



## How Artist Scherezade Garcia Came to Work and Exist on Her Own Terms

Listening to Scherezade Garcia talk about her art and her creative process is watching someone relive the many ways she has made herself free – from other’s scrutiny, from expectations, from the need to justify her very existence. Alicia visited Scherezade’s studio and spoke with her about the notion of selling the Caribbean as “paradise,” the business of being a working artist, and what it means to be home.

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Alicia Menendez:

Scherezade Garcia tells stories of migration and colonization. As an interdisciplinary visual artist, a painter, a printmaker, an installation master, she uses objects like life jackets, suitcases, mattresses, tents, umbrellas, and newspaper clippings to evoke powerful questions of what it means to belong.

Scherezade Garcia:

Hi. Thank you. Pretty good. Come on in. Nice to meet you.

Menendez: This is so beautiful. I love this.

Garcia: So, be careful with your head, please.

Menendez: I will.

Garcia: Because you’re tall. I don’t have that issue. Come on in.

Menendez: So, do you live here, as well? Or you just work here?

Garcia: No, no, no. This is our house. This is our home and studio. So, what do you want to do? Do you want me to go downstairs, to show you some of the work? Or...

Menendez: Let’s sit down and let’s talk.

Garcia: Just you tell me.

Menendez: And then we can do that.

Garcia: So, you tell me when I am speaking too fast.

Menendez: There’s no such thing.

Garcia: No? Okay, good. Because you know I am fast.

Menendez: This space is so cool. Thank you for having us here in your studio. I feel like this is a sacred space, so thank you for making room for us.

Garcia: My pleasure.

Menendez: How long has this been your studio?

Garcia: Now that I am thinking about it, it's been my studio for 18 years.

Menendez: Wow.

Garcia: Yes. Home and studio. Yes.

Menendez: What... How does it change your relationship to your work when you live and work in the same place?

Garcia: You know, I always have done this, like doing home and studio, and then what I did, actually, was to try to be outside, to see if that separation worked for me, and it didn't. I realized then everything that is my life, as a mother, as a wife, as a sister, as a friend, or a colleague, is all connected. As a matter of fact, even my teaching is like a continuation of myself. So, then for me, this nesting concept of having everything in the same place works for me. And that doesn't mean that it works for everybody, but for me, it works.

Let's say like at 2:00 in the morning I feel like I need to do something. I feel I don't need to have that idea of transit, of going one place to another. I feel like I am in my territory.

Menendez: Are you down here working at 2:00 in the morning?

Garcia: Yeah. Sometimes I do that, and sometimes... But I am a morning person, so usually it's more like earlier, but like if... So many times, I cannot sleep, because I have this thing that I need to get out, because I feel like I need to write, or... So, that is one of those very convenient things. Also, I like to have all my books around. I like to have my memories around. My work is very connected, very embedded in history and memory, so I guess that also influences the fact that for me, this whole idea of having everything together makes sense.

Also, you know this idea of like layers of things that is also part of my work. You know, that it's maybe connected to the idea that I had to have everything, like as part of my suitcase. I live with my suitcase, with all the things that are important to me in one place.

Menendez: What is the first thing you ever created?

Garcia: I mean, that's a very hard thing to say, or to remember, but I was always involved in the arts. All my life. I was discussing that, because the book, and the interviews and all that, I had to kind of take a look at my life. You know, like as a spectator, and I come from a home that this was normal, the idea of... my father is a designer that draws. My mother was in theater. Music. So, we were very involved in that kind of expression, most important. That's something very much... But I clearly, I remember when I used to make drawings of Asian people. Everybody had to be Chinese. I was completely fascinated about everything that was from China, and all the buildings I would draw were from China, and then I also was very much into decorating every notebook in my friends in kindergarten and pre-K, so I was very involved always with the idea of aesthetics.

I was very fascinated by culture of other people, like I was curious about the world that surround me, and I am to this day. I am in love with this planet.

Menendez: So, you're a little kid, doodling on everything. When is the first time that someone says, "Hey, I think you might be very good at this?"

Garcia: Like, when I went to school. My parents, you know, everybody says, "Oh, Scherezade is artistic." Come from that, a lot of people like that in the home, at home, so like normal. When I get to school, I realized that something I was different with that. People would look

for me to do this, like I became the artist in residence since I was very young, you know? And like if you needed a Mickey Mouse, I will do it for you. I was in kinder. Flintstone, I will do it for you. I realized it was kind of like also then I used it as a way to make friends.

The first meeting between teachers and parents, the teacher said... Seniorita Elsa, that was her name, said, "Scherezade is an artist." Yes.

