



Transcript: Episode 2

Echoes of Resilience: Navigating Identity and Artistry

A Conversation with Mara Torres González

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: Welcome to Rising Together! A podcast on the Art and Design of Inclusion. I'm Dr. Elcin Haskollar.

Curtis Anderson: And I'm Curtis Anderson.

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: Each month we'll have a special guest and we'll learn from their personal stories and experiences about how to create change. From thought provoking discussions to real life strategies, we'll explore the transformative power of inclusion and discuss how to create a world where every single voice matters.

Curtis Anderson: We hope you can join us as we dive into the art of creating inclusive communities. Let's embark on this journey of transformation one story at a time. Stay connected, stay engaged, and more importantly, keep rising with us.

Mara Torres González: If possible, don't think about if your work is going to sell commercially because I think art is a great channel to educate others and through art you can express what you can't with words.

Curtis Anderson: You can catch the latest episodes of Rising Together on the first of every month on Spotify, YouTube, or your preferred streaming platform.

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: Welcome to another episode of "Rising Together." Today, we have the privilege of welcoming Mara Torres Gonzalez to the show. Mara is an artist and a gallery creator from Puerto Rico. In 2020, in the middle of the pandemic, she opened Mara Art Studio and Gallery in downtown Sarasota. Mara collaborates with local and international artists from all around the world, ensuring that their voices are heard on a global scale. Welcome to the show, Mara.

Mara Torres González: Thank you for having me.

Curtis Anderson: So good to have you. Could you tell us a little bit about who Mara is?

Mara Torres González: Mara is a Puerto Rican mother, wife, sister, daughter, granddaughter, and I mentioned that because in Puerto Rico it's all about family. It's part of who I am. Mainly, we celebrate everything in family. We're always together. I have a grandmother who's turning 100 in June.

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: Wow! Congratulations.

Mara Torres González: Thank you! I have very supportive parents and I have the most amazing kids. Because of my supportive parents, I signed up at the student Arts League in Old San Juan

when I was almost four years old. So, I was actually admitted before the minimum age requirement of four because they saw certain skills and talents. They said I was always creating something in the house, even out of cardboard. I would always be putting stuff together, and as the youngest of the group, one of my pieces was admitted into an Art Exhibit after I graduated from art school. That's when I had a transition and opened my first business. That was back in 2001, and the business developed into one of the main design firms in Puerto Rico. I had the privilege of being selected to design the wedding of NBA player José Juan Barea Mora from Dallas Mavericks.

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: Oh, wow! How was that?

Mara Torres González: Oh, that was amazing. And then marrying Miss Universe Puerto Rico Viviana Ortiz Pastrana. So, I would say that's one of the highlights of my design career. Also, a partnership with celebrity designer Preston Bailey from New York. That was back in August of 2017.

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: You shared with us this painting that you created when you were three years old and that's absolutely breathtaking and unbelievable that a three-year-old could do that. When you look back at all of the projects that you worked on, what has been the most meaningful one?

Mara Torres González: 209, which translates to September 20th in Spanish, (we say the day before the month in Spanish), and that is a series inspired mostly by the aftermath of hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico. So, immediately as we were able to open the front door to our house, we encountered a completely new landscape scenario, as if they just moved our house into a war zone. Everything was gray, all the trees were down. There was no power, and no phone, so you had no idea of what was going on beyond what you were able to look at. We couldn't even leave our neighborhood because the trees were blocking the one and only exit. So, we had all the neighbors get together and get the trees out of the way so we could get out. That's when it all started, when I saw all the devastation I started documenting with photography. I did a lot of documenting in San Juan, but then I also went to document the rural areas and the smaller towns. I had the opportunity to move my son out of Puerto Rico through the military base and he moved with my sister-in-law in Colorado. That is where I started working on the acoustic paintings in Colorado.

So, I was traveling back and forth from Colorado to Puerto Rico, working in Colorado, working in Puerto Rico mostly on the series of acoustic pieces. When I was in Puerto Rico, I had connected a generator to be able to turn on the hot plates. When I was in Colorado, I could just work on anything and a year later, on exactly the same day, September 20th of 2018, I had my opening night of the 209 exhibit in Puerto Rico.

Curtis Anderson: So, talking about that project, and then who you are as an entrepreneur, a boss... can you bridge the gap a little bit, like, how did that inform or shape the creative or the person you are like today? How does that develop or shape your story moving forward?

