



# *Reconfiguring* **CASTA**

*Maria Cristina Tavera*

# Identities and Intersections

*Maria Cristina Tavera's Reconfiguring Casta*

**cas•ta** /'kasta/ 'kastə/ 'kafte/ [From 17th century Spanish and Portuguese] **n** **1** caste **2** a system of racial hierarchy created in New Spain during the colonial era **3** a type of painting, typically shown in a grid of sixteen, that illustrated racial mixture in New Spain.



(Detail) Juan Patricio Morlete Ruiz, *From Spaniard and Return Backwards, Hold Yourself Suspended in Mid Air* (*De español y torna atrás, tente en el aire*), Oil on canvas, circa 1760

Casta paintings were racially based family portraits that were commissioned by the Spanish nobility that governed New Spain in the 18th century. Not unlike early natural history book sketches that documented previously unknown flora and fauna, the paintings aided in creating a semblance of classification and order for Europeans in the uncharted new world. Each image depicted a mixed race family, labeling images of parents and a child with new identity terminology (mestizo, mulatto, etc.) and creating a class hierarchy that revered whiteness. They intended to educate viewers on the social consequences of interracial relationships and illustrated that certain combinations could help mixed families regain a semblance of whiteness while others would lower a family's status. If a woman of Spanish-Indian heritage married an indigenous man, her child would be demoted in the social scale and might be labeled as a *salta atrás* — or a jump backward<sup>i</sup>. Throughout Latin America and particularly Mexico, casta was the foundation for modern racial identification and terminology. Over the centuries, sociopolitical advancements and greater acceptance of racial difference may suggest that casta are relics from a distant

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<sup>i</sup> Rodriguez, Gregory. "An Unsettling Racial Score Card." Los Angeles Times, July 18, 2004. <http://articles.latimes.com/print/2004/jul/18/magazine/tm-castes29>.

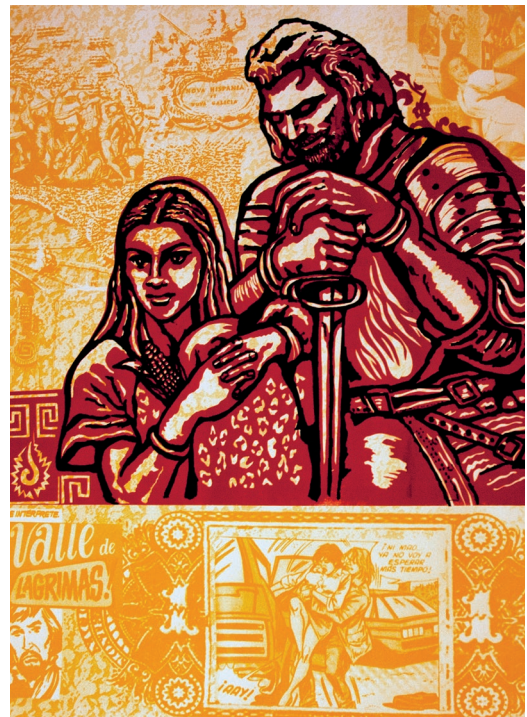


historical moment. However, as demonstrated by Maria Cristina Tavera's *Reconfiguring Casta* series, the aesthetic and linguistic formula of the original paintings provides an apt template through which contemporary issues of identity and representation might be explored. Tavera deftly departs from the rigid structure of colonial casta while adhering to ahistorical questions of race, ultimately creating a body of work that presents a 21st century *mestiza* biography.

As a dual citizen of the United States and Mexico, Tavera's life and career have been shaped by bicultural and bilingual experiences. While navigating between two cultures, she has instinctively cultivated her own set of references and icons that represent her personal understanding and affinity for history and popular culture. Accordingly, Tavera's visual and linguistic vocabulary cites a wide array of sources, such as Mexican folk tales, Latino celebrities, advertisements, comics, and current events. Previous bodies of work have included woodblock prints of the mythical *Chupacabra* and *La Llorona*, as well as prints of original urban legends the artist herself created. Throughout her work Tavera consistently examines narratives and archetypes that touch upon themes of virtue or moral peril — a ghost mother is doomed to mourn for eternity, a devious playboy deceives a gullible woman, etc. Her engagement with casta is a natural extension of this practice, as it scrutinizes

the means through which racial and gender stereotypes have been constructed from the era of *conquistadores* through today.

Just as folk legends use melodrama and the supernatural to encourage good behavior, the Spanish invented exaggerated stereotypes



*La Malinche Conquistada*, Screenprint, 2015

via casta to emphasize the societal dangers of racial mixing. Intended to alleviate continental concerns about class and hierarchy, the paintings unequivocally portrayed individuals with greater indigenous or African ancestry as poorer and more sinful, often depicting them disheveled or in domestic disputes. However, the casta system made racial difference seem cut and dry. In reality it was difficult for people to distinguish between the 16 different identities that the early paintings delineated. Instead, the prejudices created by casta-oriented colonialists encouraged *mestizaje* to thrive amidst its ambiguity and ultimately emerge as the dominant characteristic of Mexican identity. Thus, it is the mestizo or hybrid that is central to Tavera's examination of identity, albeit imbued with 21st century complexities.