Menendez: I had this professor in college who contended that the reason that there were so many great male artists is because at some point there was a kid drawing on a rock, and someone would walk past them and say, "You have talent and I want to invest in you." And that wasn't happening to young girls, and it's part of why you have this gender disparity in the early days of the art world. Who invested in you? Who said, "We can do this. We can invest in this. You can actually make a living doing this."

Garcia: I am very lucky in many things. No, it's... In the important things in life, I have to say. I come from a family where women are very powerful, like I cannot even talk about me without making references of my grandmother, my aunts, my mother, and all the sisters, so I never felt that I even had to worry about the guys. Which became a problem when I was a teenager. I was very social. I love people. But when I became a teenager, then society became more obvious to me. When all the sudden, there were more advantages, or more set opportunities for males, that was like, "What you talking about?" Because I never felt less, or then I never felt that I had to compromise, because that was not part of my family conversation. And then when I went outside, it was like that's another planet.

So, in a way, I didn't have that. I had to find a way to navigate society, then I understood soon enough that I did not belong. You know, so that was something that was very hard for me, and for a while, I became very quiet, trying to find my space, and trying to find a space where I could be who I am. You know, really. And then my parents were very supportive of making sure I went to study abroad, and that I was going to really follow the arts.

Menendez: You consider yourself a storyteller. Which stories do you most want to tell?

Garcia: My story. The one that is always at the root of everything is the idea of inclusion, of that we are all connected. That's something that is always there in my story, the connection, like we really are connected. Of course, everything that I tell, I have my tactics. My visual tactics of engage you in a conversation, of connection that is not exactly like a fairytale of a Disney thing. I talk about sometimes things that are hard, are sad, are tragic, but I mask everything as a way to heal with beauty. I make sure everything that I do is beautiful, so I engage you with beauty to engage in a conversation that not necessarily is going to be comfortable. But it's important.

Menendez: So, give me a specific example of where you do that.

Garcia: For example, if you see all my work, you're gonna see lots of figures. A lot of pieces, you really don't know if they're women, but they're always young, and which always talks about hope and beginning. Also, they're usually cinnamon colored. When I do all these cinnamon colored pieces, it's because I want to make sure I tell the stories of everybody. I don't want to exclude anybody. But as it's informed by the fact that I am from the Caribbean. I may look a little bit like a stereotype of somebody Arab, of a Spanish, but in my skin, I have Africa. In my skin, I have lots of Spanish that was already mixed with Jewish, you know? And Visigoth, and whatever passed by that Iberian Peninsula. You know, I have lots of French, also. And I have also that mixed together, and a little bit of,

thank God, Native American, and all that tells me how can I discriminate? How can I just tell one part of a story? So, then I mix all the colors of the palette, and when you mix all the color of the palettes, which that, by itself, is a action of inclusion, because you're taking everything and you're making them part of the conversation.

So, take everything. Mix it together. That's a action of inclusion. And then the outcome of that mix is cinnamon colored. So, all my pieces are about us. All of us. So, the stories are usually about colonization, usually about the contradictions of like the winter with the summer. You know, they have a lot of iconography of Catholicism, where if you really pay attention to it, it's a criticism to something that I understand very well, coming from a Catholic country. You know, I play a lot with the idea that I really colonize the colonizer. Yeah, you give me the language, the Spanish language. You give me the Christianity of a tool that helped the genocide. You know, and also supposedly by baptism that we became people.

You know, so let me tell you. With all the experience in America, this part of this continent completely transformed everything. Transformed the entire globe. You know, this whole thing of like... Yeah, they did this, they did that, but we, as the consequence of that genocide, the consequences of all that bad things, we became victors. We have victory because we created something new. We hack everything that came from the other side, and we make it newer and better in my opinion.

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Garcia: Be careful here. Okay, be careful here. This is my daughter's area, because she's also in the arts, and the little one, too. But, so I have to get by with all these crazy people. So, this is one of the-

Menendez: It's a huge volume of work!

Garcia: It's a lot of stuff here, but see, in these things, I have everything, like this is some of the pieces I do before I start the enormous ones.

Menendez: Why do you love the gold so much?

Garcia: Because gold is all the colonizers were searching when they were cruising the Atlantic, so they know, so I like to mask everything with the idea of gold in land. You know, because

when they found the gold in land, things that we are... This consequence of us, I think, is what is golden. So, I kind of love to play with that idea of, like, everything is golden, because it's masking all the suffering and all the struggle. You know? But it has to be beautiful, because there is something beautiful also-

Menendez: Gorgeous.

Garcia: It's the way to survive. Beauty is survival. I am always navigating in these waters of beauty and tragedy. That's what I like to say. More water? This is....

Menendez: How does one of your projects go from concept to exhibit?

Garcia: Okay, where I live in my head, I-

Menendez: Apparently.

