

Helen Sibila *Mariana Castillo Deball* in: Flaunt, February 18, 2019

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MARIANA CASTILLO DEBALL. EXHIBITION VIEW: "MARIANA CASTILLO DEBALL: FINDING ONESELF OUTSIDE" (2019). NEW MUSEUM, NEW YORK. PHOTO: MARIS HUTCHINSON / EPW STUDIO.

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MARIANA CASTILLO DEBALL

BY HELEN SIBILA (/CONTENT?AUTHOR=5C05BF0203CE64A3D3F734D2)

Imagine an artifact, like an ancient olmec stone sculpture in a museum, or a scribble in a 16th century notebook. As you picture it, the person who made it might come to mind, expanding the reach of the object's network. Who was this person? Where did they find the materials? When did they make this? For how long did they use it? Was

it shared? Inherited? Then, expanding the scope, when did it transition from life as a used object in one culture to being a stationary thing in a museum, likely “owned” by a modern government?

44-year-old Mexican-born artist Mariana Castillo Deball is possessed by these relationships, and she reveals, questions, and reinvents them in her work. An exhibition of work by Deball was recently on view at the University of Chicago that encapsulates her approach. The show was titled *Petlacoatl*, a Nahuatl word that means “a mat woven of snakes pointing in all directions.” This definition is apt for all of her work, her own personal mesh of constantly moving and opposing facets.

As Deball describes her life, artistic background, and upcoming work, I realize that her life is itself an interconnected mesh. From her childhood in Mexico City to academic interests in math, I can visualize all of it interacting to produce the intensely researched sculptures and events she creates.

The daughter of a printer in Mexico City, she grew up surrounded by the “reproduction, copying, and repetition” inherent to the industry. She explains how this influences her work as an artist, and how she challenges reiterative processes by “going directly in the opposite direction.” Her work poses questions about falsification and redundancies in material history, which Deball explores through these questions through sculpture—a medium where works are singular, “massive, and immutable.”



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In addition to revealing such complex oppositions, Deball's work nearly always betrays its intensely researched background. She approaches artmaking in a paradoxically scholarly yet anti-academic manner, but she has always been genuinely curious about everything. Her "approach to knowledge is playful," as she says, and she considered careers in both philosophy and mathematics. She refers to many of her works as "personal equations" to highlight the almost cybernetic experience of life's mesh that they create. For her, art is another space for experimentation: "Each personal equation is going to be adjusted through conversations, collaborations and experiments with materials, in some way I use each exhibition as a field of experimentation in which the questions that interest me are equalized."

Deball has long been interested in mathematical structures specifically, and she uses them as "speculative structures of thought" in her work. "In each project I try to build a personal equation, a spasmodic machine that, as Italo Calvino would say, acts through the author... but that machine would not work without a self immersed in a historical time, without its reactivity, without its convulsive hilarity." Thus, these "personal equations" rely on the viewer's existence as a node in larger networks. Each presents its own small cut-out of a larger network by raising "a specific question about the relationship of the individual with its historical and spatial context." Her works make us reflect on where we stand in the world in regards to materials, personal history, global history, institutions, and thought. Again, imagine yourself in that museum with that ancient sculpture. Now, why are YOU there? What brings you there? How are you connected to institutions? How do you fit into the same human history as that object?

The slithery, intertwined relationships of "the individual with its historical and spatial context" are where Deball is placing her focus in current work. She describes the tensions inherent in her work and how they operate in her upcoming solo show at the New Museum, *Finding Oneself Outside*. The exhibition will feature sculpture from her *Uncomfortable Objects* series. "The exhibition at the New Museum is presented as a journey composed of a series of fables of uncomfortable objects, impossible geographies and juxtaposed temporalities," she tells me.





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MARIANA CASTILLO DEBALL. "NO SOLID FORM CAN CONTAIN YOU" (2010). MODULAR FIBERGLASS CAST FROM THE ORIGINAL COATLICUE STATUE. 98 1/2 X 47 1/4 X 47 1/4 IN. MUSEO AMPARO COLLECTION.

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This work seems especially focused on the contrast inherent to the structures that connect objects and life to intangible forces like capital, history, and essence. These systems are paradoxically mathematical in structure yet amorphous, elusive. She explains, "I am interested in how randomness gains space within ordered structures like institutions, programs, archives, schemes, history, and more; as well as how order and chaos coexist by creating, as it were, their zones of influence, and how our lives--their narratives, their archives-- oscillate between these extremes like pendulums." Some of the sculptures, called "Mathematical Distortions," reference Scagliola, an Italian mathematical modeling technique to directly grapple with these contrasts.

Deball goes on, having switched from obscure mathematics to the story of Apollo and the nymph Telephassa. "Nymphs are both devastating and saving," she explains, and another paradox arises. "They are unpredictable in character; they are powers that act suddenly, capturing and transforming their prey. Each metamorphosis represents the acquisition of knowledge: a narrative possession." She then compares *Uncomfortable Objects* to nymphs in the way the sculptures manipulate knowledge or learning. "They force us to follow them and to look through their eyes until they are captured." And in the process, we necessarily learn what they have to teach us.

The complexity of Deball's art reflects the complicated networks that make up the mesh of life, but the presence of her own personal history in the making of each work renders them evocatively human.

Mariana Castillo Deball is currently at the [New Museum](https://www.newmuseum.org) (<https://www.newmuseum.org>) until April 14

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