

# Frieda Toranzo Jaeger

In conversation with

# Anna Goetz



↓ Tiborina nocturna, 2017. Oil and embroidery on canvas, 30 x 40 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Biema Spaulings Fine Art NY/LA

FT: Let's speak about Contemporary Geographies—the topic of this first issue of O-L.A. Let's look into the concept of geography as such and what it means in this contemporary sociopolitical context. I think is a very important topic.

AG: Yes, it is interesting to think about the different notions of geography and, perhaps, how these transform depending on the context in which they are discussed. I first thought about school, about geography classes where we learned about rivers, mountains and national borders—geography as an ordering structure and a political term, but what does geography mean in respect to contemporary identity concepts?

FT: Yes, I also think of geography as a political term. It comes from cartography. It comes from domination and its structures, and it automatically makes you think about origin and time. Where or when can I trace my origin to? Why? The idea of origin obliges you to think about time in a more ontological way, and this relates in the same way to history. This is what I read in the editorial letter about Contemporary Geographies. The Latin American region was colonized, and we are obliged to recognize this now because it hasn't been acknowledged; it has been erased. Luckily, many people have endeavored to bring this history back. I also observe that we share this history but, at the same time, we are not the same. So, we cannot homogenize America. For me, it's very important to address the diversity of people's postcolonial experience because all these collective traumas live within our psyche and our imaginary collective, so we need to address them in order to surpass them. I try to do this in my practice. **The main motivation behind my work is to create a post-colonial, decolonizing practice and approach—a practice that can decolonize your mind, your feelings and your body because colonization starts in the body.**

AG: Yes, for me and my work, decolonial thinking and practice has also been of central importance. In some subconscious way, this might even have been an indirect stimulus for me to move from Switzerland and Germany to Mexico. The question of perspective, however, is a subject that I have been grappling with for some time. We should be aware or ask ourselves, what logics determine ways of thinking, speaking and acting, and what reference system these constructs have been formed in relation to. How can we overcome or expand our set of tools? How can we expand or question the reference system with tools provided by the same? My personal—probably naive—way of dealing with this problem is moving through different contexts and confronting myself with reference systems that are new to me, recognizing my inability to understand and considering it as an ongoing process of approximation. I think you can only surpass your own mindset and invent or imagine radically other ways by emblazing different experiences.

FT: I am a little bit cautious about this approach because I don't want to fall into a discourse that suggests that you require a certain set of privileges—especially the privilege of movement and certain economic capabilities necessary to facilitate movement—to then be able to accumulate experiences which will result in decolonization. I understand what you say, and it has been my personal experience as well. While I cannot discount this as a strategy, I also believe that reading certain books or accumulating certain knowledge from others shifted my perspective without necessarily moving in space. There are a lot of people who have migrated and lived completely unaware that feelings of disempowerment, body shame and victimhood are all colonial traumas and coping mechanisms. So, I understand your point. I think, for me, the breaking point was when I migrated away from Mexico and had access to other ways of thinking and other sources of knowledge. I would like to think that, even if you don't have certain privileges, it is possible through education and sharing experiences and methodologies of thinking in order to decolonize yourself.

AG: I fully agree with you, of course. I would like to add, though, education in that sense is always a privilege. The editorial team of the OLA also speaks about the diversity in Latin American art that it wants to present to its audience. Frieda, you briefly mentioned already that Latin American art is still too often homogenized—probably because of its shared history of being colonized—which ultimately speaks more about a shared experience in relationship with European countries and their cultural imposition of modern society framed in the Western history. However, the ramifications of this "shared history" have been very diverse in Latin American countries, regions and communities aside from the diversity of their pre-colonial cultural histories.

FT: As people who come from former colonies, current colonies or currently failed democracies, we don't need these very specific standards imposed upon us. **As it currently stands, we are expected to present our culture in a way that is digestible for the western eye,** or report to the world on what's



→ Desert Landscape, 2018 Oil on canvas 167 x 212 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Barbara Weiss Gallery



↑ Autofelatio, 2018 Oil on linen, steel structure, hardware 290 x 290 cm → Autoeroticism, 2018, Oil on canvas 190 x 368 cm + tongue. Courtesy of the artist and Barbara Weiss Gallery

happening in our reality and preserve our identity, which can also be a form of nationalism, essentialism or even "folklorism."

