



Freddy Arciniegas

Not one more, 2003.

Teresa Jiménez*

From Personal Experiences to Collaborative Art Interview with **MARÍA EZCURRA**

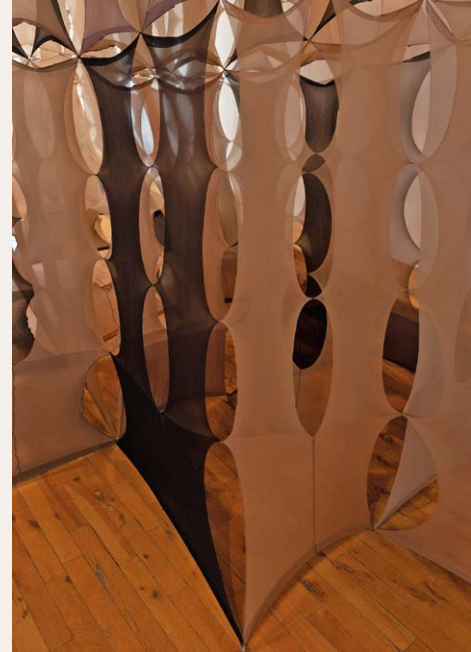
Born in Argentina, raised in Mexico, and now living in Canada —specifically in Tiohtià:ke [Montréal]— the places where María Ezcurra has lived have left their permanent artistic and experiential imprint, driving her work. The body, gender, memory, identity, belonging, violence, and immigration stand among the topics that concern her, cause her pain, and have led her to investigate and experiment with an array of forms of expression, formats, and materials, almost all of them second-hand and carrying specific meanings.

Her pieces, sometimes personal and intimate, sometimes public and collaborative, have been exhibited in several countries, such as Mexico, the United Kingdom, and Canada, among others, and her work has earned her awards and grants. In what follows, we talk about her art.

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All photos courtesy of the artist.



Invisible, 2008.



Paul Litherland

Teresa Jiménez: Can you describe your career path? Looking back, how important were your first experiences?

María Ezcurra: It's very interesting to see how, even though my work is constantly changing and evolving, there are recurring elements—which can be conceptual, emotional, material, formal or visual—that somehow end up coming back. My path as an artist is strongly influenced and informed by life experiences. I've been using my work for many years to explore, reflect on and give visibility to issues that are important to me. In this context, I constantly turn to textiles, mainly clothing, to explore themes and experiences related to memory and a sense of belonging, as well as the influence of cultural and social norms on women's bodies and experiences, stereotypes, and gender violence. These concerns and materials can be seen in my earliest work, when I was studying art at the UNAM's National School of Fine Arts, as well as in my most recent pieces, and much of the work I have done in between. Of course, my experiences are very different after 30 years, and even more so now that I'm living in another country, functioning in other languages, inhabiting a body that is the same but keeps changing. And our realities are also different. Our problems and priorities are constantly changing. Perhaps that's why, at the same time, there's a need to connect with familiar and everyday experiences through my work.

TJ: Many of your pieces are built on metaphors. Is the artist María a metaphor for the other María?

ME: It's true that my work involves metaphors. It creates connections and generates new meanings. But I also like to think that it often exposes certain things that we don't see, perhaps because they are too embedded in our reality. Rather than

reassigning, I try to question or highlight the meaning or intentions of elements that are part of our daily lives. Exploring the subjectivity of personal objects, my work is configured under a kind of archaeology of displacement and memory. It allows me to question and reformulate the physical, emotional, and cultural limits of the body and its connection to the place it inhabits. Thus, by interweaving social and personal experiences—often gendered—my sculptures and installations attempt to represent the multiple and complex relationships that make up the construction of our identities. For me, textiles are a sculptural material and a performative resource with unlimited formal advantages and symbolic possibilities. Clothing is a central aspect of my creative process, functioning as an experience and a place of exchange; a way of understanding how to negotiate our relationship with the world, with others, and with ourselves.

TJ: In your work, the use of everyday, recovered materials, as well as artisanal manufacturing, is striking. What do these choices represent?

ME: Oh, yes. The idea of reusing and repurposing materials and found objects has been constant in my work. I don't remember when I started using these types of materials. I have the impression that it was always like this. I guess it's something to do with the fear of the blank page. Somehow, I find it more interesting, more fun, or more meaningful to have access to and be able to transform an everyday object that has been used. This allows me to have a kind of dialogue with others and the experiences found in that object. I'm very interested in the stories that these objects tell us, and my work becomes a way of accessing them. These stories may be per-

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sonal, but they also reflect social, and political issues. I think there's also an accessibility issue in this choice, and that's why working with everyday objects, mainly clothes, has been so effective for me. Clothing in my work has allowed me to connect on different levels with different concepts, experiences, and people. It's a good material for making sculptures, installations and actions that are both attractive and critical.

TJ: Some of your pieces, for example *Uncover* and *Pinned Down*, materialize—or rather are completed—with the participation of the public. What do you think of collaborative art? What have the experiences been from those who participate in your work?