Garcia: Apparently! So, I have all these ideas, and I talk a lot, and I love to share things. I write. I draw. I do a lot. I have a lot of sketchbooks, so I think, I think, I think, and then I read a lot. I always like investigating, like I get into my I like to say FBI mode. I read a lot, until I decide that it's enough. It's enough and I need to work, and then it becomes drawings, paintings, installation, animations, depending of how I want to express it. But like the idea, I allow myself to give these ideas different roads, and that's why I am like so baroque, because I feel that it cannot be so simple. Then the conversation gets bigger and more complex, and then I feel that I can never finish it, so then that's why my work, you can see people that think, "Oh, Scherezade is a painter." And then other people, completely from another group of people, "Oh, no, no, she is installator." And then other people say, "No, no, no. I seen her sculptures." And I'm like, "Yeah, I am all that."

Menendez: Do you ever have a moment in the middle of one of these creations where you just want to burn the whole thing down?

Garcia: Yeah. I don't like anything I do, basically. Basically always. I always question, because I know something that I know is positive at the end of the night, it is that I... When I feel too secure, I know that's not a good sign. When I know there is more possibilities and I feel like, "Oh, maybe this is not it," but the making it is really dominating the thinking, so it's this conversation between my head and the making, this is when I am in a fabulous area. But that doesn't mean that I'm gonna love it, but I also understand that I have to be brave enough as a artist then to exhibit it, to show it.

Menendez: I work most of the time in live television, and I think part of the reason I have to work in live television is because I similar... Nothing would ever get done. I mean, things could always get better, and so there's something sort of thrilling about being on live television, because at some point it just... It's gotta go. It's as good as it is and it's done.

Garcia: Yes.

Menendez: You do not have that reality, so for you, when is something done?

Garcia: It's when I feel like if I put one more brush stroke or more line, it's gonna be damaged. So, and the good thing about that is that it's a very... It's instinct. It's very intuitive. You know, it's like something that it doesn't have a rule of how finished it looks. It is about that feeling that I have to stop. This is it.

Menendez: Your work is often described as deeply political. Do you agree?

Garcia: You know, we're all political. The moment we go... you come to this world, you know, we are inside the politics of a family. We have to navigate the politics of a society. So, yes, I am political, because I am a person.

Menendez: Do you feel that that word gets attributed to you more because you're a woman of color, because you're an immigrant?

Garcia: I am sure. I am sure, because it's also a part of the game to make you provocative and difficult. You know, but I am, like I said before, I am not really afraid of those things.

Menendez: Provocative and difficult. When you talk about the Hispanic Caribbean, you often talk about questioning paradise.

Garcia: Yes.

Menendez: You grew up in the Dominican Republic. Did you grow up believing that it was paradise?

Garcia: No. No. No. But do I love my country with a passion? Yes, I do. I love the Caribbean. All my work is a love letter to the Caribbean. But the Caribbean that I see as the paradise is this unique voice of survival. From the carnival as a way to survive, once again, the oppression. From the mixing of people, that's the Caribbean and the paradise that I love. The way that we, you know, we talk about paradise in-

Menendez: Tourism?

Garcia: In terms of religion, for example, it is such a joke that it's almost, in my opinion, offensive to the public, you know. And also, it completely contradicts the ideas and how we express them, the same way that the Caribbean is presented like we're all about pina colada, like we are all like all about dancing, and being flare. That is not true. It's the Caribbean. It is the area that is the beginning of the American dream. That's where that was born. I mean, think about how complex is the history of the Caribbean that it's the first step to the history of the continent, and then the colonization of the other countries.

You know, imagine, that was the place where they first basically construct a road that was European. It's the first church. The first baptism. Those are big deals, and then when they... and that was in the islands of Espanola, Dominican Republic and Haiti. Imagine, that was the first island with the first cargo of Africans.

Menendez: I'm not an immigrant myself, and yet I really grapple with this question of what is home. Is it Union City, New Jersey, where I grew up?

Garcia: Yes!

Menendez: Is it Miami, where I got married and had my babies? Is it Cuba, which is this, for me, sort of mythological place that I have never been, and yet-

Garcia: What is there?

Menendez: ... holds a piece of my soul.

Garcia: Yes.

Menendez: Or is home not a place, and rather a sense of belonging?

Garcia: Yes.

Menendez: What do you consider home?

Garcia: Exactly what you are talking about. I think home is where you feel that you belong to, so it can be anywhere, so I am a pirate when it comes to that. I feel very connected to people that have nothing to do with geography, like with all the other side of the planet, but there is something about the sense of belonging, that I feel connected, then that makes home like such organic territory, so it's very emotional.

Menendez: I both feel that, and then I also feel completely unmoored, right? Where it's so much easier to say I am in Brooklyn.

Garcia: It's easier. It's easier.

Menendez: This is my townhouse. This is my home.

Garcia: Yeah. It's easier.

Menendez: This is it.

