



Maria Elena González, *Riven*, 2023,
photo courtesy of the artist

ABOUT TIME, MEMORY...

WITH MARIA ELENA GONZÁLEZ

Interview by Jacek J. Kolasinski

I. Time and place: experiencing Rome Prize

Jacek J. Kolasinski: Let's start with Rome.

During your time at the American Academy, you were immersed in a city where centuries of sacred and architectural time had accumulated. How did this influence your understanding of temporality—personally and artistically?

Maria Elena González: Rome is timeless. It's called the Eternal City for a reason. It wasn't built in a day, and it constantly reminds you of that. Wherever you go, time layers itself. San Clemente is a perfect example: you walk on modern asphalt, descend to a 4th-century basilica with 8th-11th-century frescoes, and even lower to a 1st-century temple of Mithras and the foundations of a Roman market. You can literally walk through history. *Spolia* are everywhere, *fragments* reused, forms reinterpreted, recycling as a philosophy of time.

Receiving the Rome Prize placed me in that continuum. The Academy is very aware of its legacy, and you feel that responsibility. I also knew I was the first Latina after Ana Mendieta, almost thirty years later. I asked for her former studio. Although the space is

Maria Elena
Gonzalez,
Building #9
2005, detail,
photo
courtesy of
the artist



cleansed between fellows, the resonance remained. I worked on a smaller scale for practical reasons such as transportation, costs, and exchange rates, but the space was still charged with energy.

JJK: Have you noticed any daily or seasonal rhythms that have changed your thinking about time or memory?

MEG: Absolutely. The rhythm of Rome is ritualistic: liturgical, civic, and communal. The pace of the Academy—long periods of work interspersed with shared meals, site visits, and conversations—reflected this rhythm. This led me to think of process as the architecture of time: repetition, reflection, celebration. Repetition, like prayer or creation, keeps memory alive.

II. Memory, childhood and echos of the past

JJK: In *Internal DupliCity*, you use transparent materials that simultaneously reveal and conceal. It's like looking through the fog of memory. How does this relate to your childhood memories?

MEG: Memory is fleeting and unreliable. It transforms every time we revisit it. That's why *Mnemonic Architecture* became so important—I tried to give memory materiality. I recreated the floor plan of my childhood home in Cuba from memory, using reflective glass beads that appear and disappear depending on the light. It is never constant, like memory. I remember some rooms clearly, others barely scratched.

JJK: And exile? How does it affect your sense of time?

MEG: Exile didn't shatter time, only space. It's disorientation, existing between coordinates, without full belonging. This sense of uprootedness permeates everything I create.

III. Materiality and the Passage of Time

JJK: Your materials – bark, plexiglass, glass beads – seem to absorb and reflect time.

How intentional is this relationship?

MEG: Fully intentional. Materials carry meaning. Reflective beads speak of visibility and obliteration. Video records duration directly.

In Tempo, I cast a shadow on the wall—an image not present in the recording—marking the spot where *Tree Talk* began. In *Forest*, three monitors play *Skowhegan Birch #1, #2, #3* on a loop.

Each video lasts a different amount of time, so the synchronization never repeats itself. It's an infinite composition, time building upon itself.



JJK: *In Tree Talk*, you treat the bark almost like a musical score.

MEG: Exactly. The lenticels on the birch bark became visual markers, like Morse code or geological records. I imagined the tree recording its own history—droughts, winds, seasons—and I wanted to hear it.

Maria Elena
González, *Magic*
Carpet/Home,
1999. fot. Marian
Harders,
photo courtesy
of the artist

does architecture shape your thinking about time and the sacred?

MEG: The installation changes perception. When the forms dominate, you feel like a child again. But they also act like reliquaries—you want to look inside and can't. This tension is compelling. I don't know if I've used the concept of holiness explicitly. Blasphemy, yes.

IV. Translation, transformation and time codes

JJK: You translate the visual texture of the bark into sound. Do you treat it as a metaphor or a structure?

MEG: Both. I wanted the perforated markings to remain close to the tree's lenticels. The bark's pores became notation, the perforated cylinder its breath. Time exists in many senses: sight, touch, and hearing, each reflecting the other.

JJK: What happens when time changes form – growth lines into rhythm, texture into melody?

MEG: You lose something and you gain something. Mostly I was surprised by how many musical trees there were already. *Birch #1* sounds like atonal jazz, *Birch #2* is melancholic and modernist, *Birch #3* moves like a march. Nature composed long before us.

V. Architecture, scale, sacred space

JJK: In *Internal DupliCity* you play with scale – between the domestic and the monumental. How

JJK: So the scale also becomes temporal ?

