



Above: Carolyn Castaño, *Poleka Kasue: Volcan Nevado de Santa Isabel*, detail, 2026. Watercolor and gouache on paper collaged with acrylic, appliqués, and fringe on canvas.
Front: Carolyn Castaño, *Agua Santa (Cascada de Santa Elena)*, 2026. Photo by Jonas Mikosch Müller-Ahlheim.

Related Programs

***My Mother Mountain*
Opening Reception**

Friday, May 29
6–8 p.m.
Gallery 400

***My Mother Mountain*
Virtual Tour with the UIC
Disability Cultural Center**

Thursday, June 18
3–4 p.m. CT
Virtual via Zoom

**Painting, Land, Friendship:
Carolyn Castaño and Arnold
J. Kemp**

Wednesday, July 29
6 p.m.
Virtual via Zoom

**Glaciers & Climates:
Jenny Kendler & Meghana
Ranganathan on Cryospheres**

Thursday, August 6
3–4 p.m. CT
Virtual via Zoom

For updated program details,
visit go.uic.edu/g400events.

Hours

Tuesday–Friday 10 a.m.–5 p.m. gallery400.uic.edu
Saturday 12–5 p.m. @gallery400

University of Illinois Chicago
400 South Peoria Street
Chicago, IL 60607
312-996-6114

UIC Gallery 400 is wheelchair accessible. Audio descriptions
are available in the exhibition. If you have specific access
questions or needs, please call 312-996-6114 or email
gallery400@uic.edu.

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Carolyn Castaño

My Mother Mountain

May 29–August 8, 2026



My Mother Mountain considers the disappearing glaciers of the Colombian Andes. Exhibition organizer Lorelei Stewart asked artist Carolyn Castaño about her work's background and references.

Lorelei Stewart (LS): The Colombian landscape is central to the works on view. How does it figure in your larger history?

Carolyn Castaño (CC): I am a first-generation Colombian American artist born and raised in California. When I was young, my family moved back to Colombia. But we came back to Los Angeles after three years. Even though I was US-born, I had the experience of being an immigrant. I felt the dislocation of being a stranger in a new land. Subsequently, we traveled back and forth a lot. In 2012, I had a residency in Colombia, where I worked with women survivors of the country's 60+ year-long armed conflict. Parallel to their stories about the violence, environmental impacts emerged. I became obsessed with other victims of the conflict: the birds, the water, the trees.

I researched landscape representations from the 18th and 19th centuries, and over time, the work evolved, exploring the Colombian landscape and my memory of it. My mother is from Santa Rosa de Cabal, near the Parque de los Nevados, where several glaciers are. It used to have a

glacier, Paramillo de Santa Rosa. I had no idea about my mom's relationship to the glaciers until I first exhibited the drawings from ***This is Dedicated to the One I Love***. She began reciting all the glacier names and said that when she was a girl, teachers would make them memorize them. I thought of her as she has become an elder, like the mountain. The glacier and the mountain are beings worthy of care. Aside from celebrating or addressing the fragile nature of these glaciers and the Colombian landscape, this is my attempt to reconnect with a part I feel separated from—an attempt to heal or connect with a kind of immigrant longing.

LS: Can you share some of the many references within the work?

CC: My recent work examines tools of 19th-century colonialism, including maps, painted travelogues, and scientific illustrations—all employed in the service of botanical and pharmacological research and scholarship of the era. The work of botanical explorer Alexander Von Humboldt (1769–1859) (who undertook multiple studies of native birds, flowers, and plants in the Americas), paintings such as Frederic E. Church's (1826-1900) ***Heart of the Andes***, and published engravings such as Albert Berg's (1825-1884) series on Colombia's plant life all sparked European and American imaginations and fueled the search for resources in the Americas.

This work is a love letter and eulogy to Colombia's tropical glaciers. Exploring the mythos of Andean volcanic glaciers. I'm interested in their personification as elders or beautiful ones, as named by Colombia's Indigenous people, the Muisca. The paintings are in the style of the great Romantic-era painters but in a way that interrupts the Eurocentric envisioning of these sublime landscapes with patterns inspired by traditional Andean textiles, climate heat maps, sequin appliques of birds and tropical flowers, and fringe tassels that connect to traditional ponchos or folkloric costumes.

LS: Last year you won a Guggenheim Fellowship and traveled back to Colombia. Can you describe your research there?

CC: Last year, I traveled to Colombia to research and to participate in an exhibition as part of the Bogota art week. On that trip (and a second one), I visited the city's museums and archives to learn more about how Colombians represent our history and landscape. I visited el Museo de Arte Miguel Urrutia, where I had the opportunity to see 19th-century paintings, watercolors, and prints depicting Colombian landscapes: mountains, glaciers, and village life. An exhibition there highlighted the role of natural resources in the country's development, including mining, cacao, quinine, and tobacco. I also visited El Museo de la República, Colombia's historical museum, which houses many

artifacts from the early years of the republic, with a special focus on the ways that Colombia's different ethnic groups have contributed to the nation. An important part of the trip was visiting the José Celestino Mutis Botanical Gardens, named after the Spanish priest and botanist who, in 1783, led the Royal Botanical Expedition to study and catalog Colombian flora. The botanical garden had an amazing collection of native plants, trees, and flowers. They had an important exhibition on glaciers that explained the páramo ecosystem and the variety of life it sustains. The exhibit featured different maps and topographical illustrations, which inspired the drawings in my páramo installation. At the Instituto Humboldt in Villa de Leyva, I met with a specialist and toured their collection of bird specimens and herbarium. Many of the specimens in the Humboldt collection are endangered due to climate change.

The Museo de Oro has been a major influence on my work. During my visit, I focused on various uses of animal (birds, frogs, snakes) imagery in goldwork produced by Indigenous cultures, such as the Muisca and Quimbaya. I've traveled to the Los Nevados area, mainly Santa Rosa de Cabal, the mountains surrounding Santa Rosa, and the Caldas/Risaralda region, where my mother is from. I plan to return and build on this work.