Garcia: It's easier. It's easier, but I refuse to go for comfortable. You know, and I like to say, as a matter of fact, to continue the conversation, which I think is great, because this conversation I have with my own daughters. I always say, you know, "Oh, where you from?" Oh, Dominican Republic. Now I am saying, "Dominican Republic originally." Because I cannot erase half my life in New York, and I adore New York City. I love it! I mean, I love New York.

Menendez: You've now been in New York longer than you were in the Dominican Republic.

Garcia: Basically, so you know what I say? Dominican York. But now, now, I now, sometimes I feel that I shouldn't say that, because I feel very Caribbean.

Menendez: In preparing for this conversation, I read lots of reviews of your work, and it sort of struck me as frustrating how subjective those reviews are, and also how those subjective analyses are presented as truth.

Garcia: Oh, yeah.

Menendez: It must be also satisfying when someone sees it and really gets it the way that you intended it. Do you read reviews?

Garcia: Yeah. I read reviews.

Menendez: Thank you for being honest about that, because I've also had people be like, "Oh, I never read the reviews." I'm like...

Garcia: I do. I think, you know what? I like to know. I like to know. Like I told to you, I am a control freak. I like to know, because it helps. It helps.

Menendez: Does it impact your work?

Garcia: No. No. Because like I say, I'm very bossy, too. Like I know what I want, and I know who I am. The most important thing for me is to be truthful to me, and as an artist, it's you are always on search of a truth, and that truth doesn't have to really apply for everybody. But I've been always very... I feel very fortunate in the people that have written things about me. They many times... They say things that I am so close to it that I don't see it.

Menendez: You didn't see it. Yeah.

Garcia: But they unveil things that are great. Do you gonna have people that don't like your work? Of course! But since when, like I said before, the moment you are too comfortable, and everybody adores you, that's a problem. That's a problem, because then you're never going to question yourself or be inspired to self-assessment, and you do need that.

Menendez: It strikes me that there is a distinction between being an artist and being a working artist. How does one make a living as a visual artist?

Garcia: Well, yeah, this is a very good question, because this question has been in the conversation this entire week, and today's only Wednesday. Yes. Yeah, well, one thing that I feel very fortunate is that I've been able... I teach, which is something that I start doing really like 10 years ago at Parsons, but also, I have a background as a designer as well, and I have a lot of experiences that were very important and defined so much of my work, because those experiences. One thing that for me is very important is I am a artisan since I was very young. I had galleries. I have representational galleries in many different occasions, with different countries, you know? And I always been able to sell, which not everybody can do.

And not everybody's been.. Because sometimes it's so... has no logic, okay? Then also, I am very practical in the way I am. I think if you have a tool, and you can find a way with any gift or tool of talent you have, to sustain your practice and don't worry about money, that is a wonderful way to get freedom. I find so many artists full of anger, frustrated, depressed, only thinking about the \$5 that they're gonna get tomorrow, because there is this pressure of like, "If you are not a real artist if you do this or that." I think people have to find how they feel comfortable doing, where they still feel that integrity is there, but they definitely have to find ways to produce, because that's important. You know, and that teach you a lot about the audience you want to appeal to.

Menendez: How do you become represented as a visual artist?

Garcia: There're many ways. It's either... One thing I might do is, for example, like somebody comes here to my... You get a lot of curators, art historians, that somehow you meet because you're running a show and they like your work, and then they take your contact. They call you up, and then from there, you might another curator, or another art historian, and then from those, you get to be in other shows, and then you are exposed to more people, and then there is always a gallerist, and then, or somebody that is a dealer somehow, and that's how you start making the... and then they come to see your work, and then that's how you start making these connections, and you can be represented.

But also, that's the way how you recommend your friends.

Menendez: Pablo Picasso said, "All children are born artists. The problem is to remain an artist as we grow up." How can the rest of us, who will never be an artist the way you are, maintain a little bit of that artist that we're born with?

Garcia: I will say that... Never lose curiosity. That would be my thing. And be open enough to be inspired and surprised, because that's hope, and that keeps you young.

Menendez: Here I am thinking it's like a good skincare routine, and it's your curiosity.

Garcia: Oh yeah, let's see what happens. This is the thing. Well, but let me say, I love creams. And good smells.



Menendez: Scherezade, thank you so much.

Garcia: My pleasure completely. I mean, it was really a pleasure.

Menendez: Thank you as always for joining us. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Cedric Wilson is our mixer. Emma Forbes is our assistant producer. We love hearing from you, we really do. Email us at [hola@latinatolatina.com](mailto:hola@latinatolatina.com) and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, or wherever you're listening, and please leave a review. It is one of the quickest ways to help us grow as a community. Finally, be sure to follow us on Instagram and on Twitter. We're @latinatolatina.

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