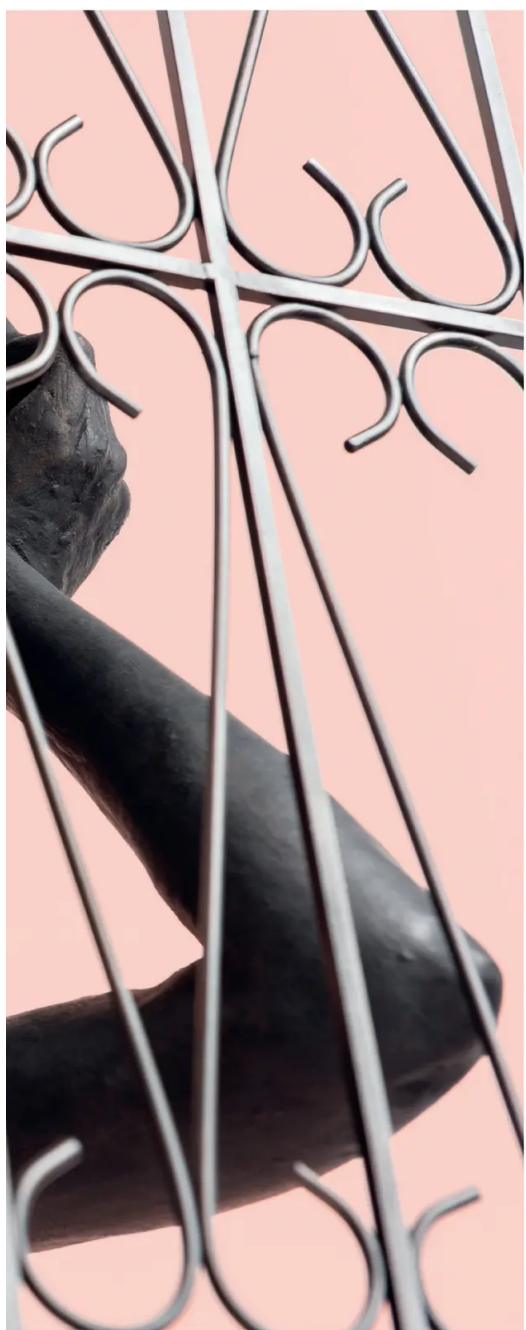




# Figurative philosophy

*Emma Park* discovers the inspiration  
and symbolism behind Cristina Córdova's  
figurative sculptures



**ABOVE:** *Maja*, 2022,  
66x30x15cm

CRISTINA CÓRDOVA IS A FIGURATIVE sculptor working in clay, widely regarded as one of the best contemporary ceramicists from Latin America. Over the course of two decades, she has built up an extraordinary oeuvre of expressive figures that reflect on themes from her roots in Puerto Rico, to the relationship between Caribbean and US cultures, and notions of family, race, gender, migration and shared humanity.

As a young child, Córdova's creative leanings were spotted by her mother, a paediatrician, who encouraged her to go to art classes. She initially enrolled in an engineering degree at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez, before switching in her second year to a BA in Arts. Although the course was focused on art history, she also took studio classes – including, in her third year, a semester-long elective on building techniques in ceramics, which was taught by Jaime Suárez, a Puerto Rican studio ceramicist and professor. This encounter was a turning point: Córdova was captivated by clay and never looked back. Suárez, she says, 'proposed the medium in such a way that I fell in love with it. He offered a portal into the possibilities'.

After finishing her BA, she went to study ceramics at Alfred University in upstate New York, first for a year as a special student and then for the two-year MFA, which offered a renowned ceramics programme. This gave her a grounding in techniques for building the human figure and enabled her to experiment with different making strategies, such as the construction of large-scale sculptures in smaller sections, as well as to reflect on artistic concepts and to find her individual voice.

### MAGICAL MATERIAL

Clay as a material means many things to Córdova. From an early stage, she was attracted by the idea that 'clay was earth, dirt, mud,' and by the symbolism of the making process. 'It feels quite magical to harvest something from the ground, work with it, adapt it to your touch, to your nervous system, and then put it through a process that will essentially turn it into stone and allow it to live in perpetuity,' she explains.

From Suárez, she drew an understanding of clay as something 'beautiful and imperfect...clay allowed me to handle material that withstood my limitations and somehow still allowed me to put something out that seemed interesting, compelling and worthwhile'.

After graduating in 2002, she won a three-year residency at Penland School of Craft. 'When I first met her, she was working fairly small,' says Kathryn Gremley, curator of the Penland Gallery. 'She had obviously a great deal of skill. She was chosen for the residency based on that.'

The community of artists and makers at Penland, nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, provided a supportive environment for Córdova while she got to grips with the business side of her practice: 'scheduling exhibitions, developing cash flow and taxes'. She found the institution and the community of craftspeople in the surrounding area so conducive that, after her residency finished in 2005, she bought a house and set up a studio there – and has never left.

