ARTIST PROFILE

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METAL AS METAPHOR

Paula Castillo digs deep into material history, giving shape to our human predicaments

What if we raised our children not to surrender so easily to the laws of physics? Freed them, that is, to dream like the builders of pyramids, Stonehenge, Easter Island, and Machu Picchu, where the only thing standing in the way of a vision was a series of engineering problems? That's the kind of environment that might account for the paradox of a sculptor like Paula Castillo: small woman, big ideas, and heavy metal objects that seem as permeable as air.

"At the dinner table, he would do this game with us," Castillo says of her father, an engineer who came from a line of workshop tinkerers. He would ask his children to imagine something interesting to create, and then everyone would contribute ideas on how to bring it about. He did not discriminate among the family's three girls and two boys, so everyone was invited to answer the question and ultimately fulfill the destiny of Man the Builder. The sons went into engineering, and Paula, through a kind of osmosis, became an acclaimed metal sculptor without ever consciously planning to make art.

She had always loved making things, but did not connect that to the art world, having been raised in the agricultural community of Belen, with a New Mexican father and Lebanese-American mother who trafficked in the practical. She assumed she would become a teacher. Naturally bright and ambitious, Castillo got into Yale, but ended up dropping out to work in a nearby factory that manufactured parts for electrical wiring.

It was this experience, more than college, that awakened her interest in art. Yale had seemed like an adventure, a way to get out of town, but she was not really prepared for the academic intensity. At the factory, she recalls, "There was a huge Polish immigrant population of mostly women; I rode the bus with them in the morning. It was wonderful, because my work is a lot about displacement—both humans and the environment—but also the pragmatics of being able to work on machines, and revisiting the game at the dinner table."

Eventually she finished her undergraduate degree at the University of New Mexico and took a teaching job in the small community of Córdova, south of Truchas, renting a room from the widow and former shopkeeper Josefita Córdova. Three decades later, Castillo and husband Terry Mulert, an artist and poet, remain in the community. They eventually bought the former general store that now serves as their home and gallery and they maintain workshops and studios next door.

Castillo had been warned before moving there that the old Spanish villages south of Taos were rife with crime, unemployment, and drugs. But what she and Mulert found instead was a community of artists and intellectuals who would gather for poetry readings and salon-style conversation: the late painter-poet Álvaro Cardona-Hine and his

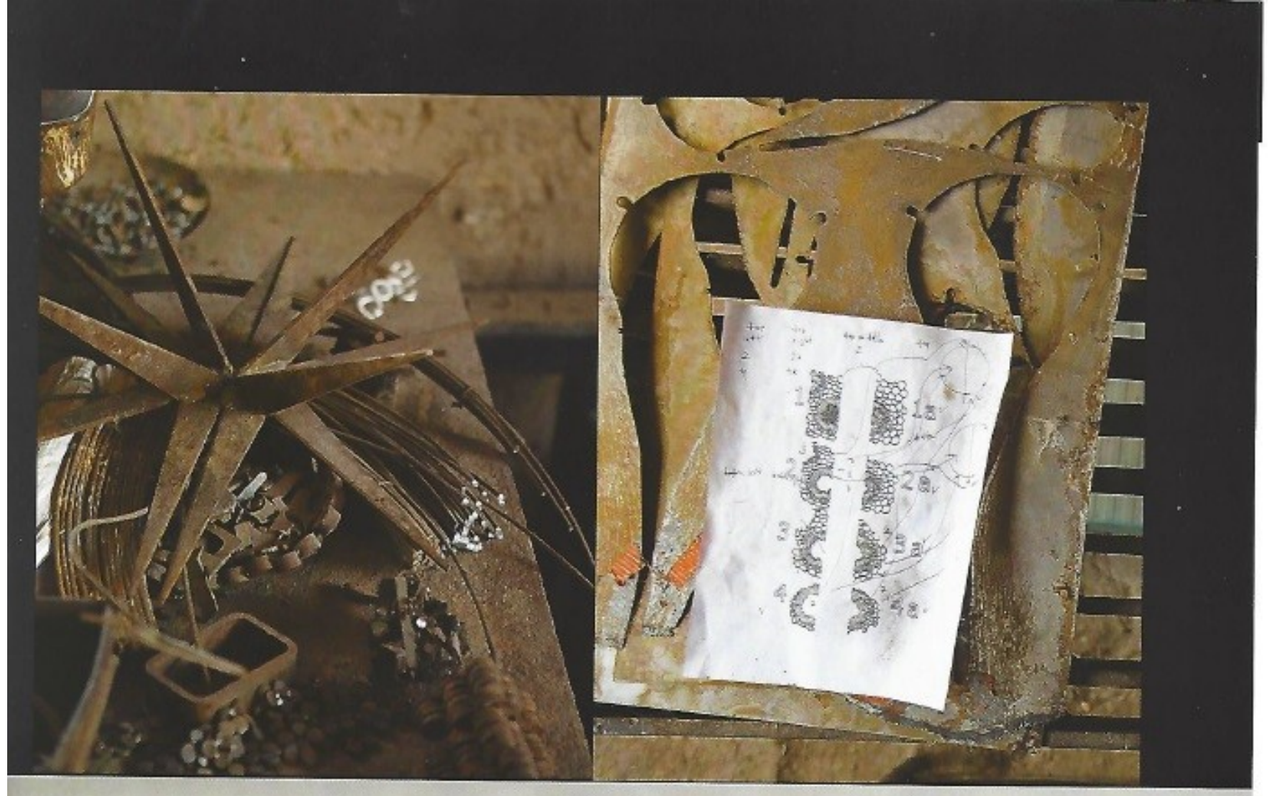
wife, poet Barbara McCauley, in Truchas, and another painter-writer couple, Pierre Delattre (San Francisco's "Beatnik priest") and Nancy Ortenstone, in Dixon. "We developed this beautiful mentoring relationship that was amazing," Castillo says.