Mara Torres González: My 209 Series. Yeah, so, I lived through the hurricanes both Irma and Maria and I lived and experienced the humanitarian crisis in Puerto Rico. Mostly because of the lack of response or the slow response of our local and federal government. How has this shaped me?

It gave me a new perspective on how us Puerto Ricans, U.S. citizens, are not treated equally. The response was way slower than any other response to a big hurricane here in the United States. Moving out of Puerto Rico into Sarasota, I experienced diversity because in Puerto Rico, you are surrounded mostly by Puerto Ricans or Americans. I experienced that diversity because there's people here from all over the world, and that is a great thing. But I also have experience on how we are not seen or treated equally even though we are American citizens. We are born and the moment we are born we are US citizens, just like anyone born here in New York, in Massachusetts, in Florida. Although we are US citizens, we don't have the same rights as US citizens. For example, in Puerto Rico, you pay local taxes but you also have to pay for federal taxes, but then you don't get to vote for the president. As hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico, we did not get the same response as the US citizens living here in the mainland.

One of the things that I get asked a lot is when do you become a US citizen? How has it been since you moved to America? I moved to North America. I moved into the United States, not America. I also get asked a lot: where did you, when and where did you learn to speak English? Back in Puerto Rico. Not here. The most frequent question I get, almost on a daily basis from customers walking into the gallery, as soon as I start talking to them or greet them: "where are you from?" Because of my accent. I don't ask customers when they start speaking to me. I never ask: "where are you from?"

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: So, it feels like an invasive question to you? Because I also have an accent, and you and I were talking about it, you know, if I go to a coffee shop trying to order coffee, and I just want to go about my day, sometimes, in my life people have grabbed me by the arm, and they're like: "where are you from?". And, that felt sort of invasive to me. Does that feel invasive to you?

Mara Torres González: It is invasive. Because I'm not asking you where you are from. I'm just talking to you, as I would love for you to be talking to me. Why does it matter where I am from? If I didn't have an accent, you wouldn't be asking where I'm from.

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: I could totally relate to that. I moved to the US when I was younger. It's been about 25 years and I do feel like Florida is my home and I have two kids. They are Floridians. They are going to be raised here, and I love this place that I call home, and I just want to go about my day, and people are asking me or I get asked daily, 20 times, where are you from? It makes me feel like I don't belong here, or I could never be a part of this amazing, beautiful space that I call home and I'll always be an outsider. Does that make you feel that way as well?

Mara Torres González: Yeah, completely. And then we try so hard to belong, and we feel like we are never going to belong.

Curtis Anderson: So, going back to this, like, shaping who you are. You know, culturally, after you moved here, did you have this inkling or was like this sense of belonging? Because you were in Puerto Rico right after you finished school up until you moved here, so who was Mara like as a creative person, as an artist, pre-hurricane? Because it sounds like the hurricane came in, shaped you, and then seeing you on this path towards, you know, moving to Florida, which then wrote

another chapter in your book. So, what's the difference between the post hurricane coming to Florida and pre-hurricane artistically for you?

Mara Torres González: I have always been an artist, whether I was painting or designing events. I designed and I performed. I did all of the flowers, all of the centerpieces. I took care of everything with my own hands. Of course, we had employees, we had staff that would help us put everything together, but I was the one designing and putting everything together. So, I have always been creative. I started the business making handmade paper and making wedding invitations. That's how it all started. I had a planner who received one of my invitations, and just reached out to me - Can I order invitations for my customers? That's how it all started. So, I have always been a creative person throughout my entire life. Hurricane Maria completely uprooted our lives. If hurricane Maria hadn't happened, we would still be in Puerto Rico.

Curtis Anderson: Do you mind if I interject with another question? Just about your project. I mean, I feel like if someone was writing a book about your life, this would be a turning point. What was your favorite piece that came out of your book? It could be the book itself, but like, I mean, you open your door, Puerto Rico is not what it was before the storm.

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: I've seen the piece with the toilet papers and I was wondering if you can tell us about that.

