

**THE MESTIZO  
ART OF CARLOS  
ZAPATA**





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# Introduction

DENNISON SMITH

‘Worthy of belief’ is the criterion used by Catholic bishops to determine true visions from false ones, but in South America, where indigenous and slave cultures became syncretic with colonist Christianity, what is deemed worthy is highly personal. In The Baldwin Gallery exhibition, *Worthy of Belief: The Mestizo Art of Carlos Zapata*, folk and tribal art meet Christian iconography to express spiritual and political realities. Zapata, a Colombian sculptor who makes his home in England, draws on the traditions of his mestizo heritage, encompassing Spanish, Native American and Afro-Colombian culture.

Most personal to Zapata is the story of Carmen, a servant who, as a battered child, sought refuge at his grandmother’s farm. During her employment by the family, she remained barefoot, ragged and impoverished. In a stratified and unequal society, as a boy, Zapata was raised to see her as less than human. Awakening to Carmen’s reality informed the deep humanity that pervades his work.

Repeatedly, Zapata’s art pays homage to Carmen. Rendered in wood or charcoal, her bare feet hold totemic power. Feelingly sculpted of rags, a bust of her head takes its place beside the wooden heads of a trinity of South American saints who have never been officially canonized: the Indian chief Guaicaipuro, who drove back the conquistadors; the African slave Negro Felipe, a powerful force in the Cuban revolution, and the blue-eyed, pale-skinned mother María Lionza. Known as The Three Powers, this historical and supernatural triad unite three ethnicities, and, in parts of South America today, they continue to be venerated as worthy of belief.

Today, Carlos Zapata lives in a bucolic village in Cornwall, with its own pantheon of unrecognized saints: from St Budoc, who arrived floating in a barrel, to St Ia, who sailed from Ireland on an ivy leaf. Yet, in subject and style, Zapata remains a Colombian artist. The drug wars of his youth are never far away: in the sculpture *Death and Life*, he recalls a young boy he saw gunned down in the street. The subject is dark, but, drawing on indigenous wisdom, even a child’s death is understood environmentally as the antecedent of life: beside a chiselled, pale blue corpse, a tree sprouts its first green leaves.

Similarly, Zapata’s wall shrine, *Death*, is no less exuberant than *Birth*. In *Birth*, a pregnant woman stands her ground. In *Death*, a big-footed man levitates. Painted in funereal pigments, the man appears to wear an azure-blue wetsuit or onesie pyjamas: light-hearted Death is as vibrant as sea and sky.

Zapata’s impulse is often carnivalesque: *Saint Rabbit’s* human breasts and pregnant belly glisten with silver leaf, and *Saint Bird* spreads his emerald wings in blessing. But the artist can be equally organic and raw: knotted with roots, straw, rags, human hair, coconut husk, string, bones and shell, well-known Catholic saints remind us of Vodun ritual objects, and a gun-totem hangs off the *Shaman Protector’s* tunic. Fetish and icon are seen to be interchangeable, and recent political violence is inseparable from the intimate and supernatural.

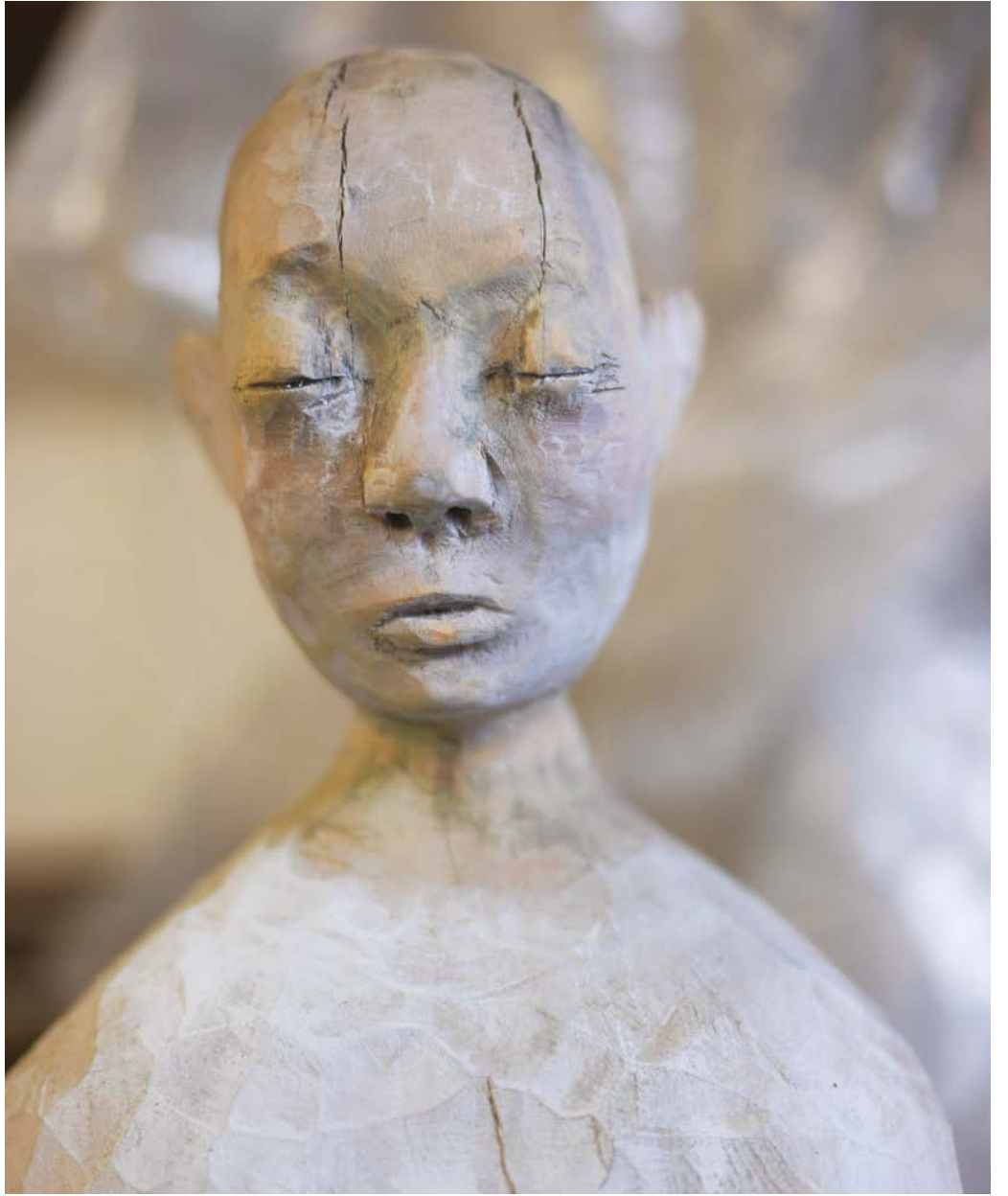
*Worthy of Belief: the Mestizo Art of Carlos Zapata* will exhibit at The Baldwin Gallery, London, October 20th – November 20th 2018.