MEG: You could say that. Our memory of scale changes the way we experience time. A house you remember as huge seems small when you return to it. Our bodies have changed, and so has the scale of the world. The house itself hasn't changed scale; we have.

VI. Silence, Rhythm, and Pause

JJK: Your works are sensitive to rhythm and stillness. How do silence and pause work in your installations?

MEG: Silence is material. It shapes how we absorb what we see and hear. It's the breath between movements, the measure that allows everything else to resonate.

JJK: You use rhythm in structure and space, not just in sound.

MEG: Exactly. Repetition, silence, and pause are strategies. They create anticipation and uncertainty. They make time visible.

VII. The Cycle of Nature and the Experience of Duration

JJK: Trees embody cycles—rings, decay, renewal. Do you see nature as co-creator?

MEG: Absolutely. The trees are the composers of *Tree Talk*. I merely provided the framework and the instrument. The project spanned over a decade, twelve or thirteen years, and evolved with me. It's lyrical and poetic in a way that urban spaces rarely allow.

JJK: And when viewers engage with *Tree Talk*, do you want them to feel that time is accumulating or dissipating?

MEG: When they hear sound, see bark fragments, collages, and video, they experience everything at once. Loops, echoes, riffs, pauses, graphic notations – it's like living inside the rhythm.

VIII. Legacy, preservation and what remains

JJK: When you work with reliquaries, shards and archives, do you think about heritage?

MEG: Not directly. "Heritage" is a contemporary discourse. I'm more interested in the forensics of traces, in what remains in the material. My exhibitions, *Riven* and *Balancing Act*, dealt with repaired shards of ceramics, fractured histories, and glued fragments. These are probably my most archival works.

JJK: These "repairs" started during the pandemic?

MEG: So. March 13, 2020, San Francisco... was closed, and so was SFAI (San Francisco Art Institute). When I returned to campus, it looked like a time capsule, gestures interrupted mid-motion. I made repairs using black epoxy from unglazed student ceramics salvaged from the waste, so the works were black and white.

At the same time, protests following the death of George Floyd were underway. These repairs became an immediate, material way of responding to what had broken around us. In *Riven* (New York, 2023), the main hall felt heavy, like a disaster site. Later, in Oakland, on *Tepco Beach*—a beach strewn with shards of pottery from a defunct pottery factory—I found color in the fragments themselves. Color resurfaced in my work, though I usually avoid it. In *Balancing Act* (Miami, 2024), the tonal register brightened, and you could feel it in the space.

JJK: How would you like your works to endure, materially or symbolically?

MEG: Materially, they must be preserved in order to be experienced. Symbolically, they will change over time, like everything.

JJK: After years of translating nature through abstraction and sound, you returned to the figure—those ancient Cypriot bodies that seem to sing. What drew you to them, and what does their voices mean today?

MEG: I delved into sixth-century BC and Cypriot sculptures. I hadn't worked directly with a figure for decades, though the body was always present through the viewer. Now there are over a hundred in the studio. Some have a sonic element—four "ancient musicians" whose acoustics resemble climate change sirens, the same sounds we hear in cities.

JJK: Final thought?

MEG: I've been creating since childhood. The gesture, the act of creation itself, is as important as the object. Its temporality is immediate, often impossible to record. The work continues to breathe, the clock ticks.

JJK: Beautifully said. Thank you, María Elena.

MEG: Thank you, Jacek. It's always a pleasure to travel through time together. ■

ON TIME, ON MEMORY...

Jacek J. Kolasinski talks to María Elena González

In this conversation, Cuban American sculptor María Elena González speaks with Prof. Jacek J. Kolasinski about the role of time, memory, and material in her art. Based in Brooklyn, González is known for her postminimalist installations that combine conceptual clarity with craftsmanship and sensory depth. A recipient of the Rome Prize, Guggenheim Fellowship, and Anonymous Was A Woman Award, she reflects on how her residency in Rome shaped her understanding of history and continuity, inspiring works such as *Internal DupliCity* and *Mnemonic Architecture*, which explore memory, loss, and displacement. Her *Tree Talk* series translates the markings of birch bark into musical scores, transforming natural time into sound and revealing the deep connection between nature and culture. The discussion also touches on her pandemic-era "repairs" works, *Riven* and *Balancing Act*, in which fragments of broken ceramics become symbols of healing and renewal. González concludes with her current series of Cypriot-inspired figures, some of which emit sounds reminiscent of climate sirens, linking ancient forms to the urgencies of the present.