Mara Torres González: So... those are not my favorite pieces, but it could be one of my favorite stories behind the pieces, it's more than one piece. So, if I remember well, two weeks after the hurricane, very early October, we had no power, right? No phones, no communication. I'm stuck in the middle of heavy traffic, right? Nonstop. Like, you're just in parking, you're parked. Later, I found out that the reason for that was that they had the roads closed because president number 45, at that moment President Trump, was in a press conference in Puerto Rico. So, he flew in two weeks after for a very brief press conference, and he was throwing paper towel rolls to the crowd, literally. There are videos online if you want to entertain yourselves. We had no running water. We had no power, we had no food. Because when I went for the first time to a grocery store with my kids, we had to wait outside an hour and a half in line. And when we walked in, the shelves were empty. There was barely any food to buy. So, I still wonder, what was he thinking we were going to do with paper towel rolls? So, it just blows my mind. So, a lot of the pieces have cutouts from the rolls. But I think, going back to your question, my favorite piece must be Reconocidos, which translates to be recognized. And it's a piece inspired by the official and non-official death tolls. You're going to see numbers on the piece. And those are in relation to the official and non-official death tolls given by the government or studies made. The official death toll is over 3000 people. And the government, when President Trump came in, our governor, Ricardo Roseo, very proudly said that we only had 16 deaths, like 1616. Yeah, 16 less than 2016.

Mara Torres González: And it was over 3000. And most of the deaths are because of the lack of response. No power. So hospitals had no power, affecting all the people that were connected to machines. Dialysis patients without power. Most of the deaths were because of the lack of response from the governments.

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: So your artwork and your life is all about resilience. You also opened up the Mara Art Studio and Gallery in the middle of a pandemic. That's a story of resilience in itself. And

when you look back at your life or your art, is there a piece of a story of resilience that you would like to share with us?

Mara Torres González: There's a lot of stories on resilience because I think Puerto Ricans, we are taught to be resilient. We have to be resilient because of our colonial relationship with the United States. So that's part of the nature of who we are. We are resilient people. But from my personal stories, I would say Hurricane Maria, because it completely uprooted my life and my family's life. I moved towards the very successful career that I am into, moved out of Puerto Rico, moved my immediate family, just the four of us, to Sarasota. We have no family here, just the four of us, starting from zero. So that starting from zero, I would say, has to be my number one resilient story. Coming here, starting all over again, my husband starting all over again. And then when we are finally opening up a business here, the pandemic hits, and then everything. Our plans changed with the pandemic, and I just opened the art gallery. It was supposed to be a larger business, and then I opened in the Rosemary District in the middle of the pandemic. And then we went through Hurricane Ian, where we had to get a new roof in our house. But for us, for example, we never lost power during Hurricane Ian, even though we were losing our roof. So it was nerve wracking for us, but we still had power. We had Wifi. We were like, this is just bizarre. So that was another story. It just keeps going on and on. And then I'm established in the Rosemary district, and my lease went up 75%. So once again, let's move and start from zero on Palm Av, of which I'm very happy about. That was a blessing in disguise.

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: Yeah, you're in an amazing location.

Mara Torres González: Yes.

Curtis Anderson: So going off of this level of resilience that you have to maintain, could you talk about some of the challenges of the type of work that you do, and not just know as a gallery owner, but as a female identifying artist from Puerto Rico, being a gallery owner in Sarasota, so, being a little geographically specific.

Mara Torres González: So, there's a lot of challenges. We already spoke about the constant question of where I'm from because of my accent. I also get a lot of reactions, people being surprised when I say, I am Mara, and I point to the window because my name's on the window, and I get like, oh, you're Mara. So I'm always wondering, is it because I look young? Is it because of my accent? Is it because I'm a woman in business? But I get that reaction a lot in terms of my work. The work that I am most passionate about is the work that can be recognized as a hard seller, but it's the work that I'm not going to stop creating. At the same time, I own a business on Palm Avenue, so I have to keep the doors open, and in order to keep the doors open, I have to sell.

Curtis Anderson: So some of the challenges would be.

Mara Torres González: Like, a compromise, and not just for me. There's other artists, and it's mostly latin artists, whose work is not the selling work, whether it's for social reasons or political reasons, but it is the work that we are deeply passionate about.

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: So do you feel like the voices of latin artists are fully represented in the arts?

Mara Torres González: I believe they are not, especially in Sarasota. When you go around the galleries, it's mostly american artists, and there's nothing wrong with that. But there's people from all over the world living here, and you don't see a lot of latin artists in the galleries.

Curtis Anderson: Why do you think that is?

