

# FLOWER MIRROR WATER MOON

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JENNIFER STEELE  
STYLING BY ASHLEE BARRETT-BOURMIER  
INTERVIEW BY KATY HESSEL



DRESS SIMONE ROCHA, HEADSCARF HERMÈS.









DRESS SIMONE ROCHA, HEADSCARF HERMÈS.

Working with hand-painted Japanese paper, María Berrío’s intricate collages burst with feminine and feminist vitality, and reveal her deep affinity with Latin American mythology, folklore and history. In conversation with Katy Hessel, she explains the influences and fascinations behind her magical, politically-charged work.

---

MARÍA BERRÍO INTERVIEWED BY KATY HESSEL

---

**Katy Hessel:** First of all, your works are so ethereal and beautiful and universal, so often populated by women. Can you tell me about who these women are and why you choose to mostly depict women?

**María Berrío:** I depict mostly women because I want to highlight the common cores found in all women. And uncover the beauty and the power of womanhood. When I paint them, I think about the woman I want to be. So, I want to reflect the woman who is compassionate, who’s very strong, and more that, she’s in harmony with herself and with everything around her. So, when I think about the woman I’m painting, I think about these aspects. At the same time, I am... like, if you

look at them, how they physically look, they have a sense of other-worldliness. And some of them, to me, when I’m painting them, I try to know more their spirit than their flesh. So, it’s a little bit more also—I’m trying to capture a spiritual being.

**Yeah. Absolutely. I know that you grew up in Colombia. It still seems like a lot of that Colombian heritage still plays a large role in your work. That spiritualism-**

**Yes.**  
**Does that come from the Colombian heritage? Can you tell me about the cultural influence?**

Yeah. These are, to me—because it’s also as I’m drawing and as I’m painting—it’s very au-

tobiographical.

I must connect to whatever I’m doing, I have to connect physically and spiritually. So, yeah, I think a lot about who I am, and my culture. And I reference also Latin American women. I think there hasn’t been, through art history, a place for us. One of the only Latin American artists they know is Frida Kahlo, who denoted also women from South America.

So, to me it’s very important that these women carry my culture and that, with their hair, their outfits, their surroundings, carry where I come from.

**Absolutely. And you’ve spent the last 20 years living in New York City.**

Yes, I’ve been living here since I was a



“I depict mostly women because I want to highlight the common cores found in all women. And uncover the beauty and the power of womanhood. When I paint them, I think about the woman I want to be.”

– MARÍA BERRÍO

teen, so I came very young. A lot of my work carries my culture from Colombia. But at the same time, it has a lot of influence from New York City.

**I also think the theme of nature is so common in your work. And I know that you’ve previously spoken about [how] we live in this very technologically abundant world and you really want your work to get back to nature. Can you talk about how nature has inspired your work?**

Yes, yes. A lot of my works are inspired by nature. I grew up in Colombia, but I grew up between the city and a farm. So I was always surrounded by nature.

And then, when I came to New York City, there was that longing for nature. So, the paintings that I started to create, this utopian world where nature was around me—but it was in a very surrealist way. To me, nature is present in every work. And to me, it’s very important that this woman connects with the natural world. Not only nature, but animals as well. I think we’re so disconnected, and more now with technology. I think that it’s very important to also touch themes of ecology and touch themes of how we can go back to the source of everything. And how we shouldn’t forget about it, because, eventually, nature will take over, you know?

**Mm-hmm.**

So, to me, it’s very important that the

works carry that feeling.

**Yes. It’s interesting the way that you say, you know, nature takes over. Because when I look at something like Night Song. I mean, it’s this abundance of nature and the flowers are so wild, and she’s in this totally naturalistic environment. Can you tell us a bit about Night Song, the actual work?**

Yes. Night Song talks a little bit... like, when I was making it, I was thinking of the spirit of nature. And as you see, she’s walking in the water in this very beautiful garden. So, usually when I start a work like that, I think about the strength of the figure in this setting. But in this particular setting, I wanted nature to take over, and you can see that with the flowers.

I wanted to create some of her presence with her clothing as well. And also, to demonstrate her connection to the Earth and to her ancestors. So, it’s kind of a very mythical piece, in which she shows this strength and this connection to her surroundings.

**And even in something like Oda a la Esperanza (Ode to Hope), you have nature coming through in this quite captive, institutionalised environment. Can you talk a bit about Oda a la Esperanza (Ode to Hope), where it comes from, and the kind of interior/exterior aspect of it?**

Yeah, yeah. So, Oda a la Esperanza (Ode to Hope) began as a reaction to the Trump admin-

istration’s family separation policy that became public in April 2018. And when I started, when I heard this news, I felt the need to do something about it. Like, my work is not always political, but in this moment in time, I felt like I couldn’t do anything else.

So, in this piece, the figures embody both mother and daughter. And, as you can see, the mother figure clutches her child as this delicate, fragile bird. And they are held in some sort of institution, and it’s kind of a place where human nature is suppressed and controlled. So, as you were saying, there is also nature creeping through. The vines are creeping through the window. And that kind of suggests that their captivity is unnatural. That the laws that are holding these women and kids are not fair, are unjust.