“I’m lucky to live in England now, free to remember and create art from my childhood memories. So many of my memories of Colombia are rich and wonderful, but as to those that aren’t: from the violence, I create art to help people imagine, with the hope that maybe it’ll never happen again.”















“I was taught to view Carmen as something like an animal. I remember her saying she could hardly see, but no one thought of buying her a pair of glasses.”

# The Saint of Domestic Servants

CARLOS ZAPATA / EDITED BY DENNISON SMITH

I was born in a petroleum camp in the jungle in the 1960s. But when I was two years old, we moved to the city. It was a happy, sheltered existence, despite what was going on around us. War in the countryside. The poverty in the slums. And the social inequalities in my own home.

Carmen was the servant of my grandmother, and she had a tiny room, with a box where all her belongings were kept. It was all she had in the world.

She was a big influence on me. She used to feed me and look after me. She was many times like a mother to me. But she was a servant, a virtual slave, and though I was just a child, I was made to be aware of the social difference between us. I knew it wasn't right. But I was raised inside it. I couldn't articulate what was wrong. She wasn't mistreated physically. Not overtly, anyway. But emotionally, yes. 'You are just a servant: you can't say this or that.' She ate her meals alone, standing in the kitchen.

I remember potatoes, onions and other vegetables stored in hessian bags in the larder. Carmen wore rough, tatty cloth. So I use hessian and burlap in my work.

Carmen was always barefoot, and people who don't wear shoes have a very different foot. Her foot has become iconic in my memory. My memories are vivid and visual, but they live mostly as feelings. Carmen's foot has become the essence of my remembering her. So I created a giant foot out of hessian, recycled string and canvas. I wanted the size to give her more status. I wanted to build a monument to someone who served all her life. In charcoal, I've also created Carmen's head, foot and hand. My intention wasn't a true likeness. Something both stronger and broader: a portrait of all the people who sacrifice themselves.

Such a sacrifice is unthinkable. As a teenager, Carmen came from the countryside with nothing but her clothes. She was looking for a better future. She did what so many people do as refugees from war and poverty.

The *Saints* series is connected to Carmen, because the many saints represent the hope

of those who have no one to call on for help. The saints are a kind of last resort, and belief in them is particularly strong when you are powerless. In her bedroom, Carmen kept a small figurine of the patron saint of domestic workers, Saint Martín de Porres. I have, I think, elevated Carmen to the status of religious icon herself.

The series first showed at Anima Mundi in Cornwall, and it's now part of *Worthy of Belief: The Mestizo Art of Carlos Zapata* at The Baldwin Gallery in London. The collection is a chapel of many religions. I try to be universal about my faith, and I grew up with a dad who was always switching between organized religions. The saints include such venerated figures as St Money. I like the practicality of that: the way we turn religion to our specific needs. It's practical. It's straightforward. I like that.

Carmen left my grandmother's house after almost a lifetime. Five years later, when I was sixteen years old, I was in a public garden when I saw a lady walking towards me. She was dressed very smartly. Brand new shoes, new skirt, a waistcoat, her hair done up neatly, and wearing glasses. Also, she had teeth, which I only knew were false teeth when I realized it was Carmen. When Carmen lived at my grandmother's house, she had only three teeth.

It took me a while before I recognized her. To this day, that still shocks me. Worse, it shocks me that for the first time I really saw her as a human being.

It's difficult to understand how that is possible. But I was a child. I was taught to view Carmen as something like an animal. I remember her saying she could hardly see, but no one thought of buying her a pair of glasses.

It was such a joy to know, at last, in the end, she had found good fortune. With the help of her son, she had recreated herself. There really was hope.

Politics plays a part in all my work, because I grew up aware that outside my safe home was an entirely different world, whose difference was entirely unfair. But the political is also personal to me. The play of power goes right back to the first day of school,



where already there is the funny one, the bully one, the quiet one, and we go through our lives like that, at work, at home or with our families. The contrast between light and dark is there from the beginning.