Mara Torres González: I don't know why. I know that in my gallery, I am trying to bring in more international talent. Right now, I have, including myself, three Puerto Ricans. I have one Canadian. The rest are Americans. But I'm trying to bring in, oh, I have one Colombian who has been at the gallery for less than two weeks, and three of his pieces have sold.

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: Congratulations.

Mara Torres González: Thank you.

Curtis Anderson: Wow.

Mara Torres González: So his work has been very well received here. We're four latin artists in the gallery, but I have to say that I have more female artists than male artists in the gallery. And that's part of my mission, to.

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: Highlight the voices of female identifying artists in the business, which is extremely important. From your perspective, then, being from Puerto Rico and being a woman in the arts, what can be done in order to create more inclusion in the arts?

Mara Torres González: Both the art organizations, whether we're talking about galleries or we're talking about museums, should be more inclusive with latin artists. But also the latin artists have, at some point, they have to put their work out. Not all of them do. The latin artists also have to reach out and put their work out. But it feels for some of them, based on conversations we've had, they have reached out at some point, and they have not been included. So I know that for some of them, it's hard, but you still have to do your part. So both have to do their part. So I'm trying to be more inclusive of everyone, regardless of where you're from. That's why I'm bringing in more latin artists into my own space and more female artists into my space.

Curtis Anderson: Going back to the compromise, because it sounds like the challenge that you face is a similar challenge that other latin artists also might face, in the sense of creating work for themselves, for a social or political drive, and then creating work that sells. And I'm interested because you just mentioned that you have Colombian artists, right?

Mara Torres González: Yeah.

Curtis Anderson: And this person has sold two pieces. What is the outlier in that situation? Is it the type of work that is a commercial piece? Is it a commercial piece that educates people? Who's the buyer or the demographic of the purchaser of these types of pieces? Where can we bridge the gap? Because it sounds like it's an educational thing. It sounds like people, if they were more

informed on this level of resiliency that the Puerto Ricans have, and then when they see pieces on resiliency from a Puerto Rican artist, they might be more inclined to support that artist because they can relate to this level of oppression, or they can relate to Puerto Ricans who feel that way. I feel like, do you feel like what the difference is or what could bridge it is a sense of education, and if so, spitballing ideas. What type of ways could we educate the masses so they are more appreciative of the art that the latin culture produces?

Mara Torres González: That is a great question, because when I evaluate Aurelia Posada, who is a Colombian artist, he is also an architect. His work does not have a social or political story behind it. I am very happy to include latin artists, regardless of if their work is social, political, or commercial. But when I look at the other three Puerto Rican artists, including myself, our work is mostly social, political, and does not sell as much as, or as fast as Aurelius work or commercial work. I think people either are afraid of it or don't understand it, or are simply not interested in it. I had a piece by Javi Suarez, who's a puerto rican artist, also an architect in town. He's been in Sarasota since Ruth Bader. And I had one customer, a female customer, walk in. She was walking around the gallery, pointed at that painting, and said, you shouldn't be showing that. For me, coming from a female, that was appalling. Right? And I didn't say anything because I am the business owner, and I should just avoid that. But it is that type of work the one that, is not always well perceived here.

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: But I really agree with you. The arts have such an important role in educating the masses and then creating awareness on a lot of the issues that many people are not necessarily aware of. That's where really intercultural learning happens. And this is something that I talk to my students all the time, because in order for us to have any sort of empathy with people, then we need to recognize that there are all these stories that are really impacting people. Because whenever we talk about human rights or issues of racism. Sometimes they could feel like these topics are controversial, these topics are political. These topics, even like death tolls, are just like abstract numbers that are out there, that we read about in the newspapers. But when we have people in front of us and we're hearing these stories, these real stories from their mouths, we are really learning the impact of, wow, these are real issues impacting real people.

Mara Torres González: It goes back to the lack of education in Puerto Rico. For example, I went to a school where I was taught both English and Spanish since I was in preschool. So, most of the Puerto Ricans are bilingual. Here in the States, it's English, unless you are interested in learning a second language, but you're not taught a second language in Puerto Rico. I was taught about the United States and the rest of the world, and I still don't understand how here they're not taught about the relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico, how we are still, we're the oldest colony, oldest existing colony in the world. We are American citizens because we were granted citizenship, but we don't have the same rights as US citizens. And I get that from all the questions from different people, that they do not know when they are asking when did I become a US citizen, it's because you were never taught, educated on that relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico. When we're talking about politics, the majority of the people here don't know, like I mentioned earlier, that we have to pay federal taxes, but we don't vote for president. We don't have the right to vote for president, but yet the United States owns us. So it goes back to that lack of education and we're just talking about Puerto Rico, United States. But it goes beyond.

