

REMORSES AND OTHER MALADIES



Projects by Carlos Castro
Texts by Monica Espinel

REMORSES

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In **Remorses and Other Maladies**, Carlos Castro Arias' constructs an aesthetic experience divided in three chapters. The first, **Remorses**, presents a series of paintings begun in 2017, that he halted fleetingly and reignited once the pandemic began. It is the heart of the show, the artist's untrammelled chronicle about a world locked in a state of uncertainty. In it, Castro shares a volatile archive of what catches his idiosyncratic eye, images, bits, and pieces of the universe that provide him the daily magic to stay afloat. The installation is like a living collage - composed with images sourced from personal photographs or from the internet - that will mutate in disposition and content throughout the course of the show. Each work has been painted in one day, a process which will

Beware the easy griefs, that fool and fuel nothing - Gwendolyn Brooks

continue, like an ongoing exercise of artistic labor. Together, they form a kind of diary, illuminating for its nerve-steadying desire to deliver his vision of the sticky vacuum of boredom in which days disappeared into a vortex.

Remorse comes in many forms, its range lashing conflicting feelings that clang in our brains. Emotions, at once joyous and anguished, swell up only to be interrupted by the next image, echoing our present state of disconnect, our fractured social and political conversation. Sometimes Castro seems to be wrestling with the demons of race and bias that afflict this time and country. Two young black men, one, but not the same: a shielded eye versus a silenced mouth, both brimming with questions.





Occasionally, the subjects are banal, part of a larger visual history that rarely enters the pictorial realm, like dangling feet with a mismatched pedicure or the rhythm of stones snuggled over time. Some are startlingly intimate, like a nude female torso struck by speckles of light that shine through a lattice screen beset with stars. Beauty comes from a diptych of seashell headphones. They evoke silence cradling our ears as we lay tumbling in the calm, hoping its reverberations might dampen the unwanted cacophony.

Beauty, however, is found in equal measure as entrapment, death, verve, and desire, as so much here speaks of damage, even dismemberment. We see a trapped rat; two splayed fish, their flesh stretched by probes; a honeycomb that sprouts adventitious buds; hints of anxiety in the form of empty pill bottles; kinky moments interspersed with fields of red that appear again and again, still warm as blood, as in the decapitated head of a once legendary statue facing down, a specter of the iconoclasm that currently prevails.

Other images are transformed by being sliced or joined with foreign objects to form disquieting assemblages. A Medieval Madonna is thwarted by a test tube whose water droplets distort her features nearly beyond legibility; a jumpy blonde overwrought with joy, her fleeting instants of pool bliss incised by a palette knife, suggesting that pleasure and violence sometimes go hand in hand. Yet other works are wed to organic matter like bones, which bring a whiff of death recalling reliquaries.

There is much to be learned from Castro's disciplined pursuit of painting and his historical consciousness. On view is the existential soul strength that the monotony brought on by the pandemic demands; crystallized moments that spill in time, his quarantine life strewn across the space like a rhizomatic maze that is still growing. Bread and Salt is now home to over one hundred works, but this incubator might sprout more, possibly reaching three hundred and eleven.

Much like the painting that resembles a terrarium gone wild, abandoned, and reclaimed by nature. This image underscores the symbiotic relationship between the manmade and the natural world in a life-affirming way, like only closeness to death, which means nature, can make us be.

Remorse is not the poison of life, it has the power to heal. **Remorses** is Castro's attempt at coagulating the present. He offers us an elixir for pandemic anxieties in an unadulterated form; it is a snapshot of a specific moment in time that lets us maintain the illusion that we can embrace and preserve what is forever fading away. So keep your eyes on the works while you can, remorse, is not for sale.



Remorses, work in progress installed at Carlos Castro's house



DARK SPLENDOR

You got to burn to shine - John Giorno

Invite God into the Difficulties (2020) are the opening words to an 8-minute video that sits at the hot core of **Dark Splendor**, the second chapter in Castro's saga. The video begins with a panoramic shot of Texas' vast skies interrupted by the remains of an empty billboard. The sequence of flashing images that follow was taken from footage shot while Castro crisscrossed the state during a two-month residency at Artpace in San Antonio. From beginning to end, the images are accompanied by a mesmerizing sermon by Joel Osteen, the charismatic pastor of Lakewood Church, Houston's steroid extreme of megachurches. He preaches, while vintage signs, church facades, swaying flags, forlorn gas stations, barbecue pits, discarded furniture, barbed wire fences, and twisted juxtapositions like an adult billboard next to a Jesus billboard in the same frame, prance before us. The images, proof of Texans' fascination with God and guns, are punctuated by close ups of Castro's works made with fire. Towards the end, the sound of reverberating shots adds to the haunting quality of the visual fragments, also echoed in the works ricocheting through the space.

