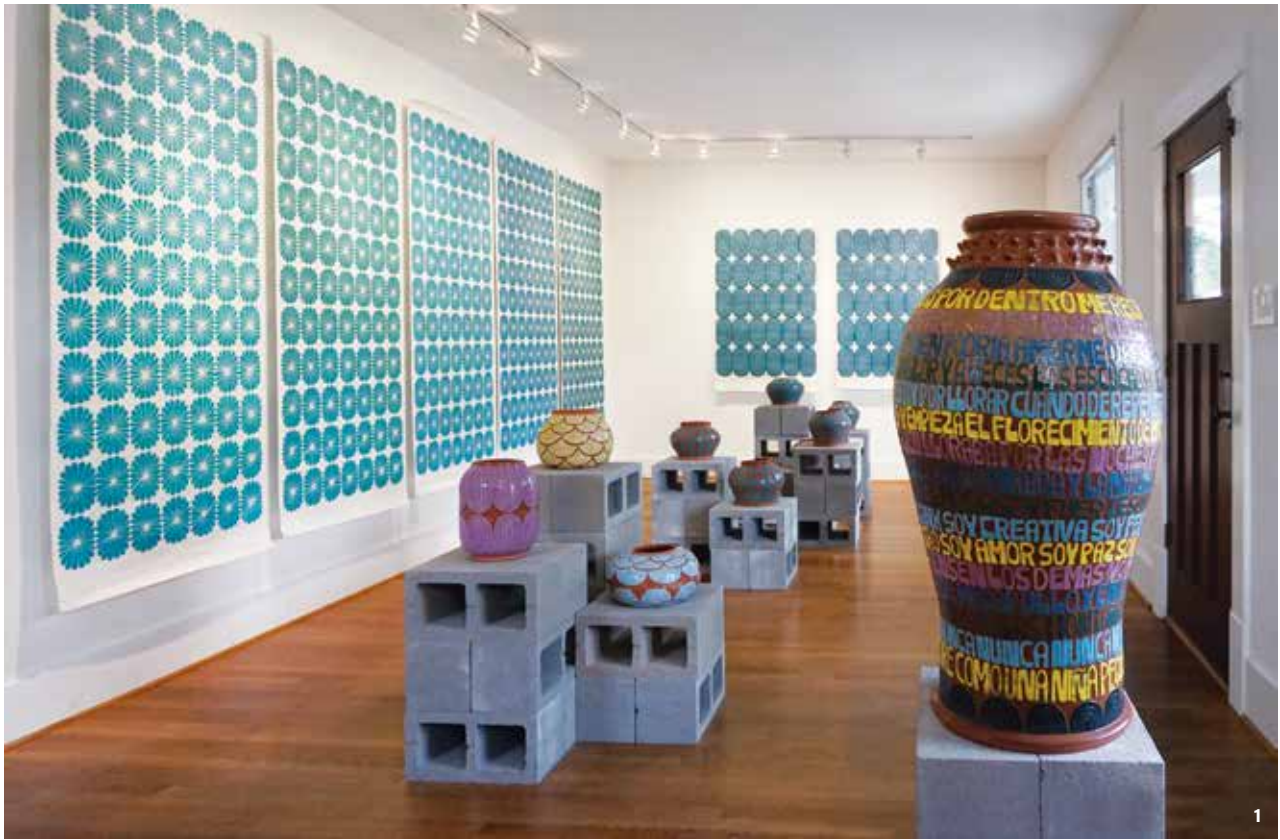


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# BARRO ROJO

LA CERÁMICA DE GABO MARTINI by Amanda Barr





*Querido hermano,  
Ya no quiero fingir o mentir  
Además quiero admitir  
Que ya estoy encontrando paz...*

*Dear Brother,  
I no longer wish to pretend or lie,  
Also I wish to admit  
That I've been finding peace...*

—“Querido Hermano,” excerpt from a poem by Gabo Martini

The work of Gabriela Martinez, who creates under the name Gabo Martini, is immediately likable, accessible across generations and cultures. It evokes her Mexican and Tejana heritage while maintaining a contemporary feel. Bright-colored, bubble-like letters loop around red clay urns calling to mind both Mexican homes dotting a desert hillside, as well as the playful hippie font of the Beatles’ *Yellow Submarine* album, while traditional indigenous-style patterns and prints on both clay and paper decorate her other work, creating a festive cross-cultural atmosphere that is at once fun and poignant.

Martinez is 24, belonging to a generation defined by a drive toward authenticity and identity. She refers to herself as Chicax, Latinx, and Mexican-American, though her favorite moniker is MexicaTejana, a blend of Mexican and Texan, coined by famed queer Chicax poet and author Gloria Anzaldúa. (Chicax and Latinx are the gender-neutral terms for being of Mexican-American or Hispanic heritage.) Her generation is drawn to relatable stories that cross socio-cultural lines, preferring substance over arbitrary boundaries, personal identity over surface appeal. They are the generation that speaks openly



**Opposite:** Gabo Martini poses with her work during the opening for “Flor Morena,” her BFA thesis exhibition at Texas State University, Conduit Gallery, in San Marcos, Texas, 2018. **1** Gallery view of “Sueños de Turquesa,” a solo show by Gabo Martini at Front Gallery, Houston, Texas, 2019. **2** *Pink Petaled Planter*, 11½ in. (29 cm) in height, terra cotta, slip, sgraffito, 2019.

about mental health issues and has free conversations about trauma and abuse; Martinez is no different, including choosing a gender-neutral first name, Gabo.