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: Curtis, you, because I'm originally from Turkey and I think I mentioned this, and Turkey is a very homogeneous region. And I know that, Curtis, you have this fascinating story, interacting with a student from Turkey, and you were able to turn that into an educational moment for that.

Curtis Anderson: Now, I don't know if you make it sound like I was aware in that situation. So I definitely need space and room to grow. In order to grow, there needs to be space allotted out so that conversations can happen, so that people can be educated and then they can understand where the work comes from. Unless you have that exposure, they're not going to know in order to ask those questions. I can't believe I'm telling the story. So, when I was entering my second year here, it's a cultural melting pot. And people like me met people from parts of the world I didn't even know existed. Right? I'm from Ohio. When am I going to ever talk about the Maldives? Right? But my second year, we were a group of friends, and we were just hanging out, and we had met a young lady from Turkey, and a friend of mine and I are just kind of talking in this big group, and she comes out of nowhere, and she walks up and she grabs my nose, and she said her thought out loud, and she goes, wow, it's soft. And we're all just kind of, like, taken back. And I'd been here for a year, so understanding different cultures and different people allowed me to make room for a random encounter, in a way, without knowing that it did. And so asking her, like, yo, you can't just walk up to someone and just invade their space. But for her, her interaction with a black person was that of a different social class. And so she really hadn't had the opportunity to be in the same space where it wasn't even, like, dawned on that we were different. We were just existing in the same group of friends. And so she had that space to do so. And then we also all had that space to create this educational moment out of a random encounter of someone grabbing my nose. But I feel like, in a way, Sarasota could. There needs to be more bandwidth. There needs to be some more growth so that people from your culture can have those types of conversations and that people can listen. They may not respond the way you want to respond. I think that's human. But given the room, an educational moment can be presented in those spaces. And I think those spaces probably need to be curated a little bit more in certain areas of the country than they would in others. But that doesn't mean that they should not exist. You know what I mean?

Mara Torres González: That reminds me! I think we talked about this, how everyone points out how exotic my daughter is, and they're always pointing out the gorgeous skin color both of my kids have. Like, I'm not pointing out your skin color ever. I'm not saying, wow, you're exotic, you're gorgeous, because you're exotic. And it's stuff like that that just stays in your head, and you try to analyze where these comments and questions are definitely coming from. And another thing, I have an accent. Clearly, my husband does not have an accent. So they ask him a lot. Where did you learn English? Puerto Rico. How long have you been here? Five and a half years. Wow. It's like, really? But then I get a lot of, where are you from? Because of the accent, and then he gets the wow because he does not.

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: You are from Puerto Rico, you're a woman and you're also a mother, right? So you have all of these really amazing experiences. You went through a humanitarian crisis in Puerto Rico, went through two hurricanes. So, if you were to give a piece of advice to young people like our students, what piece of advice would you give?

Mara Torres González: My advice would be to stay true to yourselves, to your work, and don't fear being who you are and speaking up and having a voice. If possible, don't think about whether your work is going to sell commercially, because I think art is a great channel to educate others. And through art, you can express what you can't with words, which is part of my statement.

Curtis Anderson: Where is your gallery located? Just in case some people in the community would like to come and stop by. Where exactly? Downtown Sarasota?

Mara Torres González: The name of my gallery is Mara Art Studio and Gallery. It's located in 76 South Palm Avenue. And you can find us online, on Facebook, Instagram, or our website, marastudiogallery.com.

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: Sounds wonderful.

Mara Torres González: Thank you so much.

Curtis Anderson: And that concludes today's conversation. Thank you for tuning in and joining us on this journey of design and inclusion. You can find all of our episodes, transcripts and other wonderful resources on our website: ringling.edu/risingtogether. Join us next time for more insightful conversations. And remember to stay connected, stay engaged and keep rising together with us.

Rising Together is produced at the Soundstage in partnership with Studio Labs, and Art Network at Ringling College of Art and Design. The show is produced by Dr. Elcin Haskollar, Curtis Anderson, Keith Elliott, Nick Palladino, Troy Logan and Marquee Doyle.