When I was a child, safe in the city, other children in the countryside were being kidnapped and turned into soldiers. Their mothers would feed the army, and the army would say, 'Your child is old enough to fight for the truth.' That's how they saw it: the truth. The boy would lose his childhood. If he came home to his mother, he wouldn't be a child anymore. I have a son myself. So I created the *Child Soldiers* series.

You'll find traces of the automata tradition amongst these sculptures. Sometimes, though it was my intention to use movement, as the sculpture developed, it became clear no movement was needed. Also, sometimes the automata element became less about the movement and more about the sound. There's a piece about abuse of authority, where you turn the crank and the young soldiers beat a civilian. You're implicated by putting the action in motion, but the most haunting part is the sound of the turning crank.

I was conscripted into the army at age seventeen and saw a lot of ugly things. I wasn't directly involved in any beatings, but it didn't really matter: you're part of the army, and if you're ordered to do it, you feel like you have no choice.

Are the saints good? It depends on who is using them. Saint Death protects the kidnappers. Growing up in Colombia, there were different kinds of kidnapping: kidnapped children, forced to be soldiers, but also the kidnappings of everyone else. You didn't have to be rich to be a target. It's one of the worst kind of crimes, and yet kidnappers have their saints too. This way they can think, 'What I'm doing is good, because even the saints are helping me.'

When I created *Shaman Protector*, I strung his hessian jacket with black, brown and white talismanic heads. These are kidnap victims, from the many peoples of Colombia, and *Shaman Protector* protects them until the day they are free.

I'm sceptical of organized religion, but I believe in God, and I feel the presence from time to time, which is great. I've seen how hope is necessary, and how you need to ask someone for help, for guidance in desperate situations and even normal daily life. Where I grew up, people had so little economic and social power, they gave up on calling the police. In the more remote parts of the country, it wasn't only a problem of disempowerment: there were no police available.

I'm lucky to live in England now, free to remember and create art from my childhood memories. So many of my memories of Colombia are rich and wonderful, but as to those that aren't: from the violence, I create art to help people imagine, with the hope that maybe it'll never happen again.



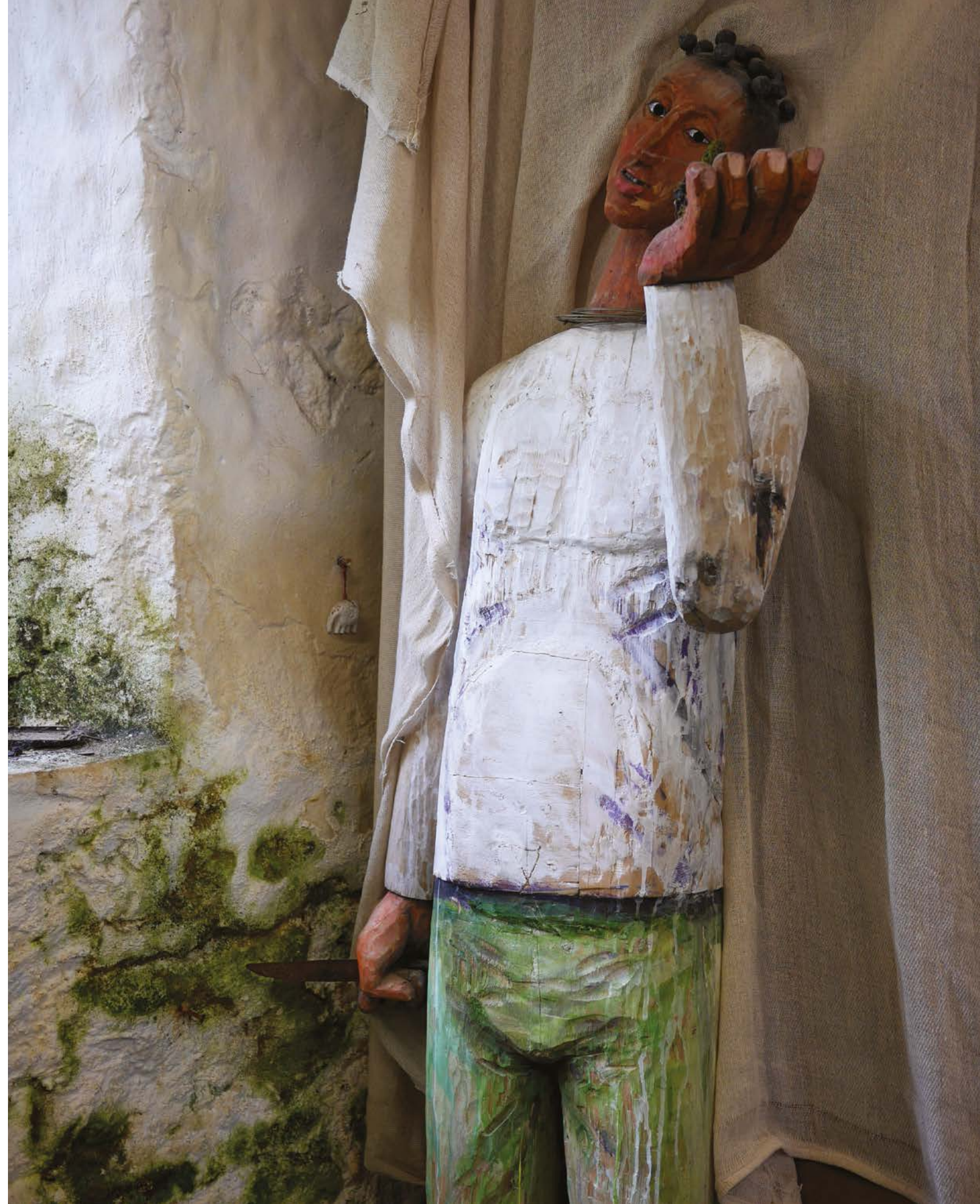
CHILD SOLDIER, 2012







“When I was a child, safe in the city,  
other children in the countryside were  
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soldiers. Their mothers would feed the  
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truth.’”