Fire transforms everything it touches, it purifies, it destroys. Castro employs it here with brutish verve, enacting its function as the ancient liturgical symbol for the transforming energy of the Holy Spirit. In *Body* (2020), however, the beautiful impression of fire is transformed into one deserving the epithet foul, as it ravages through the tiny replica of a church. Perhaps the work is a nod to the rash of arsons that targeted churches in 2010

throughout East Texas or to the long history of crimes committed against historic black churches, its slow burning fit for those warped acts of hatred. Yet despite the blue-ring flames that rise within, *Body*, remains intact. Is this smelting house of God a symbol of indestructible faith or is it symbolic of the churches' seamy underside seething with secrecy and hidden histories?

Echoing *Body* nearby is *The Witness* (2020), a figure whose roped-up head is emanating fire, giving us a glimpse of a dystopian future. Even though an empty stool is placed in front of him inviting us to inhabit his luminous darkness, our attempt to see his face is thwarted. He is witnessing the unbearable depiction of man's inhumanity to man, staring into a glowing screen that shows a looping image of a church burning. Emotionally lacerating, the statue is like a clinical portrait of human distress, a depiction of the soggy darkness that tightens around one when in the throes of a breakdown. In hindsight it feels like a foretaste to the strange and overwhelming season of death that was waiting just outside the window, now that connectedness needs to be maintained through communion with technology. The pandemic, overt racism, climate change, and inequality, make it easy to slip into the streaming abyss. *The Witness* exposes how social media and doom scrolling have become a suppressant for the malaise that defines our culture. But life has a multitude of emotions, so perhaps it encapsulates the foundation of an awakening, the moment when the heat of the fire blazes him up abruptly into a beautiful bonfire of hope.





Or maybe not. Numbness beckons when life is difficult, at times leading us to feel like we are on *Standby* (2019). A hallmark of Castro's work is his left-field sense of humor, evident in the title of his works as seen here, whereby the human ashes inside glass tubes that spell ON, actually signal off. The bright glow of neon has been replaced by the remains of a pulverized body, asking of us if the self still exists when ON Standby, when all input seems blocked by pain and we are possessed by an absence of sensation?

In **Dark Splendor**, the body, as human and institutional vessel, is under attack. Two panels in the style of medieval stained-glass scenes are filled with terror. In *Pollos* (2019) Christ is skewered thrice like a rotisserie chicken and in *Encamados* (2019), conjoined saints are being burned on a pyre as if atoning for their sins. Merging the psychological and the theological, every work seems to incorporate danger in its form, embodying the stakes of the dramatic spiritual battle spread before us. Castro's menacing tableaux creates a mystifying experience that is completed by *Shelter* (2020), a site-specific window installation that floods the room in a searing red light, intimating a diffuse otherworldly presence.

The viewer, like *The Witness*, is trapped in the same weird, paused feeling that much of the world has been in for months. Yet one work offers the possibility of redemption, contradicting the amputated faith in evidence elsewhere. *Revelation* (2020) hangs defiantly, lifting some of the languor in the air. Its silence is heavy with meaning. We sense the absence of what must have been the deafening noise of each bullet hole, now visible in the carefully composed patterns of a Gothic rose window that dispels the inherent violence of its process and the materials involved. This is art making

with the promise of catharsis, a means to purge the darkness, rendered visible in the voids left by one thousand impacts through which glimpses of light leap through.

Castro's unsettling furnace articulates the transformative power of fire by enveloping the viewer in a heated experience with the divine, its symbols, and pitfalls. The multiplicities in **Dark Splendor** allow for conflicting interpretations. Fire is inside, outside, on screen. It is symbolic of creation, destruction, and the penuries of the soul, revealing an individual willing to question, expose, and accept the contradictions inherent in the fact that religious fervor and intolerance are flip sides of the same coin. In Castro's transformation there is no closure. Instead, shock, frisson, and revelations assault our senses, while Osteen gleefully reminds us that though "sometimes he'll put you through the fire, the good news is, God knows how to make you fireproof."

MYTHSTORIES

The final chapter, Castro's **Mythstories** (2017-present), explores the relationship between the wondrous world of mythology and history in tapestries. Myths complement our understanding of history, which has its own truths and biases. Appropriating the style and iconography of medieval tapestries, Castro interlaces contemporary myths to create cross-temporal and cross-cultural connections with a rare blend of irreverence. He turns to medieval tapestries as the foundation for this series given that the turn from worship to inquiry, from unexamined mythology to history, had not yet occurred. The hybrid of old world medium and new world content infuses the contemporary subjects with a historical mystique that is heightened by period red walls.

