



INTERVIEW

Grief, Longing & Growing Within It All:

Elsa Muñoz

BY CHRISTINA NAFZIGER

Nature can be a powerful and all-encompassing thing—and so can fire. Bring these two things together, and you get the awe-inspiring, commanding and potent paintings of Chicago artist Elsa Muñoz. To render such elements together in a way that is both inside and outside the body, part of the world around us yet undeniably somatic, is nothing short of magic. In her paintings of controlled burns, there is beauty in the smoke as it fills your lungs, giving off a heat that is ready to burn so you can reemerge as a phoenix reborn. Yes, there is fire, but there is also calm water, lush foliage, radiating suns and hazy warmth in her work. Hope amidst necessary destruction.

In Muñoz's work, there is a tension of redacting and adding, destruction and creation. Where the land is cleared, new growth is possible. The process isn't easy, but there is beauty on the other side of the fire; there is joy on the other side of suffering. The artist's paintings give rise to new growth and regeneration, as her practice offers a means to cleanse the soul. In this intimate conversation, Elsa Muñoz discusses

her connection to the land and migration, the importance of unburdening yourself and how climate catastrophe relates to spiritual distress.

When did you become interested in ecology and environmental issues? What is your relationship to land?

I love this question because it's a complicated one for me. My interest in ecology grew from a deep sense of longing for connection with nature while living in a dense urban environment. To be honest, the fact that my interest is rooted in longing rather than an active connection to land gave me intense imposter syndrome when it came to painting landscapes for many years. I had to really sit with the root of that imposter syndrome and realized that this grief and longing for connection with nature was totally natural—a biological longing that persisted through the processes of the Enlightenment, colonialism and migration. And once I made that connection, I finally felt like I had a right to make paintings about nature because I was a part of a larger story that didn't begin in a metropolitan city.

By Christina Nafziger

Much of your work centers around nature and healing, such as your series “Controlled Burns.” How do you personally relate to these themes?

Nature and healing go hand in hand for me. I think I was deeply influenced by my own experience of being sick a lot as a child and being continually taken to see “yerberos” (herbalists) when Western doctors didn’t know what was wrong with me. Receiving plant medicine to heal from things that Western doctors wholly dismissed was a profound lesson. And it was this experience that gave me an education in the blind spots of Western ways of thinking about health and illness. The yerberos taught me that we could have physical symptoms for problems that began in the spirit. And that the spiritual body was both real and indivisible from the physical one.

I think from that starting point, I was able to extrapolate larger conclusions as I observed the world around me. I think that’s why the “Controlled Burn” series is so deeply felt for me, and why I’ve been painting it for so long. For me, this series is a personal meditation on this collective soul loss we’ve suffered by suppressing Indigenous earth-based wisdom. I see climate catastrophe as the physical illness that results from a multipronged collective spiritual distress.

Controlled burns are really about reducing vegetation in order to allow new growth. Can you talk a bit about this series and where your interest in controlled burns comes from?

I had the good fortune of seeing the after-effects of a controlled burn during my childhood. We took a class field trip to a local forest preserve just outside of Chicago. It was there that our forest guide explained the concept of controlled burning—a forestry practice where fire is used as an agent for cleansing and regeneration. The idea that something that seemed as hostile as fire could be used as a tool for health and regrowth moved me to my core. I was coming from an environment where violence was a big issue in our community, so learning about the concept of prescribed fire suddenly opened up the possibility of an alternate story. After that trip, the destruction I was seeing around me didn’t seem so total. The realization that a completely barren forest ground was concealing and incubating this whole other world that was slowly coming into being just beneath the surface—I found kinship in that metaphor.

I was surprised to learn that your first experience with beauty within art was

through poetry. Did this encounter spark your path toward painting? Does your love of poetry have an impact on your art making?

Absolutely. I think poetry had the same effect on me as my encounter with yerberos during childhood. In the same way I’d take plant medicine, I remember how poems would land in my chest and in my stomach as I read. I could feel their medicinal effects. So by the time I was introduced to painting, I remember thinking, “I want to make images that look the way Rilke poems make me feel.” My favorite poet is Rainer Maria Rilke. There’s this one particular poem called “Dear Darkening Ground” that is a permanent guest in my studio as I work.

I’m very touched by the words that show up in your artist statement: “the act or process of undrowning.” Can you elaborate on this phrase in relation to your practice?

In my artist statement I talk about the practice of “desahogamiento,” which is Spanish for “undrowning.” I heard this phrase casually while growing up from my mother who always encouraged me to unburden myself in any way I could—talking, crying, dancing, etc. That’s desahogamiento. It’s any practice that allows you to physically expel the psychic weight you’re carrying. My mom always instilled in me that this day-to-day griefwork was essential for healing. It wasn’t until I started painting that I truly felt I’d found my most effective undrowning tool. I’ve since come to think of my artistic practice at large as being in the service of desahogamiento. Painting gives me a space and a language with which to contend with my portion of heartache.

How would you say your artistic style has developed and changed over the years? Was there a time when your art took a significant turn, either visually or conceptually?

I think the most significant development has been in terms of finding courage and language over the years. The search for that critical vocabulary that helps others contextualize what you’re doing—that was the hard part for me. That was the thing that took many years of work, both in terms of research and in terms of simply believing that your own viewpoint is valid when you don’t fall into an easy category. So the significant turn was when I realized that if I wasn’t hearing the kind of conversation I was trying to be a part of, then I had to do my part in starting that conversation.



How have you grown this past year as a person and an artist?

Whew. This has been my personal controlled burn year, to be honest. I went through a major life change and with it came the opportunity to address quite a bit of both personal and generational wounds. I've started learning about differentiating what is mine to hold and heal, and what belongs to others. I've also learned to ask for help, which has showed me that my community is larger and more caring than I knew. And, of course, all this personal work then showed up in my artistic practice. Most significantly, this year has taught me that showing up for myself and doing my work from an authentic place inevitably aligns me with people who resonate similarly. And it is a joy to discover that none of us have to do this alone.

What is one element of your practice that folks may not initially know?

There's a lot of finger painting in my work! My DNA is all up in there.

What are you listening to and/or reading right now?

I'm really excited about the work that writer and philosopher Sharon Arnold is doing through their Patreon project titled "Beyond the Altar." Sharon's scope is vast—social philosophy, cultural theory, magic, art, animism and more. They have a gift for writing these really accessible essays about these complex and often intimidating topics. It's wonderful. I love generous teachers. ♦