So, as the title says, Oda a la Esperanza (Ode to Hope), esperanza means to wait, or to hope. And, in this sense, these figures are waiting.

They’re waiting for their children to come back, to be returned to them. So, it’s a very meaningful... to me, it’s a very important piece. It’s one of the most important pieces I’ve made. And I hope it brings some sort of awareness to the things that are going on. And at the same time, not only awareness, but that somehow, someday, somebody under that circumstance can look at it and feel some sort of hope, or... I don’t know, it’s a very emotional piece.



DRESS AND SHOES TORY BURCH.





THE ORACLES' SILENCE (DETAIL), 2019.

“To me, nature is present in every work. And to me, it’s very important that this woman connects with the natural world.”

– MARÍA BERRÍO

Yeah, absolutely. And then, something like *The Oracles' Silence*. What fascinates me about this work is how kind of statuesque it is, and I think here, your medium with the Japanese collage paper, Japanese rice paper, is so meticulous and amazing when you see it in real life. You really are capturing movement in it. I'd love for you to talk a little bit about your process and where the paper comes from and how you use it.

Yes, yes. The process... Most of these papers that I'm currently working on are handmade in Japan.

I work with a fabricator in Japan and he creates this paper out of tree barks or rice. Then he hand-dyes them with flowers. So, I work with him, but I never tell him what to do. He just sends me all these beautiful, hand-dyed papers, and then I recreate them. And I create these paintings.

So, my process basically starts very abstract, where I just go and start building everything, layer by layer. And, as you said, in *The Oracles' Silence*, you start by looking at it. You can start feeling the process, which is so layered, that it starts to become very sculptural.

So, it's almost like these women are becoming alive. But there's so many layers, it also creates some sort of mysticism, or some sort of world that is just created by the materials. So, it's a very interesting and beautiful process, but it has

taken more than 10 years to develop.

And what are the beginnings of this process? Because I know that drawing plays such a large role in your practice. I know it starts off very abstract. But then, are you drawing with the paper? Or are you drawing with pencil or pen, and then you create each section? How does it work?

Yes. I've always been, all my life, fascinated with drawing. I've loved to draw since I was a kid. I think drawing is the most... to me it takes me into another world.

In this process, I would start the backgrounds very abstractly, just with several sheets of paper. But then I would start drawing, and then creating what the composition would be and what the figures will be. And then, at the end, I go in drawing as well the face, the hands. And I'm very connected to the art of drawing. To bring some emotion into the world, let's say, with the gesture of how I would draw a hand, or how I would draw a face. So, to me, drawing is very important for every piece. I've never done a piece without any drawing involved. Sometimes, if you look through the piece, you can see there are drawings underneath all these layers of paper. So, if somebody would ever X-ray one of the pieces, they would encounter a series of drawings [laughs].

Oh, wow. I had no idea. That's amazing. But in something like *The Oracles' Si-*

*lence*, the girls are turned away. Was this the first time you've ever done a piece without the face? And what's the significance of them turning away?

Yes, yes, totally. Definitely, that piece was also a challenge. I wanted to see, if there was no gaze in the paintings, if they would still stand strong. So, *The Oracles' Silence* was kind of the first time that I turned them around [laughs].

I still felt the strength of the piece. But even if you don't see their gaze, there's a lot of drawing involved. I feel like, when I tear the paper, when I cut the paper, I'm very aware of the line as to create movement, and that line comes from the physicality of my love for drawing.

And I think drawing is in everything.

It's so interesting, what you're saying about the tear. But am I right in thinking that you use scissors as well, to cut up the paper? Or do you just use your own hands?

I usually tear. I love to tear. And then sometimes I am very precise with X-acto knives.

Scissors, I use very little. [But I do] use scissors, the ones you use for cutting hair [laughs]. Like, very precise scissors. But it's mostly my hands, it's mostly X-acto knives. I play a lot with the edge of the paper, so that also creates some sorts of lines that you can see in the pieces. So, it's a mix of everything. I try to draw with the X-acto knife.



“I must connect to whatever I’m doing, I have to connect physically and spiritually. So, yeah, I think a lot about who I am, and my culture.”

– MARÍA BERRÍO

**And can you tell me about your influences as well? Who do you look at?**

Yes, yes. I am deeply impressed by magical realism.

And some of my favourite authors are Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Pablo Neruda. I love poetry. I feel like painting is visual poetry to me.

I think there’s such a beautiful connection between both. And as for visual artists, currently I’m looking at David Hockney, Louise Bourgeois, Toyin Ojih Odutola. Who else? I love Alice Neel.

I love Grayson Perry. I love Wangechi Mutu. I love Kiki Smith. But throughout my career I’ve always been fascinated by the works of Mexican surrealists.

Such as Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo, who have had a huge impact on my thinking. Carrington created these powerful depictions of women in dialogue with animals, and she was

always tapping into mythology and psychology to render these imaginary worlds.