GOD MONEY, 2016



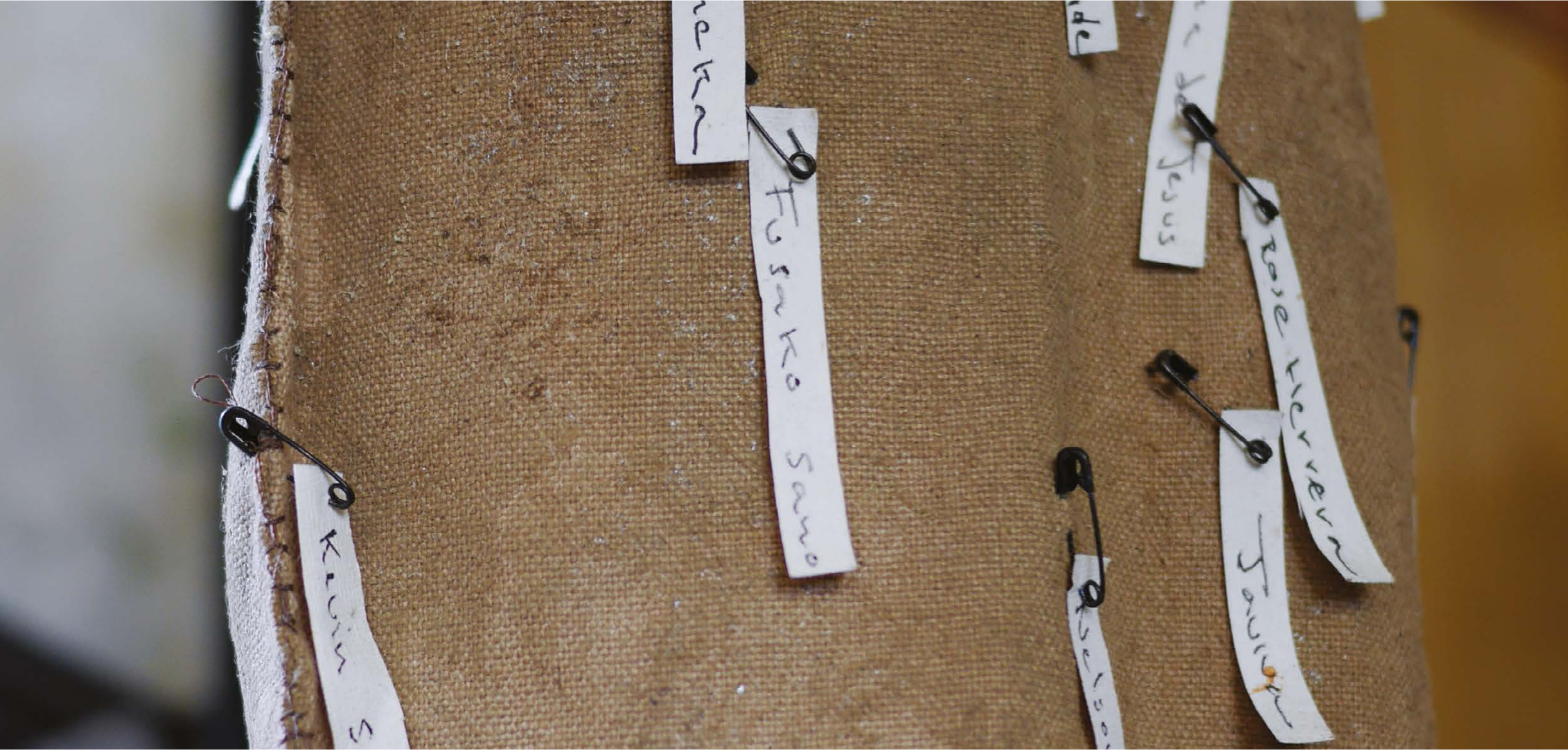


“In *Maximón*, Zapata references the Mayan folk saint and shape-shifting trickster believed to have protected the native peoples of Guatemala during the Spanish conquest.”



