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## GISELA COLÓN

Transformative Art: Gisela Colón on Ecofeminism, History, and Healing

Words PLUS MAGAZINE



Gisela Colón's exhibition "MATÉRIA PRIMA" delves into the profound interconnections between ecofeminism, colonial histories, and the universal forces of nature. Through her innovative use of materials and transformative artistic approach, Colón seeks to challenge and reshape our perceptions of these complex themes. Her work not only highlights the enduring impact of historical conflicts but also emphasizes the potential for renewal and healing through a deeper connection with the natural world. In this interview, Colón discusses the inspirations behind her art, the symbolic repurposing of high-tech materials, and the intricate narratives embedded in her monumental sculptures.



*Installation view, Gisela Colón, MATÉRIA PRIMA, Museu Nacional da República in Brasília, Brasília, BR. Courtesy of the Museu Nacional da República in Brasília and the artist. Photography by Diego Bresani.*

**PLUS:** Your exhibition, "MATÉRIA PRIMA," seems to address a wide array of themes, including ecofeminism, colonial histories, and universal forces of nature. How do you navigate the intersectionality of these themes within your artwork, and what message do you hope viewers will

take away from experiencing your pieces?

**Gisela Colón:** All these themes are intimately entangled. The history of the Earth, humanity's relationship to it, and our relationship to each other is filled with conflict. The turbulent legacies of colonial histories remain pervasive in our lives today. In bringing these complex, intersecting topics to the forefront of people's awareness, my aim is to help peel away the accumulated layers of adverse and oppressive ways of thinking. By employing ecofeminist principles and highlighting the significance of our relationship to planet Earth—which is really our womb—we can understand why Mother Earth has a maternal and matriarchal identity. This perspective allows us to shift and transform our values to connect with the natural world again. By connecting to essential elements of nature, geological materials, and cosmic forces of gravity, energy, and time, we can see ourselves in the greater continuum of history and, hopefully, do better on this planet as we move into the future.

**P:** Your use of high-tech materials like optical acrylics and carbon fiber in your sculptures is intriguing, especially given their typically associated functions with militarism and surveillance. Can you elaborate on how you repurpose these materials to convey messages of transcendence and healing within your artwork?

**GC:** When I was a young girl growing up in Puerto Rico, I suffered experiences of violence, displacement, aggression, and oppression. Nature became my source of healing. In the 1970s, we lived on a rural farm in Bayamón, and whenever I became distraught, I would run outside and find refuge among the plants, trees, animals, and life all around me. I particularly liked to sit on the curved branch of an Eucalyptus tree and systematically peel off layers of colored bark, which was a calming activity for me. A few days later, when I returned to the tree, I saw how it had healed itself—the areas of peeled bark had turned different colors, becoming a beautiful tapestry of renewed wood. This is how I learned early on to tap into nature's own vital processes of regeneration.

This early lesson in life-reaffirming renewal, rebirth, and transformation has become the conceptual foundation of my artistic practice. It is a particularly rewarding challenge to repurpose high-tech materials, typically associated with functions of militarism and surveillance, into vehicles of light, life, and transcendence. What might be used for destructive and oppressive purposes can become something transformative—an object of beauty that channels positive energy, fundamentally replicating the universe's own processes of evolution and rebirth.

**P:** The monumental carbon fiber monolith, “Plasmatic: The Fourth State of Matter (Parabolic Monolith Oxygen),” appears to encapsulate multiple layers of meaning, from Latin American colonial histories to personal experiences with gun violence. How do you approach the process of imbuing such complex narratives into your sculptural forms?

**GC:** I usually start with the smaller, more intimate, and personal layers and strive to end with something universal that can resonate with people more broadly on a humanistic level. My practice often begins with the microscopic, focusing on the energy of life as manifested in the building blocks of nature—the vibrant energy of atomic particles, our intricate cellular composition, and the incredible torquing movement of our spiraling DNA. Then, I move to the macrocosmic, observing much larger universal geometries in motion—the concentric elliptical halo of Saturn’s rings, the dynamic interplay of our solar system, the elongated fluid form of our Milky Way, and the endless gyrating galaxies of the universe.

