

TOTAL IMMERSION

FRIEDA TORANZO JAEGER AND
CHRIS SHARP IN CONVERSATION

Frieda Toranzo Jaeger is a Mexican painter based in Hamburg where she recently finished her studies. I was turned on to her work by the young American artist Myles Starr, who lived in Mexico City for a spell, and who exhibited a painting of her's at his Vienna-based project space, SORT, in 2016. Initially surprised and even a little put off by the work, I found it strange, aggressive, unaccountably sexy, and anything but "Mexican." It did not take me long to realize that I really liked it, and Frieda and I started what has turned into an ongoing conversation about her work, the craft and stakes of painting in general, and Mexico City, among other things. Below is a more formalized version of what we have been talking about.

CHRIS SHARP

Let's start with cars, since they play such a prominent role in your practice. Depicting mostly their interiors, you manage to communicate something very aggressive, claustrophobic, and weirdly sexy about cars. You seem to feminize what is typically construed as the acme of manhood or masculinity while ramping up its macho-ness to an almost intolerable degree. At the same time, you seem to be playing with perceived stereotypes regarding the depiction of cars—exterior views, often accompanied by bikini-clad women, tend to betoken male possession or ownership, while interior views (not including the engine, which is all about muscle) generally suggest luxury, comfort, safety, an almost domestic quality, and you are most certainly scrambling these codes. Can you say a few words about this subject matter and how you portray it?

FRIEDA TORANZO JAEGER

I first became interested in machines when I started to write my thesis on postcolonial theory. I was fascinated with how Gustave Flaubert, who was very influential in forming Western ideas of "the other," describes for instance the Orientals. In one of his letters to Louise Colet, he wrote: "The oriental woman is no more than a machine who makes no distinction between one man or another man." This became the source of my investigation—how machines can take your individuality away, how and why machines are related to masculinity, and how it would feel to be this female machine that takes away the individuality of Western men. I wanted to explore this concept more in my practice. And the car struck me as the perfect machine for this investigation. Plus, it possess a certain baseline universality. Almost everybody is forced to interact with these machines in one way or another on a daily basis since our landscapes are shaped around them, and in growing up in Mexico City, the average time that I would spend in a car every day was about three to four hours just to go to school and back. The car becomes a very domestic and private space, which you fill up with your own private rituals.

Then there's the essentially exploratory nature of painting, which takes you through the inevitable process of locating yourself in relation to everything. The car is a place where you also have to locate yourself constantly, from the inside. In this sense I am talking about painting itself and the nature of my own practice. But I am also fascinated by the semiotics of the "car" as a symbol that is so related to men and masculinity, as you already pointed out. I am interested in how control over the potency (engine revving) of this machine becomes an extension of a man's imaginary intrinsic male potency and domination fantasies that enable him to perform a form of masculinity. It is for this reason that I chose exclusively electric cars: they are almost completely silent, and they will soon be able to drive themselves. So by disassociating these two conventions from traditional notions of control and potency, I am trying to re-genderize the function of their semiotics.

CS

How does this relate to the way your paintings tend to be fully saturated with information? It's as if there is no space—which is ironic, if you think about it, because the car traditionally signifies space and freedom, at least in the mythos of the United States (for instance Route 66). But not necessarily in Mexico City (or anywhere in Latin America, for that matter), where you are liable to spend hours trapped inside a car stuck in traffic cursing the day you were born.

FTJ

[Laughs] It's true! I am trying to transmit a sense of total immersion, a disruptive one that obstructs you from interacting fully with your surroundings, like looking at the landscape through the car window. You're isolated, the air conditioner is on. Trapped. But I guess the claustrophobic feeling comes from the fact that at the same time the commodity value of such cars is a trap. Assurances of freedom, of liberating the world from pollution, and representing some kind of neo-capitalist progress that promises to save the



Above - *The Net Courtin*, 2017. Courtesy: the artist
Below - *The Net* (front view), 2017. Courtesy: the artist
Opposite - *The Net* (back view), 2017. Courtesy: the artist









Above - *Autocontrol as a form of landscape* (view as closed), 2016, HISCOX art prize 2016, Hamburg 2016. Courtesy: the artist

Below - *Autocontrol as a form of landscape*, 2016, *Lerchenfeld 1* installation view at Kunstverein Schwerin, Schwerin, 2017. Courtesy: the artist

Opposite - *puppy pilot*, 2017. Courtesy: Private collection



world. When we are facing mass extinction, in our flying-electric-vegan-leather-interior cars, with nothing to eat because the soil is dead, we will curse the day we first got into one of these vehicles.

CS Dystopian to the max. I feel you. Indeed, I love how one can feel all this aggression, angst, and even contradiction within the work. You are seeking to upset and rewire the semiotic coding of what is essentially an object of mass extinction (hereafter known as OME). But these are not merely symbolic or conceptual paintings. There is obviously a profound love of and serious commitment to painting in what you do. It is not a means, but an actual end in itself. It is possible to talk about your work both vis-à-vis a specific tradition, which includes car paintings (for instance Peter Cain) and painting more generally. I am tempted to broadly situate it somewhere between, say, classical Flemish still life, in which there is no hierarchy of information, and Jana Euler, whose work is similarly claustrophobic. There is also a sense of “painting beside itself,” what with your unusual installations and incorporation of sculptural elements. Indeed, painting is rarely an inert, two-dimensional object in what you do. Maybe you could talk a bit about your thinking behind this?