ME: Yes, I have many pieces that are based on collaborations or are made in a participatory way. When working with clothes, the integration of my body and experiences in my artwork was, to say the least, inevitable. I remember feeling the need

to perform actions with other people, and avoiding it at first, out of a kind of stage fright. I finally did it, and it turned out to be a process that demanded a lot from me but also allowed me to generate new experiences and meaningful connections. My first actions simply involved making my textile pieces in front of an audience, but little by little these incorporated more and different audiences or communities, who have participated with me in an interesting process of exploring different themes and experiences. By taking a more active role in the creative process, I feel that working with other people becomes a dialogue, a way to discover and generate new ideas together; to connect and rebuild things through these creative experiences. The work dynamic varies a lot in each case, since it is defined many times during the same creative process. But it's always very important to consider what participation will leave the people or communities involved in the project, and not just the artist; whether on a personal, collective, community or social level. *Pinned Down* (or *how to keep hiding Thousands of Needles in a Haystack*), for Example, Was Presented in Articule (Montreal) in 2015, to commemorate the lives of the 43 student activists from the Ayotzinapa Teacher's College in southern Mexico, who were killed and burned one year before by Mexican authorities. In response to this tragedy that deeply affected Mexican society, I created a participatory installation that invited the public to reflect upon the



Maria Ezcurra

Pinned Down, 2015.

loss of these students: 100,000 pins resting upon a raised metal platform cut into the shape of Mexico were placed at the center of the space, symbolizing the people who have died or disappeared in the last decade due to the so-called Drug War. Participants were encouraged to choose a pin from the “haystack” and use it to attach a black ribbon onto their clothing. This gesture became an act of grievance and recognition that aimed to strengthen the refusal of survivors and organizers to forget the lives of the deceased and the power of their struggles. With this project, I wanted to engage the public to hold an open discussion and reflection on the rising count of the dead and to raise awareness of their social and political struggles. It opposes the dehumanization of such large numbers of the murdered and missing by personalizing the abstract through a subtle, yet powerful form of rehumanization.

TJ: Some of your work are calls to action with very strong positions on issues such as gender violence, forced disappearances, and injustice. However, it transcends the political propaganda discourse and appeals directly to conscience and emotions. How do you achieve this?

ME: I think this connects again to the idea that our personal experiences are ultimately a reflection of social issues that affect us all, and therefore have important political implications as well. I believe that every woman in Mexico has suffered some kind of sexual harassment or assault. It’s really terrible. The problem is so big that it has somehow become normalized. Despite attempts (and little progress) to combat the most obvious gender and sexual violence —such as physical aggression, sexual abuse, shouting and insults— I think it has been very difficult to make visible and combat invisible violence and



Burral.



Colacha.



Cormisa.



Guardapolvos.

Wardrobe of the Perfect Housewife, 2008-2010.



Liminal: Stretching the Margins, 2023.

micro-machismo, such as humiliating, devaluing, despising, ignoring, emotionally blackmailing, revictimizing, controlling, and annulling women.

For me, clothing has been an incredibly effective material to talk about personal experiences and other realities, especially when it involves gender-based violence, in all its facets. Clothing protects—but also restricts—our bodies, both physically and socially. Sadly, women in Mexico grow up learning to “take care of ourselves,” using clothing as armor to protect us from unwanted “attention.” This is how, negotiating my need to be and myself, I have used clothes as a second skin to adapt to social constructions that fluctuate inexorably through time and space. I created *Ni una más* (2003) as a response to the femicides in Ciudad Juárez that began in the 1990s, and whose impunity somehow motivated the terrible wave of gender violence that Mexico is experiencing today. With *Invisible* (2008–2019) and the *Wardrobe of the Perfect Housewife* (2008–2010) I tried to explore and make visible how gender-based violence—from femicides to micro-machismos—has infiltrated all aspects of our lives, often through socially-accepted stereotypes that normalize violent behavior toward women.

TJ: Tell us about your most recent work *Liminal: Stretch the Margins*. Is this a return to intimacy?

ME: This exhibition, curated by ART/AROUND and presented in 2023 at Projet Casa in Montreal and at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Quebec, seeks to stretch and challenge boundaries, creating and connecting liminal spaces and experiences. The work is made primarily out of suitcases and pantyhose. I have been using pantyhose for years to create sculptures and installations. After 20 years of using them in my work, they are a material I know well, along with their material, spatial and symbolic possibilities. They are elastic and fun, delicate and fragile, but also strong and resistant; resilient. I can stretch them as much as possible to connect two points without breaking them. Stretching, extending, pushing to the limit can be a persistent act of continuous adaptation and reinvention. Sometimes we need to stretch different aspects of ourselves, our lives or our identities to fit, reach or change without tearing or breaking. And there is no point of return: you can’t go back to the initial state and space. You are in the liminal. There is always a trace of change because materials, as well as people, have memory. Suitcases are a new element in my work. For years I have thought about integrating them into my process, as a reflection of migratory experiences and aesthetics. Like clothes, I believe that suitcases are liminal spaces related to change. This is why for *Liminal* I incorporated deconstructed and stretched garments into these containers. **MM**



Liminal: Stretching the Margins, 2023.