Applying this conceptual framework to my practice, I often draw from deeply personal narratives and transform them into something that people can generally relate to in a more expansive way. The monolithic form achieves this on many levels. It begins with my own personal experiences with gun violence in Puerto Rico, then incorporates the collective Puerto Rican experiences of military colonialism on the island, such as the military occupation of Vieques and the use of our rainforests to test Agent Orange during the Vietnam War. Ultimately, it speaks more broadly to experiential intersections of Latin American colonial histories across the Caribbean and the Global South.

As a form, the monolith is first perceived as a bullet, projectile, missile or rocket. Yet, in the greater trajectory of human anthropological history, it has also been the form of amulets, artifacts, obelisks, ancient archaeological structures, and prehistoric architectural wonders. The monolithic form has manifested in the rudimentary runestones of Stonehenge, the conical mathematical magnificence of the Pyramids of Giza, and the sentient petroglyphs of my own Puerto Rican Taíno ceremonial stones of Caguana Park in Utuado. This singular totemic form has been used by humankind from the beginning of time as a harbinger of good fortune and, for apotropaic purposes, warding off evil spirits. In my practice, I utilize the monolithic structure to address age-old mystical questions, deep human fears and desires, and the perennial mysteries of our human existence. Where did we come from? Why are we here? Where are we going? What is the purpose of our existence? How can we exist in balance with the Earth again?



Installation view, Gisela Colón, *Mountains Are Inside Me*, Efraín López, New York. Courtesy of Efraín López and the artist. Photography by Inna Svyatsky.

**P:** The exhibition includes immersive installations that invite viewers to engage with various mediums, from photo murals to translucent totems and luminous sculptures. How do you conceptualize these installations to create a cohesive and transformative experience for the audience?

**GC:** I began with the geological and geographic location on the planet: Brasília, the capital of Brazil. Designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Brasília was created *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) on the plains of central Brazil from 1955 to 1960. The brainchild of President Juscelino Kubitschek and renowned architects Lucio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer, Brasilia is a marvel of 20th-century modern thought in architecture, urban planning, and design. The Museu Nacional da República is part of the Monumental Axis of Brasilia and is shaped like a giant aircraft when viewed from above. Positioned at the heart of the city, it holds an incredible array of architectural buildings with a futuristic ethos.

The exhibition is framed by six large-scale photo murals that place Brasilia's geographic location in context with the rest of the world. These murals place the Global South in conversation with iconic sites around the globe, including the pyramids of Egypt, a baroque forest in the Netherlands, and

the remote desert of AlUla in Saudi Arabia (an early stop on the ancient Spice Route dating back 10,000 years). These photo murals are designed to offer visitors an immersive experience in which they can traverse diverse localities of varying geological and socio-historical conditions.

The exhibition is also a response to the groundbreaking architecture of Oscar Niemeyer's "flying saucer" structure. Shaped like a convex dome with circling ramps that shoot up and into it from various directions, the museum hovers on the Monumental Axis like an aircraft in space, poised to connect us to worlds beyond this Earth. Populating the interior of this architectural dome, the translucent totems and luminous cell-like sculptures appear as vessels of connection to another dimension. As such, the exhibition invites visitors to weave their way through the scene as though they are moving through time and space—transposing the deeply personal and intimately local into a universal experience.

**P:** The Pod sculptures in your exhibition explore color theory through the production of structural color, offering viewers a prismatic experience of light. Can you delve into the technical aspects of creating these sculptures and how they interact with environmental factors to facilitate perceptual experiences of color as light in real-time?