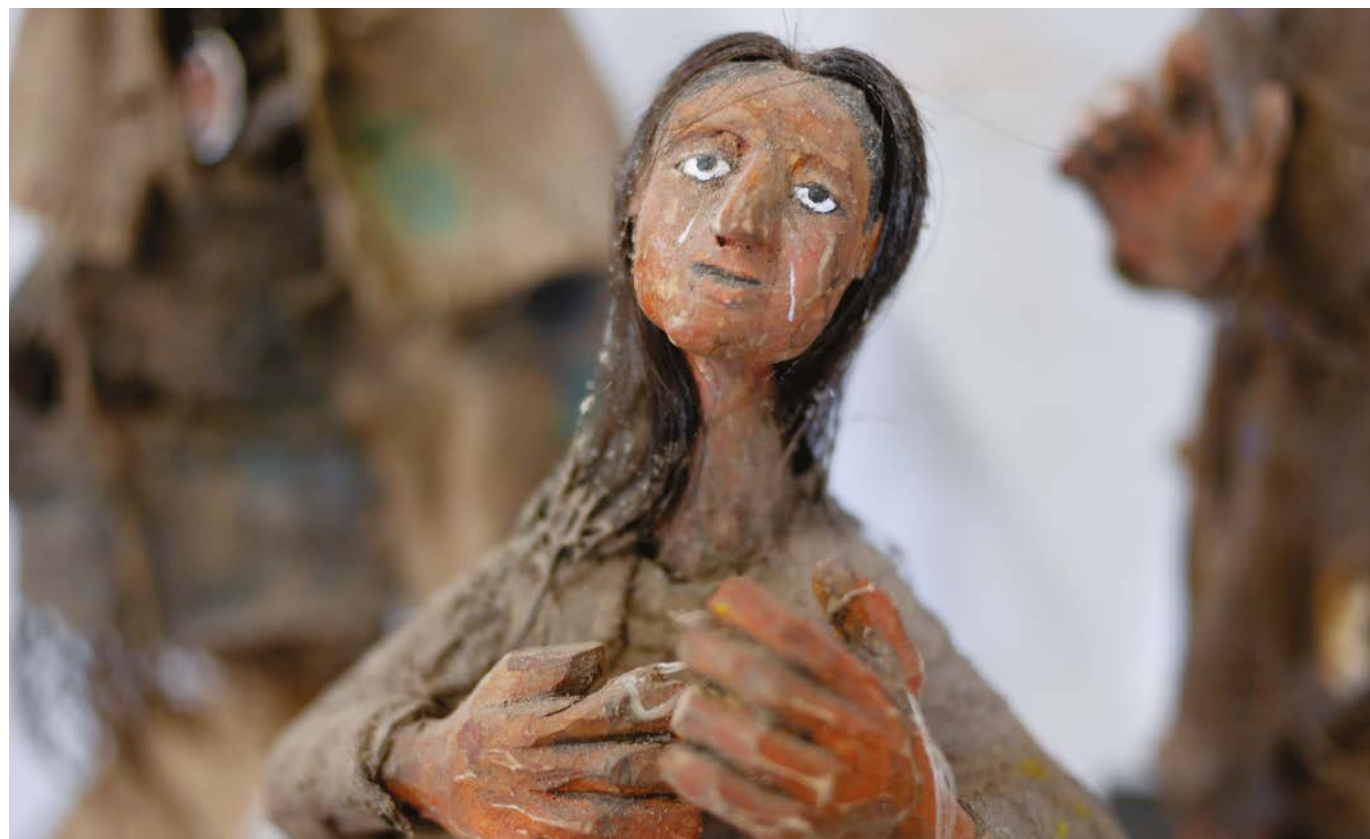
















# Mestizo Colombia

VERITY SEWARD

Engaging with his European and indigenous mestizo heritage, Carlos Zapata uses his sculptural practice to distil and personalize the traditions, ethnicities and political realities that constitute Colombian national identity and Latin American society more broadly. *Mestizo* was a term first used during Spanish imperial rule as a classifier within the caste system – a class hierarchy based on racial background and acculturation. Whilst mestizo peoples very rapidly became the overwhelming majority of the Latin American population, historically they held less power than European aristocrats and their descendants. Today, *mestizo* has been reclaimed as a flexible and ethnically unifying term to denote those living within the Hispanic mainstream. Approximately half the population in Colombia (including Afro-Colombians, Indigenous Colombians and other minority groups) identify as mestizo regardless of their ancestry.

Dennison Smith, founder and director of The Baldwin Gallery, writes: ‘The word *indigenous* – like *native* or *first* – is problematic, but English doesn’t offer us a better word. The dictionary definition is: “originating or occurring naturally in a particular place” or “naturally existing in a place or country rather than arriving from another place”. Both definitions and their applications are suspicious when applied to humans. Why? Because the word can be used to create a false and immobilizing history, one that stagnates a people in both time and space, and one in which any kind of change – from innovation to migration – equals the dirtying or diminishment of a mythical state.’

In Latin America, where indigenous and slave cultures became syncretic with colonial Christianity, the merging of disparate beliefs to preserve religious traditions reflects an adaptability and resilience that refuse temporal entrapment. In *Maximón*, Zapata references the Mayan folk saint and shape-shifting trickster believed to have protected the native peoples of Guatemala during the Spanish conquest. Maximón – also known as San Simón – is frequently conflated with Mayan mythological figures, the Spanish conquistador Pedro de Alvarado y Contreras and the Christian saint, Simon Peter. His veneration in various forms exemplifies the syncretization of pre-Columbian culture with aspects of the dominant power structure. This blending of spiritualities is a salient feature of Latin America and exists in contrast to colonial histories in North America.

For example, whereas Métis peoples in Canada have a more compartmentalized cultural identity – concretized and necessitated through shared traditions, institutions and unifying political figures in their battle for sovereignty and recognition – mestizo culture is defined by its fluidity. Adopting one of his many guises – a hat and suit – Maximón personifies the complex history of migration and change that has shaped Latin America.