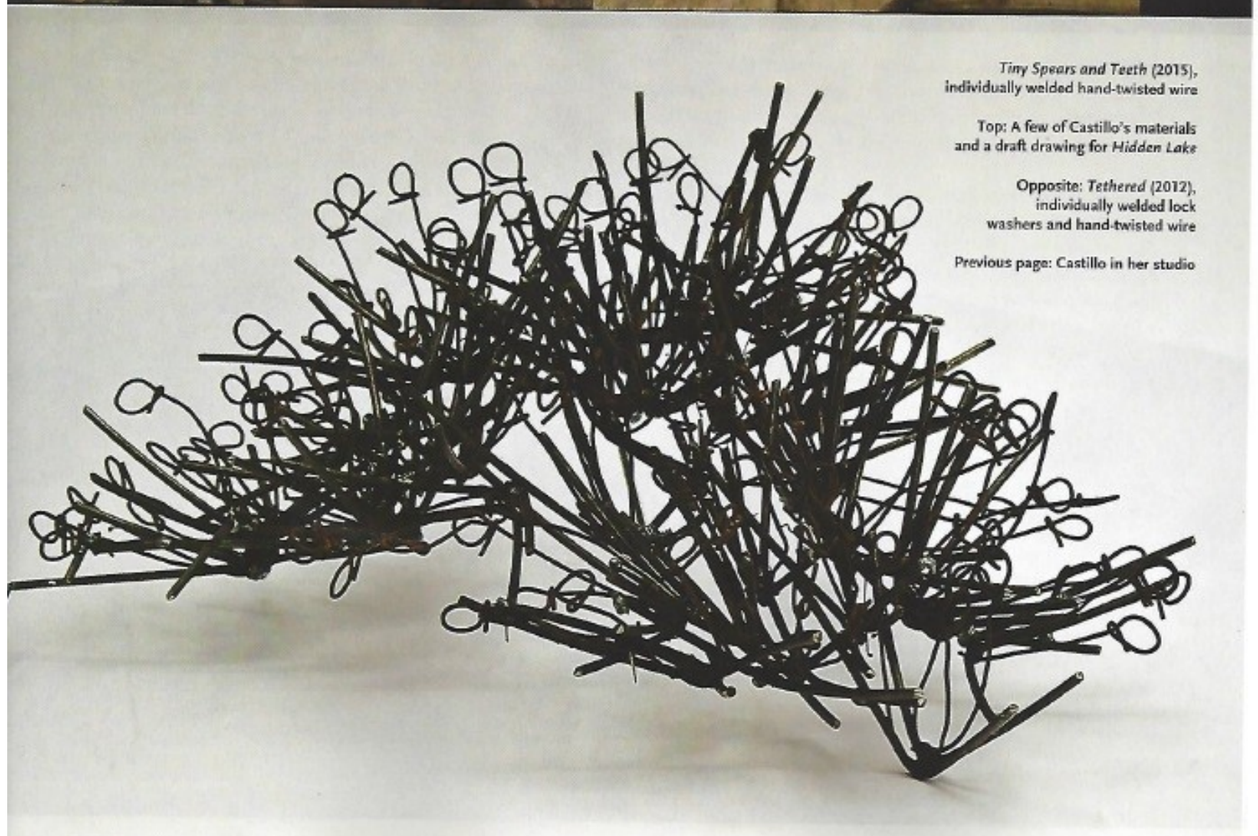
It was during this time, in the early 1990s before their son arrived, that Castillo revisited her childhood habit of collecting scrap, putting it together in ways that appealed to her conceptually. By her own account, she found an audience for the resulting artworks fairly quickly. By 1998 she was showing at William Siegal Gallery (then on Canyon Road) and winning public commissions, which now account for more than half her working time. She is best known for these public pieces, like the ones commissioned for the New Mexico History Museum when it opened in 2009: a set of mountain benches, two steel trees that climb up a wall to the roofline, and a colcha-style Rio Grande snaking along an exterior wall.

