



400 South Peoria Street (MC 034)
Chicago, IL 60607
312-996-6114
gallery400.uic.edu

Gallery hours:
Tuesday-Friday, 10:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m.
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Contact: Denny Mwaura, Assistant Director and Curator, dmwaura@uic.edu

Carolyn Castaño: My Mother Mountain
May 29–August 8, 2026
Opening Reception: Friday, May 29, 6–8 p.m.



Carolyn Castaño, *Chundua – Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta*, 2023. Watercolor and gouache on paper collaged with acrylic, sequin appliqués, and fringe on canvas.

Gallery 400 at the University of Illinois Chicago is pleased to announce *My Mother Mountain*, the Chicago debut solo exhibition by Los Angeles-based Colombian American artist Carolyn Castaño. On view from May 29 through August 8, 2026, the exhibition brings together paintings, watercolors, and sculpture to examine the accelerating disappearance of Colombia's Andean glaciers—and the colonial and capitalist forces behind their loss. At the beginning of

the 20th century, Colombia had thirteen glaciers. Now only six remain. For almost fifteen years, Castaño has researched and made artworks that consider Colombia's landscapes, heritage, and precarious ecologies.

In *My Mother Mountain*, both monumental and intimate works destabilize familiar pictorial conventions. Pattern, color, and Andean visual vocabularies disrupt the logic of colonial landscape painting, insisting on other ways of knowing—and mourning—a world being remade by industrial capitalism.

In four monumental paintings, Castaño's rich constellation of visual and historical sources includes the Wiphala flag, a multi-colored symbol of Indigenous Andean peoples; pre-Columbian textiles; and 19th-century travelogues and cartographic surveys by European colonial explorers. Vibrant and densely patterned, the large-scale paintings are in direct dialogue with the romantic landscape tradition that Castaño argues was never neutral. They served to aestheticize and open landscapes to resource extraction—legacies that reverberate into today's climate crisis.

Castaño has said, "My work proceeds from a painted base layer evoking painters like Frederic Edwin Church, whose painting *Heart of the Andes*, 1859, was a sweeping homage to these landscapes. The pieces...immediately interrupt that Euro-centric way of looking at these sublime landscapes by introducing collaged textiles patterned after traditional Andean textiles or the infographic color-coding of climatological heat maps. The layer of sequined appliqués and fringe tassels connects the works to traditional ponchos or folkloric costumes as well as to contemporary fast fashion."

Another section of the exhibition features a series of small watercolors that record the disappearing chain of glaciers, in the style of Colombian artist Manuel María Paz, who set out to catalog and document all regions of Colombia as part of the 19th-century Colombian geographic survey, the Comisión Corográfica. Castaño's thirteen washed-out, loose watercolor paintings harken back to the ambition of the Comisión Corográfica while marking the loss since then.

One room of the exhibition addresses ecologies threatened by glacier loss. Andean glaciers provide clean water to nearby towns and support delicate wetland ecosystems, such as the páramos, zones of Andean mountains above the timberline and below the permanent snowline. Unique to the Andes, páramos store water and are the world's most diverse high-altitude ecosystem. In *A Páramo Bestiary*, a series of delicate watercolors, Castaño depicts but a few of the estimated 5,000 species of the páramos—3,000 of which live nowhere else on Earth.

Not only are páramos drying out due to increased temperatures, glacial recession, and reduced precipitation, as mineral-rich areas, but they are also sites contested by multinational corporations and local populations with longstanding connections to the mountains.

The mountains and glaciers at the heart of Castaño's work have meaning beyond their ecological importance. They are subjects, relations, and what the exhibition's title names: mothers. Castaño's work unpacks the myths and folklore surrounding Andean volcanic glaciers such as El Nevado del Ruiz and Volcán Nevado de Santa Isabel and their personification as elders or "beautiful ones," so named by Colombia's Quimbaya people. This mythic personification contrasts with their diminishment due to climate change, extractive industries, and urbanization.

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Carolyn Castaño is a Colombian American artist born, raised, and based in Los Angeles, working across painting, installation, video, and artist books. She has presented solo exhibitions at Craft Contemporary and the Orange County Museum of Art. She has participated in group exhibitions at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the 56th Venice Biennale, and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco. In 2025, Castaño was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in Fine Arts. She has also received a Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant (2013) and fellowships from the California Community Foundation and the City of Los Angeles. Castaño holds a BFA from the San Francisco Art Institute and an MFA from UCLA and is a Professor of Drawing and Painting at Long Beach City College.

The exhibition is curated by Lorelei Stewart, UIC Gallery 400's Director and Chief Curator.

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Tours:

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Founded in 1983, UIC Gallery 400 is one of the nation's most vibrant university galleries, showcasing work at the leading edge of contemporary art, architecture, and design. The Gallery's program of exhibitions, lectures, film and video screenings, and performances features interdisciplinary and experimental practices. Operating within the School of Art and Art History in the College of Architecture, Design, and the Arts at the University of Illinois Chicago, Gallery 400 endeavors to make the arts and their practitioners accessible to a broad spectrum of the public and to cultivate a variety of cultural and intellectual perspectives. Gallery 400 is recognized for its support of the creation of new work, the diversity of its programs and participants, and the development of experimental models for multidisciplinary exhibitions.