



Where
magic
meets
material

LEFT AND ABOVE: *Impossible Bouquet series*



Jessica Browne explores how Martha Pachón Rodríguez brings elements of magical realism into her finely detailed porcelain sculptures

‘LET YOURSELF BE CARRIED AWAY by fantasy, by details, by colours, and discover your inner peace.’ These are the words of Colombian-born ceramicist Martha Pachón Rodríguez, whose porcelain works carry with them the legacy of a culture steeped in storytelling and magical realism. With a career that spans continents, Pachón has not only carved a unique path through the world of contemporary ceramics but also cultivated a language in porcelain that is distinctly her own: poetic, provocative and profoundly personal.

COLOMBIAN ROOTS

Born in Bogotá and raised in the lush, contrasting regions of Colombia, from the misty Andean highlands to the vivid tropical plains near the Magdalena River, Pachón’s artistic sensibility is inseparable from her roots. Her upbringing and family were made up of a cacophony of creative and culturally rich experiences. ‘Our house was constantly frequented by intellectuals, writers, poets, composers and painters,’ she recalls.

As the daughter of a painter mother and a father immersed in music and storytelling, her childhood was filled with books, colours and unfettered freedom to create. She remembers how: ‘My mother would cover the walls with paper and place several bowls of paint on the floor so my sisters and I could paint without worries or limits.’

Her homeland of Colombia has arguably permeated her own artistic identity. ‘Colombia is a nation that fills you with strong emotional experiences: the colours, the light, the music, the nature, the smells...(they) leave a mark on you,’ she explains.

From an early age, Pachón found herself drawn to both form and material. A formative moment came during her time at a French convent school, where the punishment for talking too much and laughing too loudly turned into a lifelong calling. Sent to a jungle-like courtyard for her misbehaviour, she discovered a nun's ceramic studio. 'She made beautiful things that she put in a kiln and they came out even more beautiful,' smiles Pachón. This experience lit the fire of what would become her lifelong medium and was 'the starting point for creative happiness for the rest of my life'.

Pachón's initial education in Colombia was both broad and deep. She earned degrees in Childhood Education and Fine Arts from the Universidad Surcolombiana in Neiva and later taught at the same university. Her early work was rooted in stoneware but it wasn't until she arrived in Europe and undertook travels through Asia, that porcelain revealed itself as the material best suited to her vision. 'Porcelain was the only medium to express my magical realism in a refined, elegant and light or contrasting way,' she reveals.

She continued her ceramic training at the Art Institute for Ceramics G. Ballardini in Faenza, Italy, one of the most prestigious centres for ceramic education. The move to Italy was a turning point, allowing her to fully explore porcelain's possibilities. Her work began to straddle multiple worlds: between Colombia and Europe, sculpture and installation, tradition and innovation. Over the years, her practice has grown to include not only stand-alone sculptures and porcelain jewellery but also immersive installations that speak to broader cultural, ecological and spiritual questions.

PORCELAIN AS MEMORY

Pachón's work finds inspiration in an eclectic array of sources: from Caribbean mythology and Mediterranean light to artists such as Zaha Hadid, Federico Fellini, Giotto and iconic performers like David Bowie and Juan Luis Guerra. The concept of magical realism, a defining aspect of Colombian literature through figures like Gabriel García Márquez, is deeply embedded in her visual language.

Her sculptures blur the boundary between reality and dream, sensuality and sanctity, nature and fantasy. This blending is especially evident in her series *Impossible Bouquet*, inspired by her Caribbean grandmother's elaborate scenography, or *Sein-Oursin*, based on childhood memories of magical objects slipped into her pockets by her father. These works are emotionally charged, richly layered and crafted with immaculate precision. Titles often shift between Spanish, Italian and French, a nod to the multicultural and multilingual life she leads.

Storytelling, memory and cultural hybridity are the lifeblood of Pachón's practice. Her work begins with a story (sometimes real, sometimes imagined) and unfolds across sketchbooks, maquettes and long periods of reflection and consideration. 'My process begins with an emotion, a memory, a story – with something that touches my heart that I want to express and share,' she explains.

Often, the piece already has a name before the first line is drawn. Her process is slow and deliberate, sometimes taking a year or more before the physical work begins. Yet, once in motion, her discipline is rigorous, from mould-making to the final firing, infused with technical precision and poetic intent. She explains: 'I prepare all the materials; it can take a week, a month or more. Then, the making of the parts begins for another week or month. Finally, the construction, which can take one to three days. If it is an installation, it can take months. The finishing touches and slow drying follow; this requires another month, then the firings at 1000°C and 1280°C.'