The public work is not really representative of where she started, however, since it evolves through the exacting requirements of narrative proposals and technical drafting. The work for which Castillo gained notice is abstract pieces assembled mostly by intuition, using discarded materials from industrial fabrication—the byproducts of punch presses, lathes, and drill presses—which she welds and wires together in appealing patterns. Immediately accessible for their graceful beauty, the studio work carries such opaque titles as *I drifted on through tangled lines* and *I can only count things*, which have been known to frustrate viewers with their poetic impenetrability.

Born of her lifelong inclination to collect, handle, and think about materials, Castillo's studio pieces emerge from a hands-on tinkering with her thoughts about the unseen connections between things, from the objects' physical characteristics to their social history. Animating the process is her deep fascination with critical theory, which carries her from the tactile and visual experience of the maker to the conceptual associations of the contemporary theorist who pulls things apart to reconfigure them in new ways.

The series called *The Forest* offers a good example. These pieces, arranged in different groupings, consist of ripped, discarded galvanized steel culverts that Castillo collected from roads in the Santa Fe National Forest. Using the culverts as a mold, she welded together small metal discs left over from a punch press in an echo of their shape and then arranged the refabricated culverts in a way that suggests vegetable peels, or shed skin, or road-kill snakes—something once alive and then abandoned. >





Tiny Spears and Teeth (2015), individually welded hand-twisted wire

Top: A few of Castillo's materials and a draft drawing for *Hidden Lake*

Opposite: *Tethered* (2012), individually welded lock washers and hand-twisted wire

Previous page: Castillo in her studio

Edge of the Woods (2015), steel

Flower in Flower (2015), hand-cut, hand-formed steel

The Forest (2012), individually welded steel byproduct

She calls the piece a palimpsest, a manuscript page that has been erased and written over, a metaphorical figure for unrelated texts that interrupt and compete with each other. These culverts, she says, have an interesting history: some were part of WPA road building projects, and for years allowed people in the area to move safely through some of the state's remotest areas. "They tell the story of a community as witness, if anyone wants to go that far," she says. And then there's the discarded punch-press discs, salvaged from a fabricator who worked on a majority of the casinos built on Native lands throughout the Southwest. "So it is a narrative—for me anyway."

The piece thus brings together one of Castillo's enduring themes: "the confluence of global forces in our local environment," as she describes it, and the fact that our interactions are interwoven with influences persisting from "other times, other spaces, and other agents."

