

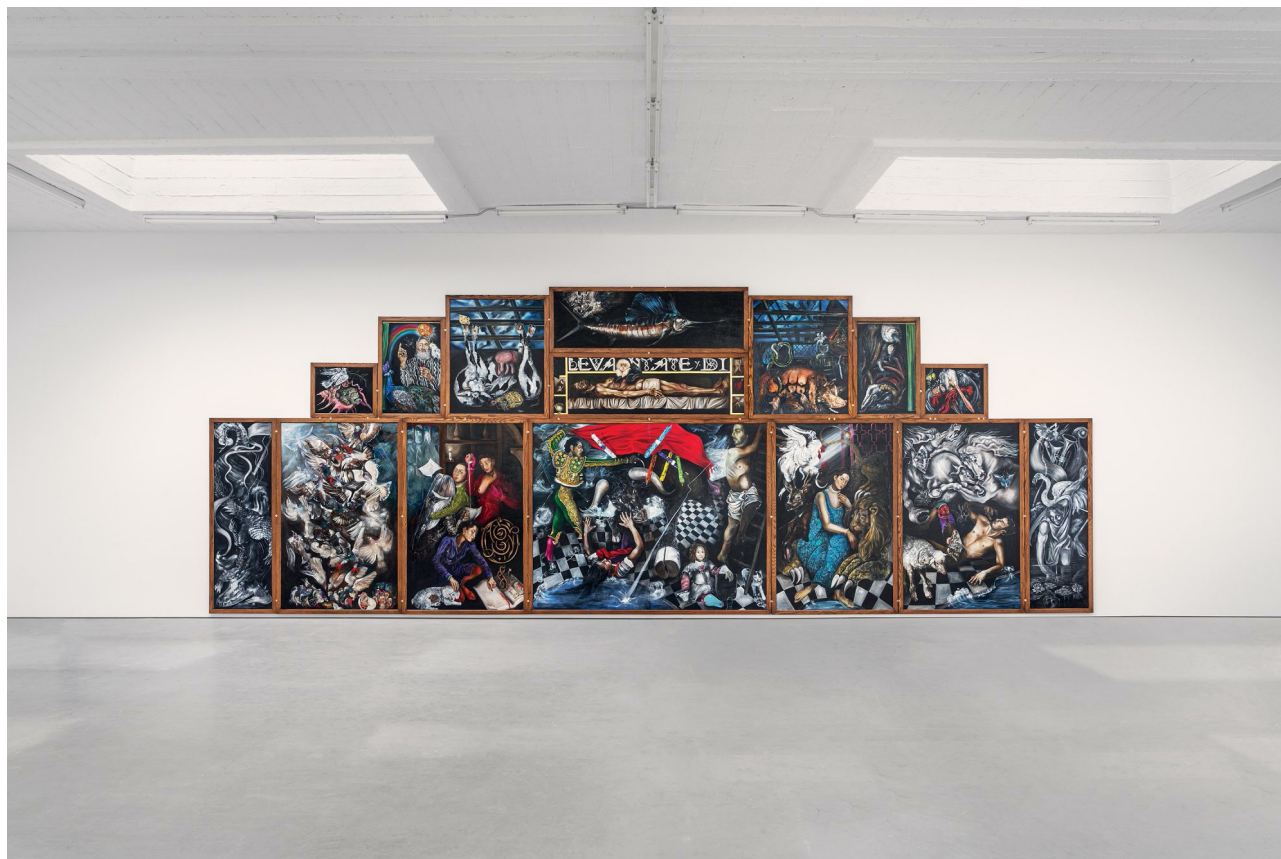
# A Cabaret of Herstory: Karla Kaplun

by Anna Goetz

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Karla Kaplun, *La Misión*, 2022, *La Misión* installation view at Gaga, Los Angeles, 2022. Courtesy: the artist and Gaga Fine Arts, Mexico City / Los Angeles. Photo: Dawn Blackman

Over only a few years, Karla Kaplun has developed a complex body of work that is defined by drama in various forms, and that critically—often satirically—engages with issues of cultural appropriation, commodification, and hierarchization.

*Aztec BLAST® Workout* (2019) is a multimedia series whose backbone is an elaborate marketing campaign for a fitness program that fuses Mexican *conchero*—a ritual dance containing elements of pre-Columbian ceremonies that originated after the Spanish conquest and served to keep ancient rituals alive—with bodybuilding routines, presented via the aesthetics of the contemporary wellness industry. *Aztec BLAST® Workout* satirizes the attempts of the postrevolutionary Mexican government to construct the *conchero* as a cornerstone of Mexican identity, and exposes a broader tendency of new-age industries to commodify Indigenous cultures; the eternal search for the authentic and spiritual guidance frequently takes the form of capitalistic cultural appropriation. With *Aztec BLAST® Workout*, Kaplun laid the conceptual groundwork for her work to come, especially her study of bodies as they perform movement routines.