In *La Malinche Conquistada*, the artist foregrounds an image of *La Malinche*, a Nahua native woman, and Hernan Cortes, the Spanish conquistador credited with overtaking the Aztec empire. La Malinche was one of several women given to the Spaniards as slaves, and eventually became Cortes' translator and mistress. In giving birth to his son, she became an iconic figure as the literal mother of *mestizaje*, a mixed race child of native and Spanish ancestry condemning her to being considered a traitor while simultaneously a victim of exploitation. Tavera's choice of



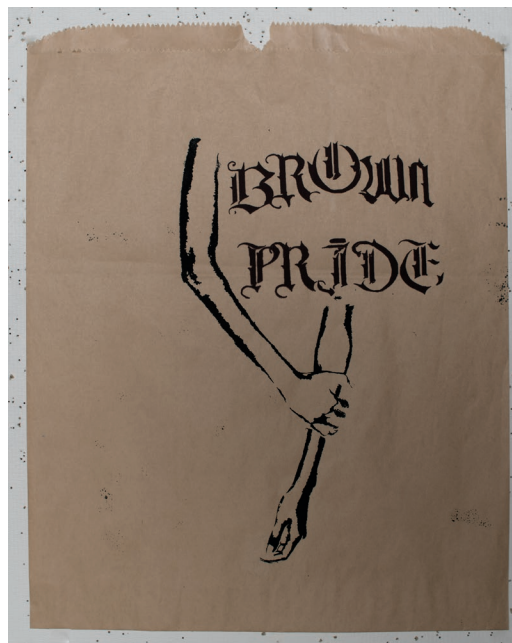
*Rarotonga Beauty*, Screenprint and mixed media, 2016

juxtaposing images immediately belies her interest in problematizing history's treatment of La Malinche. She counters the central image with a faded photonovela of a man slapping a woman, and a comic strip depiction of a man violently forcing a woman into his car. In the bottom corner, the comic's title *Valle de Lagrimas*, or Valley of Tears, suggests an apt title for the somber composition.

Elsewhere in the installation, Tavera focuses on enduring prejudices within and against Latinos and Blacks. *Rarotonga Beauty* focuses on an Afro-Latina, the star of a popular 1970s Mexican comic book about a powerful jungle queen seductress

with dark skin and green eyes. The character of Rarotonga perpetuated the stereotype of the hypersexualized Black woman, and demonstrated the entertainment industry's culpability in constructing racial ideology. Tavera juxtaposes a portrait of Rarotonga staring defiantly at the viewer with charts dissecting eye color and genetics, and images of blue, green, and brown eyes. The eyes allude to the persistence of racial categorization while also referencing the role of the media in fabricating beauty standards. The artist is less ambiguous in *Brown Tone*, which prominently features a brown paper bag. Here Tavera is referencing the Brown Paper Bag test, an act of colorism pervasive throughout the earlier 20th century. Fraternities, social clubs, and other public gatherings would often discriminate against Black and mixed race patrons by only permitting entrance to those whose skin was lighter than a brown paper bag. Tavera upends the object's history of prejudice and shame by defiantly imprinting Brown Pride on the composition, invoking civil rights activism and the solidarity felt by Chicanos and Latinos.

For Maria Cristina Tavera *Reconfiguring Casta* is an exercise in unpacking and amalgamating personal recollections of race in the United States and Mexico. By layering visualizations of historical anecdotes with contemporary



*Brown Tone*, Screenprint on paper bag, 2016

references, Tavera asserts that the past and present remain interconnected through the lived experiences of people of color. Rather than simply recreate colonial casta paintings, she has evolved the genre into a new form that is both representative of contemporary inundation with visual culture and symbolic of the hybridity that defines mestizaje. *Reconfiguring Casta* is both figuratively and literally immersive, making visible the innumerable iterations of racial discourse in the 21st century.

*Essay by Mia Lopez*



**Mia Lopez** is a curator and educator with more than ten years of experience in museums and non-profit art spaces. As the 2013-2015 Curatorial Fellow for Visual Arts at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis she collaborated on exhibitions, programs, and catalogues including *9 Artists* (October 2013), *Art at the Center: 75 Years of Walker Collections* (October 2014) and *International Pop* (April 2015). In 2013 she completed dual Masters at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in Modern Art History, Theory, and Criticism and Arts Administration and Policy; her graduate thesis examined anthropology, museology, and performance in work by Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco. She also has a BA in Art History from Rice University.

From 2007 through 2010 Mia was the Programming Coordinator at the Museo Alameda in San Antonio, Texas where she designed and managed public programs pertaining to Latino art, history, and culture. She has interned and worked nationally, including at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, and the Contemporary Art Museum Houston. Mia is also a 2012 alumnus of the Smithsonian Latino Museum Studies Fellowship. She has lectured and participated in juries and panels at the Smithsonian Latino Center, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the University of Minnesota, the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, ArtPrize, and the Rochester Art Center.



**Maria Cristina Tavera's** dual citizenship and bilingual/bicultural upbringing between Mexico and Minnesota has greatly influenced her professional experience, writing, curatorial, and visual art practice. The yearning to be with family in Mexico has evolved into a fascination with Mexican art and traditions. Her art explores combining contemporary methods with traditional practices to address issues related to gender, societal expectations, and human classifications.

Tavera has a Masters in Public Affairs-Leadership in the Arts from the U of M Humphrey School. She has received fellowships from the Archibald Bush Foundation, Smithsonian, Museum of Modern Art-New York, and the Institute of Mexicans Abroad (IME): Promoters of Culture. Grants received are from Metropolitan Arts Council and Minnesota State Arts Board. Tavera has exhibited locally and nationally including the National Mexican Museum. Her work is in private and public collections such as the Weisman Art Museum and the Plaines Art Museum. Her writings on Mexican artists have been published at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the Walker Art Center, and in Germany with De Gruyter Allgemeines Künstler-Lexikon. She also published a book titled, *Mexican Pulp Art*.



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