**GC:** I developed a process of creating vessels that reflect and refract light into constituent parts through layered structures. My sculptures incorporate many layers of optical materials folded into one another, much in the same way as the layers of my own stratified diasporic existence as a Puerto Rican artist living in the US. The immediate visual experience is one of a fluid color spectrum that prompts viewers to question what they are seeing. The sculptures create conditions of "impossible" colors because the rays of light are fragmented into indeterminate perceptual phenomena. Both the form and the colors constantly shift depending on the quality of environmental lighting and the movement of the viewer, generating what I have termed structural color.

In the end, it's not merely about the "process" or the "objects" but about connecting the viewer to the experience of Life itself. I see my work within a lineage of perceptual discourse, from Frank Stella, who famously said, "What you see is what you see," to Robert Irwin, whose main motivation was for you to "See yourself seeing," to James Turrell, who sought to dematerialize the viewing experience into pure light. My aim is to generate an experience that transcends mere "seeing" to offer the "feeling" of being part of a greater whole.

My hope is that in seeing these works, visitors will more acutely feel the laws of the physical universe—gravity, energy, time—and transform this immediate awareness into a sense of understanding that we are all merely matter that has evolved over time. Having originated from the Big Bang at the beginning of the universe, the cells that make up each of our bodies carry this elemental matter through time. I want you to "feel yourself being alive." Through my objects and immersive installations I hope to generate a perceptual experience that goes beyond the usual

human-centric viewpoint into an expanded post-anthropocentric era, where humans are not essential to the survival of the Earth. In the end, we are part of a much greater continuum through time and space.

**P:** Your artwork often draws inspiration from natural phenomena and cosmic forces. How do you balance scientific concepts with artistic expression in your creative process, particularly when exploring themes such as time, gravity, and universal energies?

**GC:** Growing up in Puerto Rico, my formative years were a mixture of science and art. One of my earliest childhood memories was watching the moon landing, which sparked a lifelong fascination with astronomy. In my youth, I regularly visited the *Observatorio de Arecibo* (until recently, the largest outer space telescope in the world), studying the vastness of the cosmos and dreaming of one day becoming an astronaut. My father was a chemist and, in the 1970s, while working for the government of Puerto Rico conducting air quality studies, he discovered that Sahara dust reached Puerto Rico through trade wind currents—a previously unknown phenomenon. Thus, at an early age, my father provided me with a vital understanding of planet Earth as an interconnected ecosystem. At the same time, my mother was a painter who instilled in me an appreciation of art in all its forms. From the age of 4, I avidly painted landscapes, still-lives, and quotidian scenes of my island surroundings—applying oil impasto on wood—nurturing rich connections to the Earth and the natural biodiversity around me.

In essence, my personal experiences have been fundamentally shaped by the intersection of science and art. For me, science and art are truly two sides of the same coin. Both disciplines seek to uncover the realities of the world around us and stem from humanity's innate drive for creativity. As human beings, we possess an inherent biological imperative to explore and understand the world around us—the why and how of everything. Both come from the same place: human consciousness and the capacity for higher abstract thought. My oldest son is a mathematician, and through him, I have come to understand that even the field of mathematics involves a fusion of rational and creative thinking. Mathematical equations have a balance and inherent beauty, akin to mesh sculptures suspended in space. Similarly, my sculptures embody this beautiful interplay between complementary fields of knowledge.

**P:** Your Monolith sculptures have been described as objects that interact not only with light and viewers but also with the energy of the earth and the planet. Could you elaborate on the significance of this interaction and how it informs the conceptualization and execution of your sculptures, particularly in the context of your exhibition in Brasília?

**GC:** At their core, my monoliths act as extensions of my body. Oftentimes I feel akin to trees growing from the earth, rocks bursting from beneath the surface of the land, and mountains borne from cataclysms inside the earth's core. I channel this energy into the monoliths. In a sense, they are born of my body and its connections to the soil, land, and earth. In the end, I strive for my work to be in resonance with the constant convulsions of our world, the turbulence of planet Earth and the endless expansion of the cosmos beyond.

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