Inspired by her mother, a passionate bodybuilder, Kaplun has long been interested in the pursuit's sculptural aspects—enacting pre-defined poses that convey the idea of exertion. In portrayals of bodybuilding figures such as *SPORT/ Becky Blast* and *SPORT/ Cookie Blast* (both 2019), she blends references to the stylized bodies of postrevolutionary Mexican socialist realism with contemporary pop culture. The androgynous bodies are presented in fierce contortions to conform to and at the same time exert pressure on the confining (pictorial) frame that defines and encloses them. The frame thus becomes emblematic of any structure that imposes predetermined categories on any subject and then judges it according to how it well fits into them.

Kaplun thematizes the body and its representation as a means to resist categorization and thus the compulsion to assimilate to conventional classifications based on socially constructed cultural, gender, or racial categories that reinforce social inequalities and hierarchies, whether within or across societies and cultures.

In the series of drawings *Praying Arlequinos* (2020) Kaplun introduced a new system of references that continues to characterize her work: the European Baroque, in terms of both its aesthetic dramatization and its civilizational narrative. The contorting protagonists appear here as harlequins—the literary figure who is permitted to voice criticism and has therefore historically been employed as a vehicle to question what are considered the “right” moral principles. This anarchic figure also dominated Kaplun’s paintings presented in her first solo exhibition, *La Compañía* (The Company) at Gaga, Mexico City, in 2021. These mostly large-scale, dark, heavy figurative tableaux draw from eighteenth-century European academicism and Baroque painting. They incorporate iconic historical Western and biblical figures as they were famously represented by artists such as Caravaggio or Artemisia Gentileschi. Most of them are dressed as harlequins and impersonated by people close to the artist, thereby bringing together new constellations with icons of Mexican history and their legends. *El sueño de Bruno* (Bruno’s Dream [2020]), for instance, references Caravaggio’s *The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* (1599–1600), but in place of the soldier sent to kill the Evangelist, we see the Mexican heraldic animals, an eagle with a snake in its beak. Here, though, the eagle seems to be attacking the serpent, depicted as a white python, for trying to steal the spirit of the falling harlequin. The eagle thus becomes the savior who, symbolically speaking, tries to prevent the colonial appropriation of Mexico’s Indigenous cultures. *Escena: Acto II* (Scene: Act II [2020]), which references Jacques-Louis David’s *Death of Marat* (1793), has Marat appearing in several savior roles at once, including Mary and the lamented Christ.

Part of her cunning mission to topple Western painting from its dominating position, Kaplun’s exhibition—tellingly titled *La Misión* (The Mission), at Gaga’s shared space with Reena Spaulings in Los Angeles—consists of a single, altar-like installation composed of fifteen individual oil paintings encased in wooden frames, each with its own narrative. The piece stems from the biblical story of Noah’s Ark—the end of the old world and the promise and building of a new one. The artist does not exclusively adopt direct iconographic references anymore, yet still flirts with the conceptual structure of the Baroque aesthetic though a surrealist, nightmarish atmosphere where proportions fail, perspectives fall, and limbs appear twisted, as in in Johann Heinrich Tischbein’s *Goethe in the Roman Campagna* (1786) or Lars von Trier’s *Antichrist* (2009). The canvases depict various allegorical animals, people from the artist’s immediate surroundings (in very symbolically loaded constellations), and such “modern legends” as the eccentric Englishman Edward James (who, between 1962 and 1984, built his very own surrealist vision as a sculptural garden in a lush forest in northern Mexico). *Después del diluvio, Noé vivió todavía trescientos cincuenta años más* (After the Flood, Noah Still Lived Three Hundred and Fifty Years More [2022]) combines all of these with references to Christian iconography. *Monjes bisbisiantes* (Muttering Monks [2022]) shows the artist posing like a scholar while stroking a dog (her own) positioned at the foot of a medieval marriage scene. The bride, in armor and veil, is turned away from the viewer, while the groom (the artist’s real-life partner) protectively puts his arm around her. The fourth protagonist holds one breast bare while symbolically letting inspiration trickle down from a shell onto the artist’s self-portrait.

The appropriation of icons and iconography from Western painting has become a signature of Kaplun’s practice. The artist rewrites the narratives she propagates, confronting the violent history of the self-proclaimed “high culture” that produced them and that has swept over and subordinated other cultures—such as those in Mexico—for centuries.

Karla Kaplun (b. 1993, Querétaro) is a Mexican artist whose practice captures her long and extensive research on the Baroque in the history of Mexican and European painting. Kaplun's multimedia practice includes drawing, painting, collage, and video, often evoking a theatrical feeling through poetic images. The artist graduated from the Escuela Nacional de Pintura, Escultura y Grabado "La Esmeralda," Mexico City. Recent solo exhibitions include *La Misión, Gaga*, Los Angeles (2022) and *La Compañía, Gaga*, Mexico City (2020). Recent group shows include *Sala-jardín-bar: I Believe in God, Only I Spell It Nature*, Lodos Gallery, Mexico City (2021); *Sans Filet*, Aoyama Meguro, Tokyo (2020); and *The World Is Not Like Us, It Was Imposed, We Try to Transform It*, Britta Rettberg, Munich (2020).

Anna Goetz is a curator and researcher who currently lives between Europe and Mexico and realizes exhibitions internationally. Her research interest lies in artistic strategies that challenge prevailing hierarchies, narratives, and structures in society. Her last institutional post was at MMK Museum for Modern Art Frankfurt.