



*CIHUACOATL (SNAKE WOMAN), 2018*  
ACRYLIC ON PLASTER, WIRE MESH, DETROIT TIRE  
39.5" X 32" X 28"

# INSIDE OUT

MARELA ZACARÍAS

SEPTEMBER 1 - DECEMBER 12  
2020



**MADART SUPPORTS ARTISTS IN OUR COMMUNITY, BRINGS ART INTO OUR LIVES IN UNEXPECTED WAYS, AND CREATES COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN THE ARTS.**

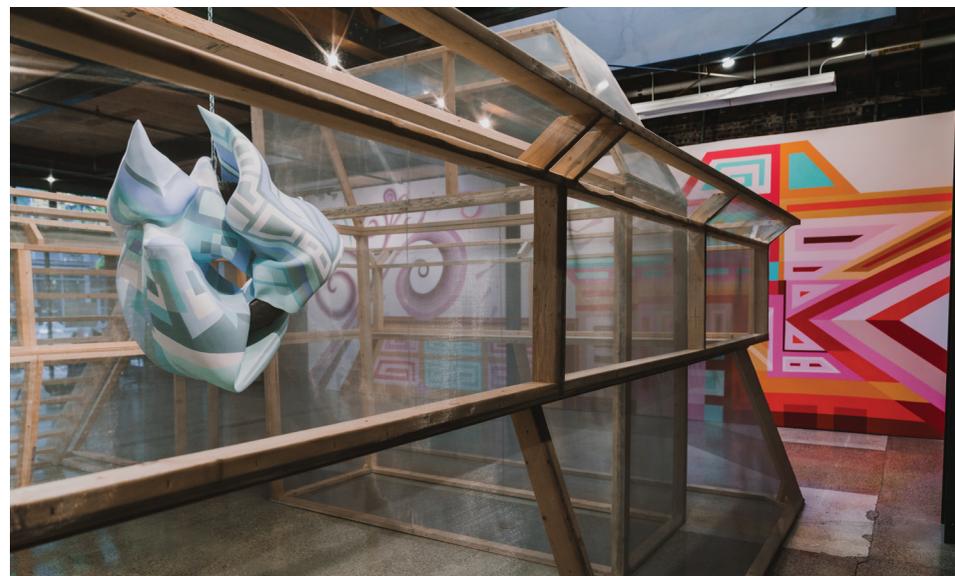
## FOREWORD

In February of 2020, Brooklyn- and Mexico City-based artist Marela Zacarías was in the height of proposal development for her MadArt Studio exhibition, *Inside Out*. We had plans to speak in March after her return from traveling home to visit family in Cuernavaca, Mexico. What was intended to be a three-week trip for Zacarías turned into a four-month stay, as all plans surrendered to the uncontrollable current of a global pandemic and as racial tensions escalated across America. With borders closed, travel restrictions in place, and complete uncertainty of the future, Zacarías and her family hunkered down and she reacquainted herself with a home she left when she was 17. This unexpected time had a profound impact on the development of *Inside Out*, providing a spaciousness to take in the societal and political unrest of the moment. This prompted Zacarías to turn inward towards the familiar and celebrate the power of storytelling as a mechanism for action.

Amidst this contemplation, The Temple of the Feathered Serpent—a Meso-American archaeological site in Xochicalco, Mexico—rose as the conceptual and structural cornerstone of *Inside Out*. Xochicalco is located near Zacarías' family home and as the daughter of an anthropologist, the site holds both personal and historical significance. Believed to have been constructed after

disbanded Indigenous empires joined together to collectively rebuild in 700-900 CE, the original pyramid is known for its unique architecture and amalgams of culturally distinctive relief carvings. Zacarías chose to recreate this temple using wooden frames with a wire meshing overlay, the same foundational elements of the plaster sculptures that have defined her practice over the last decade. This material choice creates a shifting transparency on the structure's surface that slowly reveals a suspended, figurative object that is physically protected within the pyramid's walls. Acting as the heartbeat of the exhibition, this piece is one of Zacarías' signature sculptures, titled *Cihuacoatl* after the mythological female feathered serpent and Aztec goddess known for providing women with strength during childbirth. Though *Cihuacoatl's* coiled body is on display, Zacarías only insinuates access to her through a non-functional staircase and a transparent physical barrier.