In *The Awaken King* (2019) Castro borrows the iconography of The Cloisters' monumental medieval works known as The Unicorn Tapestries (1495-1505) to create an evocative rendering of the late King of Pop, immortalized as pop royalty. The eccentric, beloved cultural icon whose moral foibles and untimely death have been the source of many myths, is pictured as he passes into a sacred realm that lies beyond our earthly experience. Bubbles, his chimpanzee companion, perched on the edge of the coffin stares down at him, as does the unicorn, fittingly portrayed as half white and half black. The tragic hero is surrounded by plants prescribed in medieval herbals as antidotes to poisoning, such as sage, pot marigolds, and orange, an apt backdrop as Jackson's death resulted from an overdose of propofol. Mythic as this sounds, he may have passed physically, but has transcended in space and time through his music and dance.

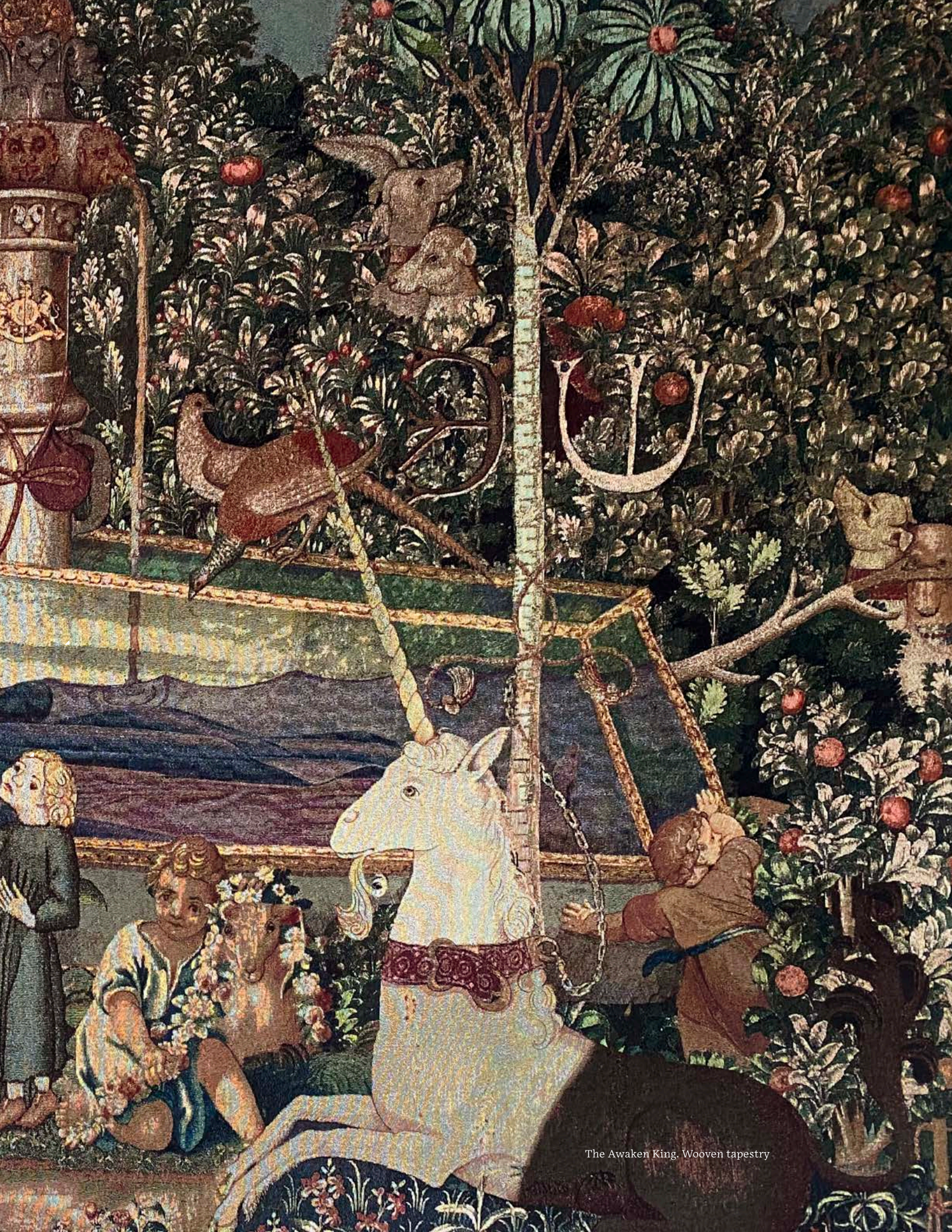
The restricted area in the Grand Theft Auto Games called Area 69 (2019), is associated with the long-held rumor of aliens and Unidentified Flying Ob-