The first ten years of her practice were intense: combined with the challenges of making a career, and 'furiously working and showing', she had





**TOP:** *De mi isla salvaje*, 2016, ceramic and metal, 106x63cm

**BELOW:** *Cosmología isleña*, ceramic, steel, resin, 2021, 152x71x71cm

**RIGHT:** *Cristina in her studio*, 2022

two daughters to bring up. Looking back, Córdova wonders how she managed it: 'I guess I had the wind of youth in my sails,' she says wistfully.

As an artist, she loves to play with the medium and is constantly experimenting. Her prolific output has evolved over the last two decades from heads, through busts and torsos, to whole-body or group sculptures. Characteristically, she taught herself basic anatomical principles independently. She then spent a summer studying applied sculpture at the Florence Academy of Art, where she learnt techniques such as 'sight sizing': looking at a model and mapping the proportions, contours and vantage point onto clay – essentially 'drawing in space'.

Her interest in the human figure goes back to her early training as a classical ballet dancer and the close connection she had experienced between 'the language of the gesture and the body'. Figure-sculpture in clay became a way for her to 'tap into that channel of communication'.

### SCULPTURAL PROCESS

The process Córdova has developed for sculpting a large-scale figure involves several stages. When she wants a more naturalistic effect, she begins with a live model in her studio, whom she photographs from several different angles. She then prints out the photographs to scale and uses them as the basis for sight sizing and for other references.

If she wants a more 'archetypal' figure, for instance in her larger free-standing heads or torsos, she will not necessarily use a physical model but simply relies on drawings and her imagination. She has also gone through phases of sketching people before translating them into clay, using this as a method of brainstorming: 'It is a great strategy to hunt for something that will just click,' she reveals.

Córdova then builds up the body in hollow sections, from the head and shoulders, through the trunk to the legs and base. For larger works, she uses a 'paper clay that has a lot of grog in it'. This results in a substance that is 'incredibly strong...it feels like concrete'. The heaviest work she has cast using this method was a head that weighed 136kg.

Having made the sculpture, she lets it dry partially overnight then moves it to one of the kilns she has in various sizes. The work will then go through a bisque-firing process before being removed for glazing and returned to the kiln to be fired again. Recently, she has used the native earths of Puerto Rico and Penland to make pigments for her work, which lend it their own distinctive 'voices'.

Above all, Córdova is concerned with clay's potential as an expressive and narrative medium, which can be used to sculpt works that are imaginatively engaging on a visual and tactile level and yet are not dominated by a simplistic message but are open to different interpretations. The details are important, especially the relationship of the face to other parts of the body. 'If I have a sculpture and the face is holding a lot of emotion, I feel that the mystery of what is happening becomes dissipated,' she says.

She prefers to create a sense of internal activity through faces that are more externally 'neutral', with the emotion being hinted at in other ways, such as through a clenched hand. She has also experimented with the juxtaposition of the human form and backgrounds, including photographs of Puerto Rican landscapes or patterns, such as a black-and-white 'camouflage' that integrates the female body into its surroundings.

Images: Lucy Plato; LOAM; Gretchen Ruiz; Raquel Perez Ruiz; Chad Weeden









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Rather than being designed to reflect particular ethnicities, her faces are given idealised, abstract features, and she uses a range of non-naturalistic glazes from soft stone, to white and black, reminiscent of Roman bronzes. 'What people don't often see is how scholarly she is,' says Gremley. 'She not only studies the human form and understands it from a technical aspect...but she is also exercising her thought processes. Her work is layered and nuanced.'

#### FINDING CLARITY

In the mid-2010s, Córdova decided it was time for a change of pace: 'I was making work so fast that I felt there wasn't enough of a pause,' she explains. So, she began to divide her time between making and teaching. In spring 2024, she founded the Center for Study of Figurative Ceramics, the aim of which is to offer courses, co-taught by different collaborators, that reflect a 'philosophy' of figurative sculpture. She also won a prestigious Maxwell/Hanrahan Award in Craft.

Córdova's latest exhibition, and first as a curator, is *El Puente* ('The Bridge'), at the Penland Gallery. The exhibition brings together mixed media work by three other Puerto Rican artists, including Suárez, with three of her own wall pieces, a form which she is preoccupied with at the moment. Among these is *Madre*, 2024, which centres on the outlines of her daughters, now 22 and 17, who lay down on the studio floor while she moulded clay around them. The two outlines are presented back-to-back in a swirling, dreamlike, perhaps scarred landscape, and was made while Córdova was working through her grief at losing her own mother earlier in the summer.

Her artistic approach is both introspective and outward-facing, personal and communicative. 'What I am trying to do,' she says, 'is find enough clarity inside myself to summon my knowledge of the material and combine it with something that feels vibrant and compelling and formally bring it into the world. Once these things come out, my hope is that they have a voice that reaches from something specific to something universal...that has to do with just being human.'

This deep connection with open-ended experiences that transcend restrictive categories, combined with technical mastery, may explain why her work has such an immediate appeal. 

**ABOVE:** *Vaivén*, 2023, 38x147x15cm  
**LEFT:** *Madre*, 2024, 168x10x223cm

For more details visit [cristinacordova.com](http://cristinacordova.com). Center for the Study of Figurative Ceramics; [figurativeceramics.org](http://figurativeceramics.org). *El Puente*, 1 April – 7 June 2025, Penland Gallery; [penland.org](http://penland.org)