Built of solid metal and yet appearing transparent, the 23 weblike pieces of *The Forest* capture what is perhaps the most recognizable element in Castillo's work: a seemingly effortless union of opposites. The scrap metal, a product of human industry, communicates strength and permanence, yet Castillo makes of it something mutable and flowing, beautiful and ephemeral, even leaving metal pieces to rust and patinate, subjected like organic matter to the corrosive effects of nature.

What began as minerals in the earth was subsequently transformed by the hopefulness of human intention and ended up as capitalist waste, leading Castillo through a maze of concepts that has branched out for more than two decades—what she calls "the visual manifestation of ideas." These concern dislocation, our alienation from nature, the dissolving of boundaries between the known and the real, all of which lend her work a metaphoricity that appeals even to those who are simply drawn to its beauty.

Confronted with the undeniable aesthetic appeal of her work, Castillo squirms even as she acknowledges the importance of admirers who respond to her sculptures intuitively. "I really don't believe in originality," she begins, "but the way we put things together is a form of translation. The way I almost 'collage' things—for me it's unique, so that is one piece of the originality." Her aesthetic sensibility, however, "comes from all kinds of things, and comes through me. It feels authentic, but I don't know if it's a concern for me."

The artist does not make it easy to understand her intentions, and she readily admits, "Sometimes I care if it comes across, and sometimes I don't." According to her artist statement, "My work annexes minimalist forms and schemes and reinscribes them with a quietly schizophrenic division between the hyper-organized desire to dissolve into the world . . . and the need to buttress margins . . . Ultimately the final goal for all of my artwork really is to expose our real, dense, and buried attachments to the 'other.'"

In 2010, when she was already well established as an artist, Castillo went back to UNM for an MFA, not to shore up her resume but "because I needed something to recharge me, and I needed community." She gained valuable experience with AutoCAD software and collaborated with landscape architects, but mostly Castillo used the time to thoroughly indulge her desire to read artistic, political, and social theory.

Her pieces from this period, short films and critical interventions as well as sculptural installations, offer a window into her overriding concerns. *Agnus Dei* is a poignant but harrowing five-minute film of a sheep slaughter, starting with wildlife scampering in a winter wonderland and narrowing to the sawing apart of a piece of meat, set to Bach's choral *Mass in B Minor* (Agnus Dei). In her project *Letters to Dead Trees*, Castillo posted signs on utility poles in the Carson National Forest that asked such sad questions as, "I know you were a tree, but who am I?" and "I wonder how long you have been here. Do you remember your forest?" These pieces, which communicate urgent concerns about the human place in the world, divinity, and our animal origins, also communicate a mood of forgiveness and grace that helps translate the narrative "I" of many of Castillo's sculpture titles from obscurantism to emotional confession. She does care if it comes across.

With her postmodern eyes wide open, the artist knows she cannot hide behind the formalism of abstract sculpture, peeping out to offer only the lowercase "I" of her titles. One is bound to ask how she positions herself as a female Hispanic sculptor who is not working in any style that would be accepted at Spanish Market (or, at least, not yet).

"Style is one of those surface things that's not about anything but commodifying things," she responds dismissively—while allowing that some artists might feel compelled, for financial reasons, to work in a framework "they feel is the only access point for engaging in community.

"For me, doing any kind of self-identification like that seems anachronistic," she adds. "What kind of art would a Hispana woman be doing?" Yet she admits to a certain discomfort with the possibility of tokenism. "I do have some feelings that I was able to get into a gallery because I was a female Hispanic artist who was doing something different." Reviewers often comment on the petite Latina sculptor and her brute creations, but the paradox Castillo poses goes beyond mere demographics.

Rather than represent an idea or position, Castillo places herself within the flow of human evolution, as medium rather than message. "It's the museum-ification of culture, putting a Plexiglas box around something," she says of orienting her work to a particular tradition. "My response is that we're still here, and still reframing around all these vertices."

Approachable as she is, down to earth and forthcoming, Paula Castillo is also in some palpable way not entirely one among us. The mysterious way she transmutes metal scraps into cultlike objects embodies the artist as alchemist, the magician who mediates between physical objects and unseen forces. Her incantations begin with the "I" but always point outward, elsewhere, from the ground from which we sprang to our animal embodiment to the possibility of grace and transcendence. ❁