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Articles tagged **Rica Maestas**

## The Rooms Where We Are Born

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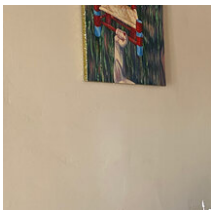
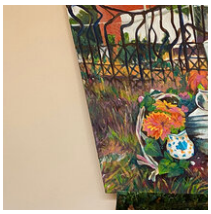
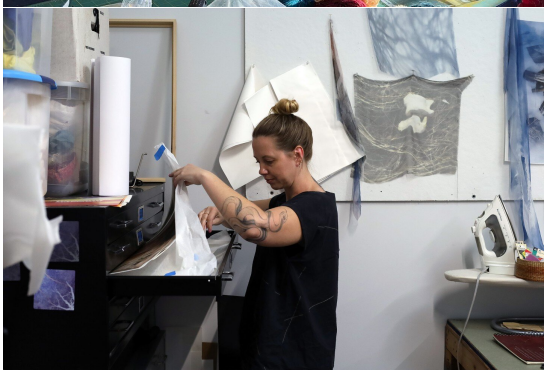
Rica Maestas: A Profile by Bethany Tabor


If you had the chance to set up a studio in the house where you grew up, would you? A studio can be a complicated site, heavy with many varied and sometimes conflicting emotions. It's a place of inspiration, dullness, discipline, creation, incubation, and meditation. The studio is the place where an artist might (intentionally) get lost from the world, and to get some distance from the self, in some cases. The house in which one is raised, on the other hand, is heavy with ghosts of past selves, memories of growing pains, and other tumultuous feelings. To set up a studio—a place for retreat, inspiration, and creation—in a place haunted by the complexities of growing up, may seem like a daunting task to some; for others it might be too nostalgic. For me, I'd be intimidated by such an undertaking because I'd be afraid to confront my cringe-y past selves.  For Albuquerque-based artist Rica Maestas, it imbues her artistic practice with textures of past and future identities that teach us all a lesson in living, dying, and being reborn again.

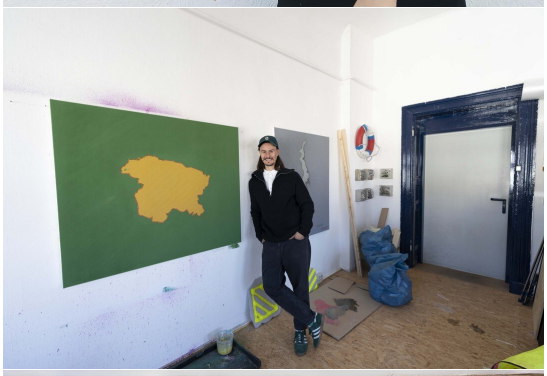
Rica's studio is a beautiful, sunlit room built off the side of her home with double doors leading out onto a flagstone patio. It's fairly common for artists to create a zone for themselves in their homes, especially given how much space is afforded here in Albuquerque. I was very surprised, however, to hear that this was also the house where she grew up. What a charged site! In a reference to Fernando Arturo Flores' book *Tears of the Trufflepig*, Rica says that, "the rooms where we are born keep giving birth to us forever," and, indeed, for her there is an ongoing death and rebirth cycle experienced through the work she produces here.


In Maestas' interdisciplinary practice, there is a haunting mysticism woven throughout. Whether looking at a photography series, a performance, painting, or elaborate costume, it becomes clear that she is allowing her creativity to flourish alongside a skilled channeling of energy. There is also an eclectic element to her studio, the objects in it, and the work she has produced; in her own words, she defines her practice as "socially engaged art," so the eclecticism makes sense. Engaging society requires dexterity in a variety of genres, materials, and methods. The common through-line in every piece of work, every object, and every ephemeral performance is that they are all forms of interpersonal storytelling. Much of Maestas' work deals with constructing a narrative of the self—salvaged from intricate layers of heritage, context, folkloric characters and archetypes, and the environment in which she was



raised—and all serving the purpose of building connections with her viewers and audience.

I look around and immediately notice paintings on and off the wall; sculptural costumes taking on wild animal and plant forms familiar to the Southwest; photographs of all sizes depicting installations as well as documenting performances and rituals. Near her supplies are a pair of clear, plastic platform shoes, which accompany one of the costumes. And, finally, my eyes settle on an altar Maestas maintains with trinkets, candles, affirmations, and even a photograph of a much younger Rica, which she later painted on a large canvas.



Much of the work in her studio is engaging specific kinds of self-portraiture, though not always in the form of a reproduced image of the self. Sometimes, the self-portraits are the byproducts of solo performance documentation. Other times, the self-portraits are more conceptual in nature, such as with a couple piñatas made from pieces of old journals that are pasted back together to form objects that one could hypothetically beat with a

stick (this is one way of dealing with a Ghost of Cringe-y Past). I am most intrigued by a series of photographs that documented a ritual and performance called The Final Offering from 2017 that took place in Chimayo, New Mexico. The performance served as an offering to a holy site where thousands of people take a pilgrimage each year. Recent historic conservation efforts and subsequent increased security inspired Maestas to make one last offering to one of the least barred off sanctuaries. Even though Maestas is not Catholic herself, she was ritualizing the loss of a sanctuary that was in the process of taking on a new shape.