**We are expected to preserve our cultures instead of moving forward.** In the end, if we want to be recognized by the systems in place and the markets, our choices are to preserve, to contain, or to represent what is expected from us and supply the demand. I think publications, institutions and curators must free us from these expectations and rules imposed upon us. I also understand that the impact of art has not to do with the present. Painting in particular has a very slow impact. I'm amazed by this because we are obsessed with the urgencies of the present. At the same time, we know that a painting might liberate someone three generations later. This is the magical power of art. I'm personally not preoccupied with these hysteric urges of the present. I understand that this will be an archive of the feelings of the people in Latin America—an archive of the feelings that are being felt now, the conditions of thinking and collective traumas.

AG: In that sense, art is always a "child of its time." It mirrors a certain way of approaching and discussing pressing issues of its time, but it can also gain depth and significance through a transfer process—discussing works of art in relation to a particular context and circumstances they are presented in, but still in consideration with their original conditions. As I mentioned before, I think the difficulty is that our tools of expression are institutionalized. Overcoming these institutionalized operations is not something that happens from one day to the next; it is a rather slow process. We have to put modes and structures in question and do things differently, but how do we acquire different "tools?" Art from non-Western contexts, such as from Latin American countries, is too often still read (by the critics, curators, etc. in the West) in relation to and with the tools of the discourse of the West, instead of within its very own set of references.

FT: My work does not propose to represent Latin America in any kind of blanket statement. However, **I would like my work to be seen and talked about in Latin America because it's important for me to provide women and girls here more references of a queer woman and examples of freedom of speech.** This is what we don't have. There are not so many examples of women who went beyond the expected because of the systematic oppression in which most women in Latin America live. I'm not saying I'm one, but I'm trying to be. Maybe I'm failing, but I'm also not afraid of failing.

AG: I think you only fail if you don't make the effort. However, this opposition of winning vs. losing is a dichotomous categorization you want to overcome. Isn't the only failure to submit yourself to these categorizations and give up?

FT: Totally. Give up to the invisibility, to not being seen or heard. I think about this when I think about the future. My work has a lot to do with

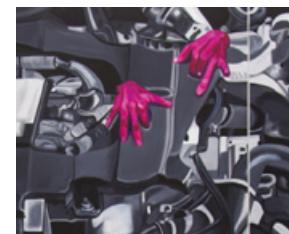
the future—the idea of the future, not the future itself as a time phase, but more about how we construct the idea of certainty. In a fantastic utopian sense—in my fantasies—I imagine a post-apocalyptic world where everyone is a radical lesbian and men are no longer needed for sexual activities, and as a consequence, their role has to change. Every outcome is a machine that works in a completely ecological sense. These are all utopias, which are sometimes satirical and sometimes comical and are not at all meant to be serious. At the same time, I think by using these symbols, I try to engage in some sort of epistemological delinquency. I do this by working with the most advanced motifs there are, the most advanced cars—the ones that have not even been built yet.

AG: I think by reinventing or projecting these utopian ideas and forms, you form a critique of the now.

FT: Absolutely. I think the future is just uncertainty. Tomorrow we could all die from coronavirus. Yes, I try to engage in radical disobedience, especially in my role as a Latin American woman. I'm not trying to preserve or showcase a culture that is so rich and hybrid that you cannot really even grasp it. Instead, I choose the opposite. I choose to deal with the most male Western symbol, which is the car.

AG: With the discipline of painting, that on its own has a heavy and male history.

FT: Yes, because I think we have to relax our logic. Let us contradict ourselves—we are not going to go back to our pre-Colombian roots. It's impossible. We are also not going to become Western. We have to become something else ourselves. **We live in a Western patriarchal, neoliberal society. We don't belong here nor there. We have to let ourselves be contradicted.** I try to do this by painting. You know, I'm dealing with the ultimate commodity and the most bourgeois art form, but at the same time, I want to decolonize myself. To really decolonize yourself, I think you have to relax your logic and understand yourself as someone who can be contradicted and still be real.



AG: Contradicting one's own mind and the categories that determine our belief system—understanding that these categories are not fixed. We are habituated to thinking inside these systems of reference that also give us security and stability. In order to decolonize, we have to constantly question how we think and what makes us think this way. Why do we use this rhetoric or medium and not another one? Staying in a dialogue with oneself and with everything that is around us, that is the great potential that lies in art—a heterotopia of putting things in question and inviting others to participate in that discourse.