jects (UFOs) in the game. Though no evidence supports these rumors, they have not subsided since its real-life counterpart is the legendary Area 51 - a highly classified United States Air Force base located in the Nevada desert - that Castro nods to in a wall plaque. The lacuna between fact and fiction surrounding Area 51 has led to conspiracies since the 1940s, when people started reporting UFOs. Some suspect it is a lab where the government keeps and studies aliens and captured alien aircraft. The admittedly cryptic tapestry shows three men conducting an autopsy, from where a gaping wound oozes onto the table recalling the Roswell Incident of 1947. Given the swelter of secrecy and decades of conflicting reports on Area 51's activities by the CIA, it is understandable that the rumors continue and that they got a reboot through social media becoming further entrenched in alien lore. Castro takes care to balance these with a healthy dose of myth-busting and delirium grounded in art history and pop culture by including figures like the Venus of Willendorf, a space invader, and E.T.

As humans we are meaning-seeking creatures. Myths allow us to transcend our own existence, lifting us emotionally and imaginatively beyond our own limited circumstances. These works, as well as *The Narco Arc* (2019) and *The Cooking of the Virus* (2020), depict present-day beliefs that have permeated the fabric of our culture. They function like a compass that accelerates back and forth through history. By locating these myths in a temporal continuum, Castro reveals that our appetite for mythmaking has not subsided. Instead, what emerges from the seams where matter and myth connect, is a reminder that in the arc of humanity myths will continue to spring to life because they are central to our understanding of ourselves, our world, and our place in it.







The Awaken King. Woven tapestry

About Carlos Castro Arias:

Carlos Castro Arias was born in Bogota, Colombia. His interdisciplinary practice departs from the appropriation of historical images and the formal and symbolic re-contextualization of found objects. Castro's work explores elements of the individual and collective identity and aims to bring to light muted histories and ignored points of view.

His solo exhibitions include *The Pain We Create*, LA Galeria, Bogota (2019); *The Language of Dead Things*, Espacio el Dorado, Bogota (2017), *Stagnant Heritage*, MUZAC, Monteria (2015), *Old News of the Present*, 21st Projects, New York (2014); and *Accidental Beauty*, Museo Santa Clara, Bogota (2013). Notable group exhibitions include *Doble Filo*, Coral Gables Museum, Miami (2019); *Comfortably Numb*, Another Space, New York (2018); *Open Art Biennale*, Sweden (2017); *Liquid Sensibilities*, Cisneros Foundation Grants and Commissions, USA (2016); *Space To Dream*, Auckland Art Gallery, New Zealand (2016); *X Mercosur Biennale*, Porto Alegre, Brazil (2015); and *O que seria do mundo sem as coisas que nao existem?*, Frestas Trienal, Sorocaba, Brazil (2014), amongst others.

Castro is also a musician and educator. He studied fine arts at the University Jorge Tadeo Lozano (2002) and a master in the San Francisco Art Institute (2010). His musical projects include: *POPO* (2000), *Los Claudios de Colombia* (2005-2010) and *Amor Negro* (2020). He lives and works between San Diego, Tijuana, and Bogota.

Castro dedicates this show to his family and to his psychologist María Mercedes García

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About Monica Espinel:

Monica Espinel is an independent curator and writer specialized in Modern and Contemporary Art from Latin America. She has experience working internationally in museums, galleries, alternative art spaces, biennials, auction houses, art fairs, and philanthropy. Curatorial projects include: "Black Milk: Theories on Suicide" (Marvelli Gallery, New York, 2004), "Carmen Herrera – Estructuras" (Latincollector, New York, 2008), "Memory Leaks" (Creon, New York, 2010), "Photographic Treasures from the Collection of Alfred Stieglitz" (curatorial assistant, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011), "Rituals of Chaos" (Bronx Museum of the Arts, 2012), "The Skin I Live In" (SP-Arte, 2013), "Bruno Miguel: Todos a Mesa" (Galeria Emma Thomas, So Paulo, 2015) and "Hybrid Topographies – Encounters from Latin America" (Deutsche Bank, New York, 2018).

Espinel was a Mentor for the Associate Artists program of the Liverpool Biennial (2016-18) and is the recipient of numerous awards including ArtTable's Diversity Grant to be a curatorial fellow at Wave Hill (2009), a Milton & Sally Avery Arts Foundation Curatorial Fellowship at the Bronx Museum of the Arts (2010), and a Roswell L. Gilpatric Award to work in the department of Photographs at The Metropolitan Museum of Art (2011). Her writing has been featured in ArtNexus, Arte al Dia, Flash Art and Artforum.com.

Espinel is a Ph.D. candidate in the History of Art at The Graduate Center, City University of New York. She holds a BS in psychology from Florida International University and an MA in Art History from Hunter College.

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