I always felt very reflected by her. I always felt these cultural and artistic similarities. So, yes, some of the Mexican surrealists have been of great influence.

**Absolutely. So, you’re about to unveil a series of mosaics in New York.**

**Can you tell me a bit about where the mosaics are going to be and how you decided what to depict—and the process?**

Yeah, yeah. So, these mosaics are going to be on the N train in Brooklyn, in the Fort Hamilton station.

I worked in collaboration with a fabricator. They are called Mosaika, and they’re in Canada. And so, all of these are translations of my collages, but they’re going to be done in tile—they’re already done in tile. What I tried to do is—I wanted to do a series of mosaics that are kind of like...

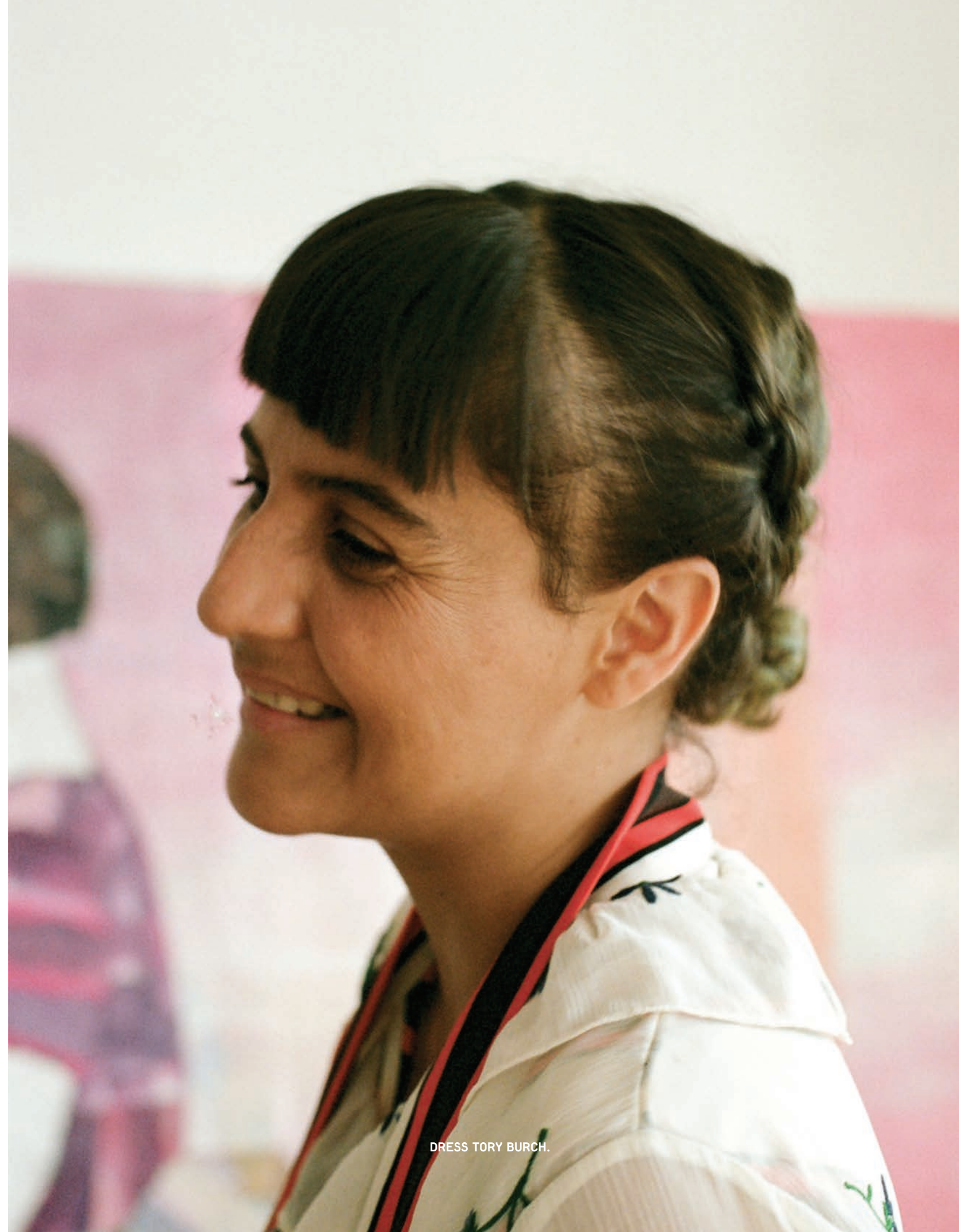
that take the passengers on a mysterious ride. So, it would be like these surreal and fantastical subway cars in which there would be musicians, parrots, swans, birds, butterflies, all riding through the train. The project is called There Is Magic Underneath It All. And it kind of makes the rider go through this passage and go as well through another other-worldly world.

So, I think it’s going to be... it is already very beautiful. And the way the work translated into mosaic is incredible.

**Wow.**

So, it’s been a great experience.

**I really, really, really can’t wait.**



DRESS TORY BURCH.