In direct conversation with the pyramid's architecture are six colorful, floor-to-ceiling, abstract paintings that line the studio's perimeter walls. Here Zacarías returned to painting on a two-dimensional surface for the first time in over 10 years, revisiting the origins of her artistic practice as a figurative muralist. The vulnerability brought forth in returning to this medium after a



TOP:  
*CIHUACOATL* INSIDE THE TEMPLE OF THE FEATHERED  
SERPENT, INSTALLATION VIEW

BOTTOM:  
TEMPLE OF THE FEATHERED SERPENT AND  
*DECONSTRUCTED PYRAMID* MURAL,  
INSTALLATION VIEW

decade-long absence is echoed in the structural limitations constructed around *Cihuacoatl*. To paint these works Zacarías approached the canvases intuitively, using blue painter's tape to draw the complex geometric designs of each piece and allowing the contours to reveal themselves as she worked. Through their encyclopedic palette, figurative abstractions, complex interactivity, and visual relationship to the architectural elements of the studio and pyramid, these murals display the proficiency of Zacarías' painting and her seamless transition back to a flat surface. Further, she uses this medium to continue and advance the conversation between European and American geometric abstraction and the work of early Indigenous cultures.

Zacarías' practice is rooted in ancient mythologies and cultural histories. She investigates the untold or under-told stories of dehistoricized communities and retells them in visual form. This is most clearly seen in *Inside Out* through her temple's dedication to Cihuacoatl, which deviates from the original temple's dedication and places inherent feminine—rather than masculine—strength at the forefront. These interpretations consider the power of historical narratives to act as a guide to overcome our modern-day challenges. *Inside Out* is the re-envisioning of a fragmented society, the rebuilding of failing structures through unity, togetherness, and nurturing strength.

**EMILY KELLY**  
DIRECTOR + CURATOR



**ABOVE & NEXT:**  
ZACARÍAS PAINTING "NEW BEGINNINGS" MURAL





## IN HER WORDS, MARELA ZACARÍAS

### EXERPTS FROM INTERVIEWS & CONVERSATIONS

**FOR INSIDE OUT, YOU RETURNED TO PAINTING ON A TWO-DIMENSIONAL SURFACE FOR THE FIRST TIME IN 10 YEARS. WHAT HAS THIS PROCESS BEEN LIKE FOR YOU?**

It was a vulnerable but empowering experience. When I am painting on my organic sculptures, I engage in a conversation with their form, and the color and line design emerge naturally and effortlessly. I was afraid of losing that fluid dialogue going back to a two-dimensional surface. This is why it was important for me to go into the experience intuitively- without knowing what I was going to paint before starting the murals.

What I discovered is that by allowing myself to be present—taking as a point of departure the architecture of the pyramid and the space, in combination with the intention I set for the work—the lines and colors flowed just as naturally as they do on my three-dimensional forms. Through this process, I

discovered a lot about who I am *now* as a painter.

I enjoyed working freely with my pallet. I chose colors to create energy and play and I had a really good time doing it. I was surprised when some figurative images arose but I allowed myself to follow their lead to see where they might take me. I felt free to experiment and although I definitely feel more comfortable with some parts of the murals than with others, I learned from all of it.

**YOU'VE DEVIATED FROM THE DEDICATION OF THE ORIGINAL TEMPLE AND INSTEAD CHOSE TO HONOR THE FEMALE FEATHERED SERPENT, CIHUACOATL, THROUGH YOUR TEMPLE. WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS REDEDICATION?**

