

FRIEDA TORANZO JAEGER ON SEMIOLOGICAL VANDALISM AND DECOLONIAL FUTURES



Frieda Toranzo Jaeger in front of her painting *The Perpetual Sense of Redness*, 2021.
PHOTO GEORGIANNA CHIANG

*For her one work exhibition “The Perpetual Sense of Redness,” on view at the Baltimore Museum of Art through October 3, the Mexican painter **Frieda Toranzo Jaeger** has created a kind of modern-day altarpiece, her largest work to date. Featuring eleven embroidered canvases of varying shapes and sizes hinged together into a silolike form, the work is, like most of her sculptural paintings, a winking homage to driverless cars—a symbol of the future. Below, the artist discusses her emphatic infusion of Indigenous techniques with Western ones, and explains why cars came to be her central motif.*

I made this work specifically for the museum’s rotunda, which connects three rooms. I wanted the painting to be experienced from many different angles. Two sides show car interiors painted to scale. The third side shows a laptop on a bed, and the fourth is a graveyard scene. The work is about the different spaces where we imagine the future—I think this is the most important task of decolonization. But I also wanted to include a reminder that death is always with us. The relationship Mexicans have to death—exemplified nowadays by the Day of the Dead—is a remnant of our pre-Columbian past. Still, the painting of the bed is surrounded by these embroidered blood vessels that extend from a heart and into all of the panels. The work isn’t meant to be read in a linear way; it doesn’t have a beginning and an end. I’m borrowing pre-Colombian compositions, which are often round and expand from the center. So it’s more of a cosmology of different interior worlds, places where we dream.

All the embroidery is done in bright red because I want to emphasize that I’m inserting an Indigenous tradition into a Western one—that I’m destroying the preciousness of this painting. My family is trained in traditional Mexican embroidery, and I hire them to work on my pieces. They often think contemporary art is weird, so this is how I bring them closer to what I do.

In one vignette, above the bed, I copied a composition from a Matisse painting in the museum’s

collection, *Still Life, Compote, Apples, and Oranges* (1899). I borrow other paintings frequently in my work, alluding to the artists in the colonies who just copied European paintings when they were learning. Postcolonial identities have formed from copies of copies of copies. Visitors can go find the original in the building.



View of Frieda Toranzo Jaeger's exhibition "The Perpetual Sense of Redness" at the Baltimore Museum of Art, 2021.
PHOTO MITRO HOOD

I titled the work *The Perpetual Sense of Redness*. I have Indigenous heritage, and Indigenous (or "red") people are often, for good reason, very concerned about preservation. But unfortunately, this puts us in this perpetual state of just hanging onto what we already have, never being able to construct a future. This tendency isn't exclusively Indigenous, but it crops up among Indigenous people in the most perverse ways. Sometimes it feels like all we can do is resist the pervasive efforts to erase our traditions. That's why it's important to me to focus on the future.

I often think of my work as semiological vandalism. Most of my paintings are of cars. I'm also trying to use cars—especially self-driving cars—as a space to imagine this decolonial future. As people from the colonies, I think we tend to exoticize ourselves, so I wanted to have a symbol that was not expected of me. I often paint the cars at a one-to-one scale, inviting viewers to sit down and take a ride.

In the background of one of the car panels, you can see that the car is in outer space—there's a satellite and some stars. I wanted to gesture toward the people who are thinking about colonizing new planets, and warn that colonization isn't only a thing of the past. On the other car panel, it's unclear whether the orange and red backdrop is a sunset, a sunrise, or a fiery apocalypse. For me, that sums up the state we are in now amid all these ecological collapses and the pandemic—maybe we do need a catastrophe to really change things. Maybe something that seems like the end can be a new beginning.

You can probably see that I'm not trained in painting; I studied in Hamburg, and the program there was super theoretical. I don't even want to learn; I'm not interested in the Western ideas of intense labor or of making illusions. My instructors emphasized talking about painting and understanding the medium's possibilities instead of technique. This was amazing for me, because I don't think it's happening in a lot of painting circles—at least not in Mexico. Painting is often seen not as a political tool, but rather dismissed as a commodity. I came to understand the power of painting from the women who taught me: instead of wanting recognition from the male critics of their generation, they created their own system of critique and validation, which was so inspiring.

—As told to Emily Watlington