As we talked more about this idea that a house continually gives birth to us, she shows me a photographic diptych: Birth of a Tortilla Baby, 2017. One image shows an empty kiva fireplace, the other depicts Maestas in a fetal position curled up inside the hearth, waiting for her rebirth. Maestas is no stranger to this liminal space, in fact much of her work is situated there. The transitional moment between nothingness and life—death and (re)birth—is something she leans into as an essential part of her construction of self and her narrative of self. With work straddling this realm and whatever others lie just beyond the veil, this might be what gives Maestas' work the slightly mystical, or metaphysical tinge.

One of Maestas' notable pieces is a 2019 site-specific performance that took place at the Kit Carson Cemetery in Taos, New Mexico. In this work, called Acequia Madre, Maestas donned a large, white sheet (a callback to DIY ghost costumes) decorated with large, sparkling tears streaming down from the eyes, and led a tour through downtown Taos and Kit Carson Cemetery as the character of La Llorona, an iconic figure in Chicanx folklore. La Llorona, a name that invokes

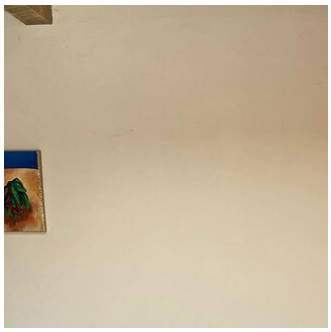
memories of scary stories, urban legends, and often causes chills down the spine, is the “weeping woman” whose cries can be heard in the night near a river, or ditch as she searches for children—for she is mourning the loss of her own who died by drowning. This character appears in many forms around the Southwest and northern Mexico, but for kids like us raised in New Mexico, La Llorona was a symbol and a warning to remain cautious on the banks of the Rio Grande.

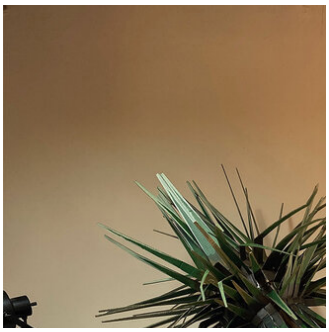
For her performance embodying the spirit of this character, Maestas sought to channel her for a night to give her audience the chance to build a tangible relationship to La Llorona, in order to confront the fraught history of a land colonized by the Spanish settlers, as well as to illuminate, celebrate, and contend with the mixed cultural identities that proliferated from Spanish colonization. With this performance taking place in a cemetery, “on the full moon in Pisces,” Maestas notes, the veil thins and there’s a palpable spiritual presence felt during the performance. Beyond the haunting and educational aspects of this performance, there is another interesting detail

gleaned from this experience: Maestas had to learn how to move her body in entirely new ways in order for her movements to be perceivable by her audience. I jokingly remarked, “This must be how the spirits feel when they pass on beyond their corporeal form.” Ghosts, whether of the metaphysical kind, or of our past selves, or even the ghosts of fraught and tragic histories, learn how to haunt us by coming to understand how to make themselves perceivable.

In addition to La Llorona, there are two other large characters, or entities, that Maestas embodies via elaborate, sculptural costume pieces that play a big part in her performance work. Laying on the couch is a coyote costume, which takes the form of a cape, headpiece, and plastic platform heels; the body and head of the costume are lit up from the inside by string lights. Its fur is made from woven plastic materials, with the long tail crafted from pieces of cut up bags from a local grocery store. Coyote is a recurring motif in Maestas’ work, showing up in a few paintings in addition to the costume.

Coyote in folklore represents the archetype of the Trickster; he is mischievous and cunning with shrewd mental acuity. These animals play an important role in mythology because of how they test the boundaries between what’s real and what’s not. They teach an important lesson in honing one’s skills of discernment. To embody Coyote covered in plastic bags is to beg the question of how to differentiate between trash and treasure and to remember that things are not always as they seem.





Across the room is another costume, although it is difficult to judge whether this piece is actually a costume, or a sculpture, or maybe even some kind of futuristic architectural model. There is no discernible face or any other anthropomorphic shapes or elements, but with a closer look, one can make out a headpiece and two sleeves, which are green and spiky. This piece, which represents a yucca plant, serves as a study on resilient and monstrous plant species that thrive in an arid desert climate. The yucca, with its large spikes looming like a threatening armor, is a gentle giant, and Maestas has been studying its form throughout her life by observing one of these plants growing just outside her home's adobe wall. Getting the costume on and off is an ordeal, and then there's the problem of moving through the house and getting out the door with this piece that has a chaotic, approximately 3-foot radius. Once outside, though, both the costume and Maestas are in their element.

Each of these three costume studies have their own unique experiences and lessons learned, but together, they serve as a grand lesson in embodiment. How do you embody or inhabit an identity in this physical realm? What room for experiment and growth is there when embodying physical forms that are not our own? And, most importantly, what elements of your past selves do you take with you as you are reborn?

There is a clear progression of Maestas' work deconstructing and then building back up again her own narrative of self and identity through the use of folklore, myth, and archetypes. But what I am most interested in is how this manifests in the physical realm. And what better place to explore that than in her childhood home, this place that gives birth to her over and over again? It's true that there are many ways to be reborn, psychically and physically, but it seems that with these costume studies, Maestas is exploring all the different ways she is reborn into the embodiment of different characters. And in that process, she learns new ways of being and moving in the world. With each new character she puts on, she is understanding how to move in a way to better understand and be understood. It becomes a lesson in empathic understanding, bridge building, and connection seeking. When Maestas becomes these characters and beings, not only does she step into relationship with them, but she seeks to bring them into relationship with her audience and viewers, inviting them to also experience and experiment with their own connections to themselves, both past and future.

Ricamaestas.com

Instagram: @ricaroux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