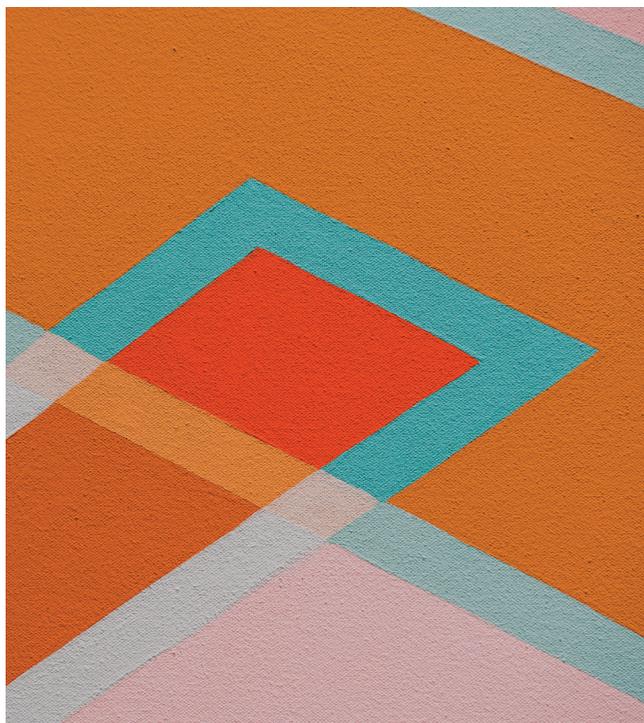
It is believed that the original temple was dedicated to Quetzatcoatl who, before the arrival of the Spaniards, was considered one of the most important gods in all of Mexico and parts of Central and South America. Cihuacóatl is the female counterpart of Quetzatcoatl, and she is a serpent woman who gives women strength during childbirth. In Aztec mythology it is believed that together they created humans and the 5th world, which is the world we live in today. However, Cihuacóatl has never been as central of a



figure in our culture as her male counterpart.

Since the beginning of civilization we have been honoring male gods and male attributes, prioritizing them over the feminine. Machismo and patriarchy are a direct result of this way of thinking, which has only led to the abuse, inequality, and oppression experienced by women in many aspects of our society. I think we've come to a place in time where it is important to change the stories that no longer serve us in order to create a better future.

Changing the dedication of the temple from Quetzatcōatl to Cihuacōatl was an act of changing the beginning of my own creation story. It felt like a new beginning, where I was able to reset a part of myself and place the female goddess at the center, allowing everything to grow and unravel around her. She represents resilience, strength, and creative power and her attributes remind me of what we collectively need to imagine in order to create a future that we want to be a part of.



## WHY IS STORYTELLING IMPORTANT TO YOU?

Starting as children, we come to understand the continuity of our lives through story. We learn about our family, our community, our culture, and the world at large through our parents, schools, and the institutions that surround us. More often than not, these beliefs and narratives that we've learned overtime exclude important stories of marginalized people and communities.

Through my site-specific work I try to revive these undertold stories so that I can integrate them with the present and re-imagine a future that I want to belong to. When you do it long enough, this practice of retelling becomes a new way of looking at life. In this version we have agency in the telling and creation of our own story.



ABOVE:  
MURAL DETAILS, GEOMETRIC ABSTRACTIONS

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Working with a labor- and research-intensive process merging sculpture with painting, Marena Zacarías molds window screen and plaster to create undulating forms with the quality of fabric: bodies filled with movement and expressive quality. The sculptures' surfaces are populated by socially-committed geometric abstractions—shapes and patterns that intuitively arise from the artist's study of the history and specificity of the site of work.

Zacarías has held solo exhibitions in New York at the Brooklyn Museum, Sapar Contemporary, Praxis Gallery, the National Arts Club, and Art at Viacom; Wasserman Projects, Detroit; the Brattleboro Museum,

Vermont; and at Galería Alterna, Mexico City. She has taken part in group exhibitions in New York at BRIC, Smack Mellon, British Society of American Art, Praxis Gallery, Y Gallery, No Longer Empty, and El Museo del Barrio; and at the Mexican Cultural Institute, Washington, DC.

She has most recently completed a large-scale permanent commission for the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. Zacarías received her BA from Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio, and her MFA from Hunter College, New York. She is represented by Sapar Contemporary in New York, Winston Watcher in Seattle and Galería Alterna in Mexico City. She currently lives between Brooklyn, NY and Mexico City.



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