

Carolyn Castaño at Craft Contemporary

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Carolyn Castaño, ***Cumanday- Beautiful Mountain*** (installation view) (2023). Craft Contemporary, Los Angeles, 2023–24. Image courtesy of the artist, Walter Maciel Gallery, and Craft Contemporary. Photo: Amy L. Tierney.

Carolyn Castaño's *Cumanday- Beautiful Mountain* features large-scale, mixed-media artworks that combine watercolors, textiles, sequins, and other appliques to play with the conventions of landscape painting. Presented at Craft Contemporary, her show takes inspiration from Cumanday, one of six remaining tropical glaciers in Colombia. At first glance, Castaño's work may appear to embrace the landscape genre, often identified by its idealized and sublime representations of nature. However, a greater understanding of Castaño's concerns makes clear that the series is a stirring critique. Draining landscape painting of its presumed neutrality, Castaño uses the genre to depict the realities of environmental destruction caused by capitalistic greed.

During her research for the exhibition, Castaño studied 19th-century painted travelogs and maps—documents that became visual manifestations of the colonial encounter. These artistic representations of the natural world served as what I like to call “soft propaganda,”

which helped reinforce the European settler colonial worldview that “uninhabited lands” were ripe for exploitation. While formally, her series of sixteen watercolors, *This is Dedicated to the One I Love (Collection of Living and Deceased Glaciers)* (all works 2023) appears to do little to challenge such colonialist worldviews, its messaging interrupts these narratives of expansion and industrialization. In depicting existing glaciers alongside those that remain only in memory, the series acknowledges the environmental impact colonialism has had on these fertile landscapes.

Elsewhere, Castaño creates layered surfaces that pucker with texture like a topographical map come to life. In *Cumanday- Beautiful Mountain (Nevado del Ruiz)*, the Cumanday glacier appears protected by abundant flora and fauna, including appliqued palm trees and local tropical flowers painted with a hard-edge technique. Some of the wildlife, such as the emerald toucanet, are labeled in the style of colonial-era travel books designed to index culture as a means of control. Near the bottom of the composition, red and blue grid-like patterns inspired by Pre-Columbian textile patterns such as the Tocapu tunic, worn by inhabitants of Colombia’s mountainous regions, reference both the flag of the Wiphala people and graphs used in COP climate conferences. Here, Castaño alludes to a real bind faced by locals, who must survive in a capitalist system that renders them unintentional collaborators in the environment’s destruction.

Castaño’s formal strategies—particularly her use of fabricated pre-Columbian and Indigenous textile motifs—delegitimize colonial worldviews. As stand-ins for Indigenous cultures and histories, the fabrics and other appliques acknowledge the presence of the original stewards of the land. The landscape was never uninhabited, awaiting some sort of inscription: Rather it has always been overflowing with life. This sense of vitality infuses *Madre Monte- Reina de los Jardines*, a glazed terracotta clay sculpture created in collaboration with Kim Torres. Placed in the center of the gallery, a woman with brown skin and black hair is adorned with plants and accompanied by animals as she sits in a pool of water at the bottom of a glacier. A prominent goddess in Colombian folklore, Madre Monte protects the land and punishes those who cause harm to it; her presence seems to serve as a rebuttal to the conventions of depicting the landscape. Taken as a whole, the exhibition similarly functions as a prayer against further environmental exploitation by honoring the many lives of Colombia’s glaciers.

Carolyn Castaño: Cumanday- Beautiful Mountain runs from October 1, 2023–January 7, 2024 at Craft Contemporary (5814 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90036).



Carolyn Castaño, ***Chundua – Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta*** (detail) (2023). Watercolor, mixed media, fabric, and appliques on paper mounted on canvas, 75 x 144 inches. Image courtesy of the artist, Walter Maciel Gallery, and Craft Contemporary. Photo: Amy L. Tierney.



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Carolyn Castaño, *Madre Monte- Reina de Los Jardines* (detail) (2023). Glazed terracotta clay, 70 x 33.5 x 36 inches. Craft Contemporary, Los Angeles, 2023–24. Image courtesy of the artist, Walter Maciel Gallery, and Craft Contemporary. Photo: Amy L. Tierney.



Carolyn Castaño, ***Cumanday- Beautiful Mountain*** (installation view) (2023). Craft Contemporary, Los Angeles, 2023–24. Image courtesy of the artist, Walter Maciel Gallery, and Craft Contemporary. Photo: Amy L. Tierney.



Carolyn Castaño, ***This is Dedicated to the One I Love (Collection of Living and Deceased Glaciers)*** (installation view) (2023). Watercolors on paper, 16 x 12 inches each. Craft Contemporary, Los Angeles, 2023. Image courtesy of the artist, Walter Maciel Gallery, and Craft Contemporary. Photo: Amy L. Tierney.



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