

Posted by The Argonaut | Sep 20, 2017 | Arts & Events | 0 🗨️ | ★★★★★

## CAROLYN CASTAÑO'S NARRATIVE PORTRAITS SPEAK TO THE LATIN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IN L.A.

By Eva Recinos



“Heroine (After Policarpa Salavarrieta Jose Maria Espinosa)” is from Castaño’s series “Mujeres Que Crean,” depicting women impacted by internal conflict in Colombia

As she peeled away their plastic wrappings and dusted off each piece, Carolyn Castaño realized she hadn’t seen some of her artwork in years.

“There’s a kind of self-amnesia about what I made,” she says. “I haven’t looked at them because of space issues in my studio. Bringing them out has been an eye opener — sort of like falling in love again.”

Over the course of her two-decade career, the Los Angeles-based artist has displayed many of her pieces in galleries close to home and around the world, but a survey of her work hasn’t come to fruition until now: “Carolyn Castaño: A Female Topography, 2001–2017,” opening Saturday, at Loyola Marymount University’s Laband Art Gallery.

The exhibit coincides with a growing regional focus on Latinx and Chicanx art. Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA — the Getty’s \$16-million initiative exploring the artistic connections between Los Angeles and Latin America — launched last week and continues through early next year, with special exhibits and programming across more than 70 Southern California cultural institutions.

Although Castaño’s retrospective exists separately from this group of shows, her work aligns with the zeitgeist of this cultural moment in Los Angeles. Many of her pieces reflect on cultural identity, public image and personal history in relation to Latin America and her own Colombian-American heritage.

The bright colors and piercing lines of her “La Nueva Onda” series explores “the way style and fashion can be like a political act,” says Castaño. Paying homage to signage and storefronts, the pieces capture individual personalities while referencing fashion styles and expressions.




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“Narco Venus” highlights the stories of men and women involved in the drug trade. The focus is mostly on the women: the ones who help transport drugs; the girlfriends or wives of major male figures in the narco world. The series points to the way in which Castaño often imbues her pieces with narrative, or lets the story directly inform her piece.

“I’m interested in narratives, storytelling, I’m interested in the kind of background, the stories of these different women from the ‘Narcos’ series,” says Castaño, who conducted workshops with women impacted by narco drug wars during a 2015 artist residency in Medellin, Colombia. “The stories of the women are what gives the figures that are represented really the meat, the content, the depth.”

But there’s a personal angle to her work as well: “Tropical Baby, Self Portrait” portrays the artist framed in bright patterns and flowers.

“It’s really important for an artwork like that — this amazing, very graphic, very stylized image — to be very visible,” says Laband Gallery Director and Curator Karen Rapp. “So that is the image that will be circulated on campus. It’s really important, I think, to have a woman of color much larger than life and really visible because it doesn’t happen often enough.”

Many of the artist’s works are captivating just in photos, but Rapp encourages visitors to see them in real life. Some are extremely textural — layered with rhinestones and “literally gobs of feathers,” as Rapp excitedly explains — and their vibrancy can’t fully come through in images.

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“Pictures do not do it justice. Anything with this collage and this texture, it really makes a difference to see these in person. It will be a powerful moment to get up close and look at all these little embellishments she’s added to her canvas or to the paper.”

For Angelenos, seeing the pieces in person can also be a means of exploring the recent art history of the city. Over the years chronicled in this exhibition, Castaño has seen the art community in L.A. shift and evolve.

“There’s works that I’ve made that were part of a moment with a whole group of people, and some of [those pieces] aren’t here for different reasons, and some of them are,” says Castaño. “I’m excited to re-introduce that work to people who didn’t experience it back then, and to see how it works in the public space now in 2017.”

*“Carolyn Castaño: A Female Topography, 2001-2017” opens with an artist’s reception from 3 to 6 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 23, and remains on view through Dec. 10 at LMU’s Laband Gallery, 1 LMU Drive, Westchester. Call (310) 338-2880 or visit [cfa.lmu.edu/labandgallery/](http://cfa.lmu.edu/labandgallery/) for more information.*

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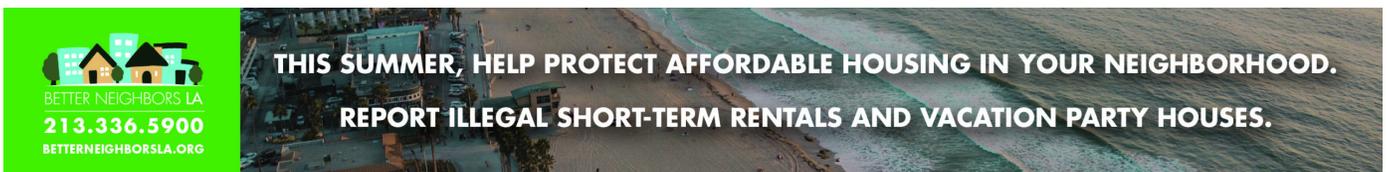
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