FT: Totally. I think desires, ideas and methods always have to renew themselves. Sometimes we forget this because we find a methodology and a way of thinking that works, and we stick to it. In my case, I often find a way of painting which takes the work in the direction I want. It's suddenly there, but I should not get stuck; I should renew the desire. I should renew the system because everything is changing around us. I go about the subject of feminism constantly, which is very close to my practice and I question myself: **How do I stop practicing any form of domination? Is this a feminist practice? How can I dominate in a feminine way?** These are things that we have to collectively practice and also collectively imagine. This is why I like radicality, because it imagines beyond what we think is possible in the present. I try to engage in radical thinking. My job is to imagine the furthest point then try to imagine it even further and in different ways. This is possible for me in the medium of

painting where it's just me and my works. It's this dialogue, which is a confrontation with yourself, with your thoughts, with your own insecurities and everything you are going to express. In the context of Latin America, my palette is full of geo-political circumstances in which I grew up until seven years ago.

AG: Perhaps you can talk about the embroidery in your work in this context?

FT: My family has indigenous roots. The women in my family have a very specific way of embroidering which has been passed from woman to woman over generations. **I thought I would combine mediums as another act of radical disobedience.** I had to transgress painting because a part of me hated it. This has been done many times by many artists. I'm aware of that. For me, it is very personal to bring this specific type of work/practice/labor/tradition into painting because it is so unsustainable in capitalism. Embroidering is not sustainable without machines.

AG: In that sense, there is a certain subversion to it.

FT: Yes, it's very subversive because it goes against the systems in place today. To make a small piece takes months. As my practice started to grow, I invited the women in my family to help. It became a collective family activity. As a Latin American person, I'm close to my family. These familial values might seem conservative, but my family is so fucking insane that there is nothing conservative about it. It was such a nice feeling that brought us closer and involved them in my work. They don't have education in art, so, for them, what I was doing was very abstract. I was always in Germany. I wanted to bring this collaboration into my work so people in my family and other people could relate to it. Then again, I'm not embroidering any folkloric motifs. I'm trying to break away from the idea that embroidery has to be applied in a certain way or follow certain patterns. I was embroidering lesbian sex together with my cousin, and she says, "Oh, I love the nipples. It's great!" This is also about balance. **Why is an embroidery piece almost worth nothing and a painting is worth so much money?** I think this reflects our Latin American heritage and also pushes us to think—**Why is my art or my heritage in an anthropological museum or an ethnographic museum whereas a painting from the 19th century is in an art museum?** What does this do to your psyche and your understanding of self-worth? This beautiful, abstract embroidery that was done in the eighteen hundred is fucking incredible, but it's in an ethnographic museum—most likely somewhere in Europe and no one really talks about it. Then you have Caspar David Friedrich in an art museum. This does something to you and your relationship to your heritage. It was really important for me to bring this tradition back.

AG: Yes. Exactly in what you are talking about we can identify another implication of the imposition of the concept of modernity framed in Western history and its hierarchies. Who is (re)producing these traditions and who creates a hierarchy between mediums? Until now, these hierarchies are still present.

FT: Completely. For me, it's also about learning about your own culture. As Latin Americans,

learning about our own cultures sometimes comes as a secondary priority. It's all about the history of the West, which is better explained and even defines the very idea of what history should be. For me, it is very important to try to understand where things come from. Embroidering, even in the West, is closely related to the history of feminism. It is one of many expressions of their marginalization. This is one more reason to bring embroidery to my work. It is a struggle because it's very unsustainable. Even beyond the money, it's also about time. How many can I produce, and should I produce? There I reflect on my own struggle with my identity. I could become an artist who follows neo-capitalist rules, but I try to resist, and this also goes into my works—the frustration, the resistance, everything. In the end, what will be important is the overall message from this time. That's why it's important to reflect privileges, domination and hierarchies and express our stance against them. I think this is the message that will speak louder.

AG: You mentioned before that you are glad that you are rarely pigeonholed as the "Mexican artist." I wonder, since the Mexican culture and its tradition is part of both your personal and your work's identity, in its whole complexity, how can it be addressed and internalized without turning into a trap, triggering with some people the expectation and the portfolio of clichés that we talked about?

FT: I don't have a specific answer to that, but I would like to have the voice to explain my work, especially to the Mexican audience so they understand where I'm coming from and what I am doing. That would be the most important thing. There are many structures in the Latin American art world that engage in post-colonial abusive practices. This gives me so much rage, but I can turn that into a source of motivation to understand the structures which I can then overcome. I just want to tell people that the structures that we really understand are the ones that we can break and rebuild.

AG: In that sense, your work and the way it is discussed is encouraging. It is discussed in the context of different discourses. Therefore, I would like to argue that it might even bear the potential to articulate another form of discourse—a discourse that functions across existing reference systems—and by this means, perhaps even suspend an institutionalized hierarchy between discourses, aesthetics, cultural histories, etc. with a diversity of discourses on the table informing as well as questioning each other simultaneously in a constant process of reconfiguration.