The myriad regional saints that Zapata depicts in his *Carnival* series mirror the diverse array of folkloric and legendary creatures that occur in Colombian oral culture and carnival traditions. *Saint Chicken*, the forest spirit who tempts hunters from the path to consume them, stands beside *Saint Horse*, the evil mule believed to instigate treacherous storms. Brandishing a human mask, *Saint Jaguar* retains the entrenched mythological symbolism the jaguar has held across indigenous and pre-Columbian cultures in Central and South America: he is a guardian figure in times of war, a spirit companion and transformation figure for shamans who traverse between the Earth and the spiritual realm. Each anthropomorphic deity exhibits personalities and attributes that provide an important channel of communication between the tangible and the metaphysical worlds.

Carnival is integral to Colombian cultural identity, and is understood to be influenced by a mixture of both European and indigenous practices as well as dance, music and masquerading traditions brought to diasporic communities from West Africa via the transatlantic slave trade. In the *Saints* and *Carnival* series, Zapata attaches organic materials, such as feathers, shells and cloth, to his wooden carvings, drawing upon West African Vodun talismans and *nkisi* power objects from the Congo basin. Fetishism – the imbuing of a human-made object with spiritual power – has historically been disregarded in Western thinking as an arbitrary attachment to materiality, associated with witchcraft, Satanism or the occult. Zapata, however, finds an equivalence between the veneration of shrines and statues in Catholic tradition and the fetish objects believed to be inhabited by spirits in African beliefs. Embedded nails, coins or gold and silver leaf reference our pan-cultural fixation with metal and its role as communicator between the human and spiritual worlds. While Zapata’s figurines are reminiscent



of African material culture, they share characteristics with Russian icons inlaid with gold, and the glistening embellishments that bedeck the interiors of cathedrals. With considered chisel gouges, most left raw and unpolished, he carves eclectic expressions of worship, celebration, pain, menace and contemplation to investigate the practical purposes of religious objects and the power that humans ascribe to them.

With its roots in colonial, indigenous and transatlantic slave cultures, *mestizo* is a synthesizing identity that transcends the arbitrary signifiers of nationhood. In the nineteenth century, much of South America was unified under the name of 'Gran Colombia'. Zapata conjures the historical union of Venezuela and Colombia in his work *The Three Powers*, referencing the Venezuelan Tres Potencias, a triad of Latin American hero-saints, the veneration of whom equalizes historicity and mythology. In the centre is the green-eyed mother, María Lionza, whose union with a giant anaconda transformed her into a goddess of indigenous mythology. Believed to inhabit Sorte Mountain in Yaracuy province, she is the eponymous figurehead of a Venezuelan religion similar to Cuban Santería or Brazilian Candomblé in its blending of Catholic, African and Indigenous beliefs. She is flanked by Negro Felipe, an escaped Cuban slave who fought alongside Simón Bolívar for the liberation and union of Latin America in the nineteenth century, and the indigenous chief Guaicaipuro, who led the sixteenth-century uprising against Spanish gold miners in the Caracas valley. In their coexistence, the trio embody the inherent hybridity of mestizo Latin America.

Fusing the spiritualities and mythologies of settler, indigenous and slave cultures, Carlos Zapata unites multiple reference points that acknowledge the riches and horrors of Latin American history. In this hybridic merging of peoples, Zapata's sculpture allows for multiple, flexible and innovative constructions of race and identity and a plural unity that is at once historic and contemporary.