FTJ I think once the work is inserted into the stream of history it inevitably find its own origins. And of course I totally see my work relating to the artists/work you mention. It’s really interesting how one’s work is always read in relation to that of others. And of course my commitment to painting is central to what I do. Engaging in the formal aspect of applying paint and contemplating it, the immersion, is what definitely brings me the most joy and satisfaction in my work, even if sometimes I have to work against it in order to bring the content and form together. I have to get out of my comfort zone. This happens in the way I install my paintings, like you said; right now I am investigating the concept of autonomy. I am trying to transgress the act of painting in itself by separating myself from it and adding sculptural and performative aspects to it. I am fighting against the two-dimensional nature of painting, against pleasing my own taste. I mean, for example, I do not have a car fetish. I don’t even have a car! But I am focusing all my aesthetic ambitions into this motif, and I do all of this via the very essential materiality of painting: oil paint on canvas. So I guess you are right. There are not only conceptual paintings because then the commitment to the form would be unnecessary, like not adding anything to the content, but in this case it is the medium through which content is transmitted.

CS I totally agree. It’s a bit of a proverbial no-brainer, but, in a post-conceptual art world in which “research” and “artistic research” are increasingly codified terms, the importance of the medium and its capacity to transmit content is often marginalized. In some contexts you get the feeling that it’s as if painting were liable to exist ex nihilo, as if it were ahistorical, as opposed to completely dependent on a couple thousand years of history. I have often encountered this attitude in Mexico and Latin America in general, where the medium is seriously fraught with unresolved contradictions. I have seen a lot of work that on the one hand takes the stretcher, and its history, entirely for granted, assuming that placing something thereon automatically makes it if not painting, then art, and on the other hand preemptively dismisses painting as unserious by virtue of its alleged complicity with the market. As a Mexican painter you have a lot to negotiate, never mind that you are a woman who comes from a male-dominated art context. I guess what I am trying to say is that being a Mexican (woman) painter comes both with some very specific baggage and yet, at the same time, a kind of *tabula rasa*, given how essentially taboo it, as a medium, is.

FTJ I agree with what you say about the current state of painting in Latin America. There is a lack of contemporary discourse due to the many prejudices that dog the medium there. Also the fact that there is almost no history of contemporary Mexican painting because, at least in my opinion, there is a melancholia for a kind of political conceptual art that every contemporary artist should do to be contemporary, together with the wish to detach from handicrafts, because by working in other media or miming more Western aesthetics you’re closer to a fictional internationality, and you don’t want to be reduced to some kind of local craft maker.

I mean, I know I’m being a bit reductive here, but generally speaking, we still have a profound postcolonial trauma. And just the fact that I, as a female painter, would never be taken seriously as a legitimate contemporary artist if I painted flowers is an example of it. That is one of the reasons why I felt obliged to leave Latin America and study in Germany. The second is that, as you say, being a female painter in Mexico becomes a brutal fight for validation. The lack of painting discourse also means that there is a lack of professionals and institutions who validate painting, write about it, or even just take it seriously. I mean, you have Lulu, which is maybe the first space that I know of that consistently brings contemporary painting into the city, and hopefully recharging the art scene in this respect. We have to create a discursive community around it—painting—in which female artists play a crucial role, in order to continue the endless fight against a macho/male-dominated art context and relieve ourselves of the exhausting burden of being a female (Mexican) artist in Mexico.

CS Can you say a few words about you’re working on now?

FTJ Right now I am still working on the concept of autonomy, and the question of display and its effects on the content of painting. I have been obsessed with altar paintings, since they are the first pieces that claimed for themselves a form of autonomy. They transformed the nature and function of the Christian image from a sided one (as in fresco) to an autonomous one, and took on a legitimate position at the center of Christian worship. The history of their display and performativity has inspired me to work a lot with triptychs, so this is what I am thinking about, while also of course always trying to engage in the process of painting and deepen my understanding of feminist and decolonizing practices. Preparing for my upcoming shows—so, basically, painting!

Frieda Toranzo Jaeger (1988, Mexico City) is a Mexican artist based in Hamburg. In 2017, she finished her studies at the HfBK, Hamburg, and she is currently preparing a solo exhibition at Reena Spaulings New York, scheduled to open this coming November. In 2016, she was the recipient of the HISCOX art prize, and has participated in exhibitions at the Kunstverein Schwerin; SORT Vienna; and Achterhause Hamburg, among others.

Chris Sharp is a writer and independent curator based in Mexico City, where co-runs the project space Lulu. He is currently preparing a survey of the work of Tom Wesselmann, entitled *La Promise du Bonheur*, for the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco, and the group exhibition, *Dwelling Poetically: Mexico City, A Case Study* for the Australian Center for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, both 2018. His writing has appeared in many magazines, journals, catalogs, and online forums.