FT: This is the question for curators now. I mean, you guys have to step up your game.

AG: [laughs] Yes, I'm very much aware of that and thinking a lot about it.

FT: Take, for instance, how to be queer without putting yourself in a queer context. I want to be queer. This bitch is gay as fuck. I want to represent queerness and I want to create this imagery, but at the same time, I don't want to be put in a box. The same thing happens with being a black artist. Nowadays, how can you talk about your identity or your color without being put into categories that reduce your content? We really needed this: to address these topics single-pointedly, but, nowadays, I think it's a question to you as curators. I'm not the only artist whose work can be discussed in many contexts, but it's curators, institutions and critics who decide to put our work in a box. I understand where it comes from, but, as you say, I do think in this contemporaneity it is an urgency to dissolve these structures. Yes, someone can be of color, someone can be queer, but from those positions we can



discuss many other topics in a more inclusive way.

AG: I think about this in terms of my role as a curator a lot. I consciously try to "distill" or abstract works and present them as epistemological arguments or propositions subtracted from the context in which they are "usually" discussed and transfer them into a different one. I believe the multiplication of these systems is, perhaps, one way of "solving" it.

FT: **Talking about something with thoughtfulness and creativity brings you so much freedom because you can address ontological concepts like freedom or resistance, so why don't we discuss things more ontologically and put different people who identify with the concept?** A big step in art for me was the new hanging of the MoMA. Although one can criticize some parts of it, I think it was liberating to see a new hierarchy: Rothko was not in his own room anymore but next to other artists. This breaks the forms of domination that have been replicated by so many exhibitions. We do the same in Latin American art. In exhibitions, we just replicate what has been already done, which has been very important, but at the same time, I'm interested in how to liberate ourselves from this repetition and self-reference. I think curators play a big role in this.

AG: I agree. This is the job of the curatorial department as well as education. One problem is that, too often, the curatorial department and the one of the educational programs work independently. These two departments should work more closely with each other because both have the task and the responsibility to involve an audience into a dialogue that is proposed within

an exhibition. Speaking about the new hanging of the MoMA, yes, I agree that their approach is very inspiring and encouraging in the way works are brought together not by affirming categorizations or ordering systems, such as chronologies or geographies, movements, etc. I think it's amazing to experience artistic approaches from different historical periods and of different cultural contexts in dialogue on issues, such as the experience of systemic violence, for example. I think this approach is very inclusive and democratic. It is very stimulating for our minds and allows us to expand our own perspective.

FT: I saw a Francis Bacon next to Siqueiros—it reinforced both strongly. It's something that you would have never seen before. Siqueiros had always been placed within the Mexican or Latin American context or within the political muralists in Mexico. There was also a beautiful piece by Cecilia Vicuña next to Jutta Köther. If I had seen this as a child, I would have grown up very differently. My understanding of art would have been different. This should be done more in contemporary settings. Latin American artists have a lot of the same problems as African art or any non-Western country. We share similar problems by not being the central players of the society. I think it's the role of the contemporary writers, curators and thinkers to dissolve problematic structures within the art world.

Lowense, 2018 Oil and embroidery on linen, Diameter 156 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Barbara Weiss Gallery

AG: It is also about "writing" new narratives, not only rewriting the old ones but "registering" narratives that have not been visualized. Frieda, you once told me that it is important for you, for example, to inscribe Lesbian love and sex in art history—an imagery that is still marginalized, even in comparison to gay love and sex.

FT: And re-written again and again. **People should have references of new ways to love each other and of being—reminders that everything changes.** This needs to be "written" because, otherwise, it can be lost. It is in the best interest of the dominating power that lesbianism, as any other form of queer culture, is erased. We have to fight actively against it.

Frieda Toranzo Jaeger is a contemporary artist currently based in Mexico. Their practice deals with the representations of masculinity and femininity in the visual culture of late capitalism, in which the car serves as the stereotypical symbol of male power and domination. Selected solo shows include: *Fantasies of Autonomy*, Arcadia Missa, London; *Deep Adaptation*, Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin; *Autofelatio*, High Art, Paris; *Choque Cultural*; and *Die Windschutzscheibe*, Reena Spaulings, New York.

4 Der Wert der Ware drückt sich am Besten in den Körpern der anderen aus, 2018, Oil on canvas, 100cm x 100cm, courtesy of the artist and Barbara Weiss Gallery