THE THREE POWERS, 2013

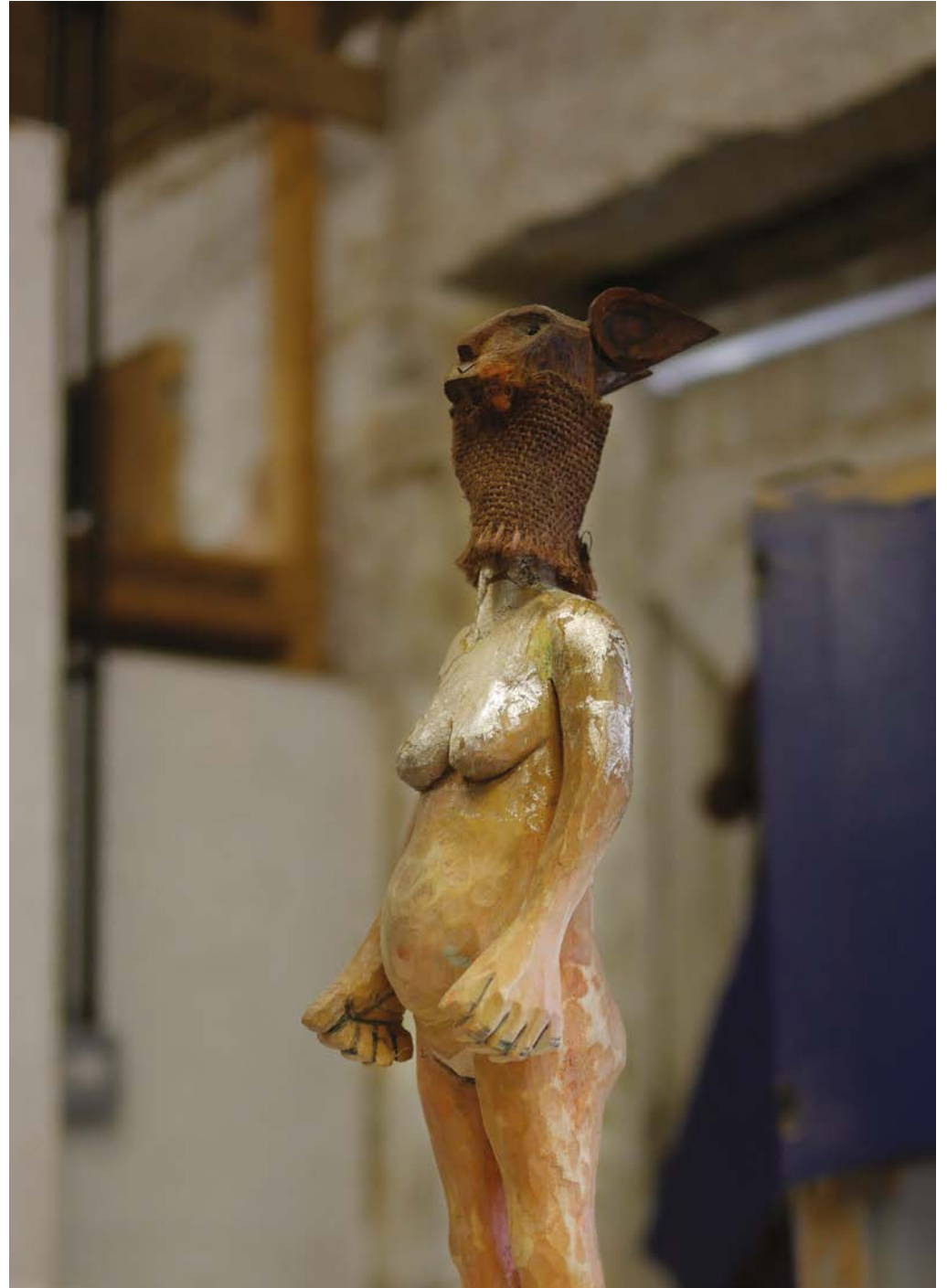




“Saint Chicken, the forest spirit who tempts hunters from the path to consume them, stands beside Saint Horse, the evil mule believed to instigate treacherous storms.”













“Zapata is best known as an automata artist, creating mechanical hand-cranked sculptures that are – as befits the tradition – playful, whimsical and infused with the exuberant folk traditions of his youth in Colombia.”

# Light and Dark Down on the Farm

DENNISON SMITH

Carlos Zapata is cooking Colombian *frijoles* as his mother made them. Already, the proverbial wine is flowing. The cold stone floor warms up beside the Aga. As the sun descends, lighting the candles fails to awaken the papier-mâché puppy who sleeps under a chair. Meanwhile, on the yellow kitchen wall careens a tiny, tin, red bus.

It's exactly as you might imagine the Cornish home of a mestizo Colombian sculptor who draws on indigenous culture and the colour palette from the Rio Grande southward. But this isn't Zapata's cottage. Not his kitchen. Not his dog. Awaiting the owner, I look out the window and see a whimsical Ken doll lodged in a hedge. This is the home of another sculptor, Tim Shaw, a Royal Academician who, despite the cheery interior, is best known for his interpretations of war, brutal politics and the heart of darkness.

This isn't Zapata's house, but Zapata and Shaw are equally at home in light and dark, and both of them make their studios on a bucolic Cornish farm.

From the cottage, ascend a steep hill toward an abandoned quarry and you'll come to a lonely airplane hangar of a barn. Roll open the heavy door, if you can. It is always cold inside. You will be met by Tim Shaw's sculpture, *Casting a Dark Democracy*, based on the infamous photograph of the tortured prisoner in Abu Ghraib. In its twenty-foot rebar armature, behind its black plastic skin, industrious spiders are spinning webs.

Or follow the lane from the cottage, and you will find a ramshackle manor house where the retired farmer is playing his grand piano. Across from the house are cowsheds, and in one of them works Carlos Zapata.

Long before the herd was sold and a lowing silence commenced to haunt the hills, the farmer began offering his outbuildings as simple, inexpensive artist and artisan studios. In the early 1990s, when many Cornish artists worked in heatless shacks – with a stunning view of the sea – and lived off baked beans on the dole, the new tenants in the cowsheds expected little more than the original occupants: a light bulb, glassless windows, a not-too-leaky roof. Aside from light sockets and window panes,

the studios aren't much more sophisticated today, and the iconic farmyard retains the values and vibe of Cornwall before its tourist boom.

About the time the cowsheds were being converted, Carlos Zapata left his home in civil-war-torn Colombia and arrived at Heathrow Airport, a self-taught sculptor with no money, no friends in England and almost no English. He could not have imagined that he'd end up on an historic Cornish farm – which has been in the farmer's family since its notation in the Domesday Book – or that his rough, chiselled sculptures, painted with hand-mixed pigments, would find permanent homes in London's Natural History Museum, The Exploratorium Museum in San Francisco, The Franklin Institute Science Museum in Philadelphia, The Arima Museum and The Gumma Museum in Japan and the Museo Parque de las Ciencias in Granada, Spain.

Zapata is best known as an automata artist, creating mechanical hand-cranked sculptures that are – as befits the medium – playful, whimsical and infused with the exuberant folk traditions of his youth in Colombia. Yet even the most light-hearted of Zapata's works may reveal their darker side. In *Diamonds Are Forever*, on the upper story of a human-headed 'house', a woman receives a diamond from her suitor. But look down at the guts: an exploited labourer hacks relentlessly at a stone. Zapata's automata are deceptively simple, elegant machines, whose whimsy allows for uncensored reality. For Zapata, who was raised during a civil war, the hard truth of institutionalized or systemic violence cannot be far away.

