico has been very important for me because it has been like landing again in another world that is not just the arts. Although the world of the arts can be very connected to reality and social processes, especially when you make art that is socially committed; it is also its own world. And it is very easy for that world to take you away from where you landed and take you flying around on a cloud, you know? So, the fact that I had Nico is like, well, yeah, I'm, I have my show at the MCA [Museum of Contemporary Art] in Chicago, but tomorrow I have to come change a shitty diaper again [laughs]. I have to clean the kitchen. I have to, you know? So yes, yes, it has been important, like, having this other world. It's not that they are so separate, but grounding myself through motherhood, to a reality that sometimes the art world is not so connected to.; Especially at the institutional or commercial circuit level and these things, you know?

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Is there anything else that I didn't ask you that you would like to say?

CAROLINA CAYCEDO: No, at this point, I would say that the investigative process of everything about the rivers and also responding to the agendas of the communities that I have been working with, sharing what I was learning in recent years, what I have come to understand is how transition processes are being incorporated or *embodied* [originally in English] in the Americas; always trying to preserve a hemispheric and continental perspective of the Americas. So, I have been able to develop a little more work with communities here in the United States, especially the West Coast, people who are working to dismantle dams, you know? So, understanding that it is part of a cultural, environmental, and energy transition that we are experiencing and that it is the communities in reality that are pushing for them and doing them. It is not only thinking about new ways of producing energy but also dismantling obsolete or oppressive energy infrastructures, you know?

Also understanding—and that's a little bit of what I've been focusing on in the last few years of work—is getting closer, is learning from communities on the front lines of the transition. Not only energetically, but also from food. Thinking about food as our primary energy, it is the primary energy.

[02:15:00]

From the sovereignty of water to the energy insurrections, as they call them in Puerto Rico. And from food, water, land, and energy. *Water, land, food and energy*. As the transitions are taking place, obviously from the very particular contexts of those communities in the Americas, from a very colonial context in Puerto Rico or a context of a lot of violence against people who fight for environmental justice in Colombia, or processes in the United States where there is a very marked institutional structural violence, or processes led by indigenous people across the continent.

And that has been the focus. And I am also at a moment, on a personal level, where I am becoming exhausted by the United States, where I feel that the political climate is going in reverse and that this is emotionally exhausting, and that the emotional violence of this country is exhausting me. And I think that for my family it is a conversation, at the family level, that we are having, above all, because, with my partner, we are who we are—because obviously, I come from a very violent country—Colombia. But I feel that the violence that is carried out here could be easily preventable and no one is doing anything to prevent it, you know? And being a mother, there is violence that occurs in massacres in schools; the lack of attention to the precarious state of mental health of our children and young people in this country is impressive. And the police have millions of dollars. And to care for these people with these traumas, there is nothing. Or the few spaces that exist are being defunded. So, I'm a little bit, yeah. And also thinking that when I arrived in Los Angeles 12 years ago, the cost of living was not cheap, but it is not what it is now.

I mean, inflation, real estate speculation, the way rents have risen in this city is shameless—it's criminal. And that and that, right? I mean, when I think about it, with my family living here for a month, four families could live in Colombia for months. It doesn't seem fair to me, you know? So, it's also like thinking about this well-being that I have now, how can I share it, where do I want to share it, with whom do I want to share it? Where do I want to establish a community? So, thinking about that, yes. And seeing how the future of the political climate of this country remains as is, it seems that there will be a few years where it will continue to go backward, due to how the legal and political institutions have been established; like thinking if it's time to start planning where to go.

I don't know where, but it's a thought that's been coming to me. And also thinking about the only options as an artist in these cities, to grow, to grow to *run a studio* [originally in English] to establish a studio, to have I don't know how many employees, to establish an LLC, production lines. Yes, it grabs my attention, and I have gone in that direction. But I don't think it's the only way. And I don't want an already established structure to dictate the way that I should make art, or that I should run my studio, what I should produce. So, it is also a time for a lot of questioning about what the art circuit is demanding of me, what are the frontiers or *boundaries* [originally in English] that I establish? And what is the way that I can generate my own structures that do not necessarily have to respond to those structures, those expectations that everyone thinks that an artist's career has to be about growing, growing, growing?

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Thank you very much, Carolina. Hey, I'm going to—

What happened to your law career? That was something we had left out.

[02:20:00]

CAROLINA CAYCEDO: Well, notice that I did a double major semester, one year. I no longer remember if I went for a semester or a year. Yes, I do. I did one. I think it was a semester. It was a semester, no more. Yes, where I did the double major. After a semester of entering only Arts in the second semester. I did both and said, No, this is not for me, because everything is already established in law. In other words, at least as a student, as a lawyer with a long career as a public servant, you can generate some laws, right? But as a student, there are some rules, there is a box that you cannot leave. But, in art, everything is fluid. There is no box. There is nothing. So, it was so difficult to have such a marked dichotomy

and it didn't work in my head. And I told my parents again, I argued with them and said, look, I tried, but this is not for me, so I ended up studying only Arts.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Well, thank you very much—I thank you very much for the privilege of hearing about your work and your life—and now I'm going to stop the recording.

CAROLINA CAYCEDO: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]