### Life and Inspiration

Born in Tarimoro, Guanajuato, Mexico, Martinez grew up between Texas and Tarimoro, spending summers in the vibrant town where every home and business is painted with highly saturated colors and her *abuelitas* (grandmothers) have patios full of blooming plants. *Artesanía* (Mexican folk art) traditions are alive and well in Tarimoro, a region that formerly produced red clay bricks and whose Spanish mission-style architecture still sports red brick tile roofs. The local *mercados* (markets) are full of warm terra-cotta *ollas* (pots) and *cantaros* (water carriers) as well as indigenous-patterned embroidered fabrics alongside local produce and modern products.

This tradition of the use of vibrant colors in Mexican and Southwestern US culture has strong pre-Columbian roots, as seen in the indigenous peoples' affinity for green quetzal feathers, red poinsettias, cochineal dyes, and farms growing indigo—the latter of which was used to paint sacrificial victims at Mayan temples. This was witnessed by the Spanish conquistadors and is evident in the sculpture, paintings, textiles, and remains of pottery. Today, even in the poorest barrio, nearly every house remains freshly and vividly painted in this same tradition—in cheerful turquoises, yellows, oranges, blues, reds, and pinks.

### Surface Decoration of Personal and Natural History

Martinez has mined this history, both from her own background and from studying pre-Columbian art during her undergraduate career at Texas State University. As a result of her upbringing, she grew up loving colors and plants, carving her first motifs as fractal floral patterns. Nostalgia for the terra-cotta homes and pottery

of her native Mexico led to her working with red clay. She coats each piece in highly saturated colorful slips, which she then carves through using a sgraffito technique. Her designs wrap around the vessels in infinite loops, repeating ritualistically and inviting the viewer to circle the pot. The patterns have an indigenous feel without being directly copied, mimicking the complex and beautiful symmetry often found in the natural world. It is haunting work, both merry and somehow wistful for a connection to nature.

It was in the last year of her BFA program that Martinez began creating large, coil-thrown pots and jars into which she would carve text. She started with quotes from books and song lyrics, love songs by Carla Morrison and the Black Keys, before moving on to create her most personal work to date. Martinez looked to her own journals and sketchbooks, in which she'd written original poetry in Spanish to help process several traumas she had experienced growing up; poems that expressed her fear, feelings of exploitation, and pain. Carving these poems, verse by verse, allowed her time to reflect on the words—words have power when they are vulnerable, raw, and honest—and it has acted as a form of empowerment therapy for Martinez, and, she hopes, for others.

"It is my story and my suffering that have been immortalized in clay." Martinez says, "In sharing my story, I am sharing my pain, and it is a pain that mainly women are forced to endure. Most



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3 *Amor Lunar/Lunar Love*, 11 in. (28 cm) in diameter, terra cotta, slip, sgraffito, 2017. 4 *Untitled (Querido Hermano)*, 33 in. (84 cm) in height, terra cotta, slip, sgraffito, 2018. 5 Martini carving letters on a terra-cotta urn for her BFA thesis exhibition at Texas State University, 2018. 6 Los portales (porticos) in Tarimoro, Guanajuato, Mexico. Photo: Silvia Celeste Martinez. 7 Tarimoro, Mexico, with Jardín de Tarimoro (Tarimoro Garden park) in the foreground. Photo: Still shot from the video "Tarimoro Guanajuato Terruño de Amor" by Erik Saul. Courtesy of Creative Commons YouTube.



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of us swallow it and repress it. We try to forget that these awful things ever happened to us, but they affect our everyday lives. These experiences affect the way we view ourselves and the way we allow others to treat us. The damage is deep and painful, but this pain was my catalyst for self-healing through self-expression. I felt like I needed to re-open my wounds so that I could begin healing myself, while also inspiring others to sit with their traumas and bring closure to their own lives. Acceptance follows reflection; liberation follows acceptance. Self expression equals self healing."

### Creating Ambience and Meaning

The placement of these large urns on pedestals created out of concrete bricks rather than white cubes completes the expression, acting both as metaphor for building blocks and further visual reminders of the average barrio. Hand-printed fabric in the same colors and motifs as the pots, hanging like wispy wallpaper or light curtains, completes the ambience for her latest show, "Sueños de Turquesa," her solo exhibition at Front Gallery in Houston, Texas, which was on view earlier this year.

With intensely personal, harrowing yet tender verses spiraling in vivid, sunny colors, these large stoic urns give the best window

into Martinez' depths. She is complex, much like contemporary society; she represents multiple cultures and nations, she heralds the coming of a generation that embraces its heritage while eschewing the constraints of societal norms, and she is only just beginning. She has a lifetime ahead of her to mine for content, and oh the places she will go!

Currently, you can find Martinez working as the studio technician at Glassell School of Art while she designs a new body of functional work, available online in August 2019 at [gabomartinipotts.com](http://gabomartinipotts.com). She plans to spend the next couple of years developing her larger pieces technically and conceptually, exploring even larger forms and pushing the work in a more sculptural direction. Recently she has been creating batches of little creatures, mini figurines meant to be plant guardians, as a studio exercise to be looser and more playful. ¡Arriba Gabo!

**the author** *Amanda Barr is an artist and educator currently working on her MFA in ceramics and her MA in art history at the University of Montana in Missoula. A habitual nomad, she has lived in six states and four countries in the past 15 years; most recently she enjoyed several years in Seattle. To learn more, visit [www.amandambarr.com](http://www.amandambarr.com).*