In the series *Child Soldiers*, he has sculpted some of his darkest memories in the guise of toys. Playing on the tradition of toy soldiers, *Child Soldiers* remembers the kidnapped children forced into service as guerrilla insurgents. The effect of a toy is visceral, with disquieting implications. A little wooden boy holds his hands in the air. A posse of prepubescent soldiers point their machine guns at him. You turn the crank underneath. You hear the *rat-a-tat-tat*. It's you who killed the boy.

While *Child Soldiers* is a direct response to a violent era, oblique references to the civil war and a critique of social inequities pervade Zapata's work. The face of Zapata's



*Shaman Protector* is placid, but his rough burlap drips with protective amulets: locks, keys, heads and severed hands holding guns. All are references to Colombian kidnappings.

Amidst a collection of chiselled saints, shamans and icons, the Zapata family servant, Carmen, is more totemic than even St Francis or St Jaguar. Her poverty, sacrifice and mistreatment are remembered in the charcoal drawings of a head and a hand, and the giant sculpture of a foot, and in Zapata's repeated employment of hessian, rags and string, which he associates with the barefoot and toothless woman amongst the potato sacks in his grandmother's pantry. In his mother's youth, a bruised and bloodied teenage Carmen appeared at the front gate and begged the Zapata family to give her work. Carmen's story speaks to war, poverty, social inequality, invisibility and even hope. It is a story told in Zapata's own voice in *The Saint of Domestic Servants*.

The smell of *frijoles* fills the Cornish kitchen as Zapata recounts his memories of Carmen. Zapata is a lithe, gentle man who speaks with a graceful Colombian accent. No streetlamps to brighten the windows: it's black outside when we sit down to dinner. At the head of the table sits Shaw, the cottage's owner, a bull of a Northern Irishman. The two artists couldn't seem more different, but war and mythos are common to both, and while neither neglects joy, both are equally unflinching in their purpose to expose violence to the light of art.

Someone pours the wine. Someone lights the candles. An amber glow hits the farmhouse table. Someone laughs. Carlos serves the dinner. Aside from the cold slate cottage floor, there is little sign of hardship.



SHAMAN, 2013



“Are the saints good? It depends on who is using them.  
Saint Death protects the kidnappers ...

This way they can think, ‘What I’m doing is good,  
because even the saints are helping me.’”



CABINET OF PRAYERS, 2013











*Icons Series*: 2016,  
wood, sand, wax, acrylic paint and metal,  
26 cm H. x 19 cm W. x 6 cm D.  
*Life* p. 12  
*Death* p. 13

*Death and Life*, 2012,  
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37 cm H. x 49 cm W. x 24 cm D.  
p. 14

*Boy*, 2017,  
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19 cm H. x 11 cm W. x 7 cm D.  
pp. 16, 17

*Dead Child*, 2012,  
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30 cm H. x 18 cm W. x 9 cm D.  
pp. 18, 19

*Carmen's Head*, 2017,  
fabric, wax and sponge,  
37 cm H. x 20 cm W. x 20 cm D.  
pp. 22, 28, 29

*Child Soldier*, 2012,  
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70 cm H. x 26 cm W. x 26 cm D.  
p. 27

*Piece of Land*, 2013,  
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1.85m H. x 40 cm W. x 70 cm D.  
pp. 31, 33

*God Bull*, 2017,  
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*God Money*, 2016,  
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pp. 36, 37

*Maximón*, 2013,  
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acrylic paint and tobacco,  
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p. 38

*Shaman Protector*, 2015,  
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pp. 40, 41

*Ex-voto for People Who Have Been  
Kidnapped and Liberated*, 2015,  
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pp. 42, 43, 44, 45

*Saint Series*: 2015,  
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*María Mountain* p. 46  
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*Unfinishedd Work*,  
p. 53

*The Three Powers*, 2013,  
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pp. 54, 55

*Carnival Series*: 2016,  
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*Saint Jaguar* pp. 48, 49, 59  
*Saint Chicken* pp. 48, 49, 56  
*Saint Bull* pp. 48, 49, 58, 63  
*Saint Pig* pp. 48, 49, 59  
*Saint Horse* pp. 48, 49, 56  
*Saint Rabbit* pp. 48, 49, 60, 61  
*Saint Bird* pp. 48, 49, 58

*Child Soldier*, 2012,  
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26 cm H. x 11 cm W. x 26 cm D.  
p. 64

*Shaman*, 2013,  
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94 cm H. x 32 cm W. 27 cm D.  
p. 69

*Cabinet of Prayers*, 2013,  
plastic figurines, wood, metal,  
acrylic paint and wax,  
74 cm H. x 35 cm W. x 11-25 cm D.  
pp. 70, 71

*Inner Spirit*, 2016,  
wood, acryic paint and metal  
46 cm H. x 15 cm W. x 24 cm D.  
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The Baldwin Gallery

The Baldwin curates dialogue between cultures, nature and art. Specializing in Native American art and environmental art, The Baldwin curates, procures and consults for museums, cultural institutions, arts organizations and collectors internationally. Collaborations or commissions in London, England include The National Maritime Museum, Canada House and The Horniman Museum.

Dennison Smith

Dennison Smith’s published works include two novels, *The Eye of the Day* (HarperCollins, Periscope) and *Scavenger* (Insomniac), and two poetry collections. She is the founder and creative director of The Baldwin (London) and holds a BS in Performance Studies from Northwestern University and an MA and PhD in Creative Writing from University of East Anglia.

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Verity Seward

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