Among her most emotionally resonant works is the series *Microworlds*. Sparked by a journey through the jungles of Colombia and Brazil, the pieces



ABOVE FROM TOP: *Water garden* and *Luna* light installations **RIGHT:** *Wedding mantle* light installation





Porcelain was the only medium to express my magical realism in a refined, elegant and light or contrasting way



LEFT: *Microworlds series*
ABOVE: *Mediterraneo* from the *Sein-Oursin* series

illuminate, both literally and figuratively, the complex relationship between indigenous knowledge and environmental exploitation. ‘It is a call to reflect on social, cultural and spiritual issues,’ she explains. ‘The work specifically addresses the problem of biopiracy, or the practice of stealing biological knowledge belonging to indigenous populations for the sole purpose of economic benefits that are not shared with the native populations who possess this heritage.’

These wall-mounted porcelain sculptures, illuminated from within by LED lighting, celebrate the ecological expertise of indigenous groups such as the Kayapó people of the Amazon. The translucent, backlit forms shimmer like celestial bodies, transforming porcelain into a conduit for activism as much as aesthetic contemplation.

Her fascination with the female experience, rooted in both the personal and communal, is particularly powerful in works like *Impudic Laces* (*Dentelles Impudiques*), a sculptural series inspired by the lives of elderly women in her current home of Fognano in Italy. These women, once lace-makers who travelled to Florence to sell their wares, became financially independent through craft. Pachón honours their resilience through porcelain imprints of lace, each fragment telling a story of autonomy, memory and transformation.

It is in Fognano that she founded MPR Studio, a collaborative space where artisans from embroiderers, light designers, woodworkers and goldsmiths, work alongside her on multidisciplinary projects. Her role as both artist and educator continues, as she teaches specialised porcelain courses across Europe and Asia, as well as in Faenza at the International Ceramic Museum’s School of Arts.

HERITAGE AND ORIGINS

Pachón’s contributions to the ceramic world have not gone unnoticed. She is a member of the International Academy of Ceramics, has received multiple awards in Europe and Asia, and was named a Maestro of Arts and Crafts (MAM) by the Cogni Foundation, a title that recognises her as an ambassador of Italy’s artistic heritage. Her inclusion in the Homo Faber Guide and the Michelangelo Foundation further confirms her status as one of the foremost voices in contemporary ceramic art.

Her latest works echo the rhythms of the jungle and the stories passed down through generations, embodying both the beauty and the fragility of her cultural roots. Through this process, Pachón reaffirmed her belief



ABOVE, FROM TOP: *Mappa Celeste* (detail), permanent installation at the Museo Territorio, Faenza, Italy; Martha in her studio

that porcelain could be both a memory vessel and an instrument of cultural preservation, a means of keeping her Colombian heritage alive even while living abroad. 'Cultural heritage becomes stronger when you are far from your homeland,' she reflects.

The passing of both her grandmothers and her father deepened her connection to her origins, prompting new works that merge ancestral memory with modern concerns. In every sculpture, she conjures a world where time, geography and emotion intermingle – a world where porcelain becomes not just a material, but a vessel of history, hope and homage.

Looking forward, Pachón is deepening her exploration into installation and environmental storytelling. She envisions future installations that not only immerse viewers in visually arresting environments but also engage them in dialogue about ecological preservation and cultural identity. These may include large-scale, site-specific works that incorporate natural elements such as soundscapes from the Amazon, interactive components and organic materials juxtaposed with delicate porcelain.

Her goal is to create experiential narratives that reflect the interconnectedness of humanity and nature, blurring the boundaries between viewer and artwork, memory and material, past and present. The evolving *Microworlds* series is now in its second phase – more abstract, more translucent, and waiting for its ideal setting. She dreams of a dedicated event to unveil the full body of work, one that embodies the complexity of her life.

In a time when the art world can often feel transient, Pachón offers something enduring: a deep engagement with materials, an unwavering commitment to storytelling and a belief in the power of beauty to reflect the most pressing issues of our time. Through porcelain, she invites us to see and feel the world anew. 

For more details visit mprodriguez.com; @marthapachonrodriguez

Images: courtesy of the artist; photos: © Rafaelle Tassinari, Faenza, Italy