

2023

Paola Fernanda Guzmán Figueroa on the importance of family and community

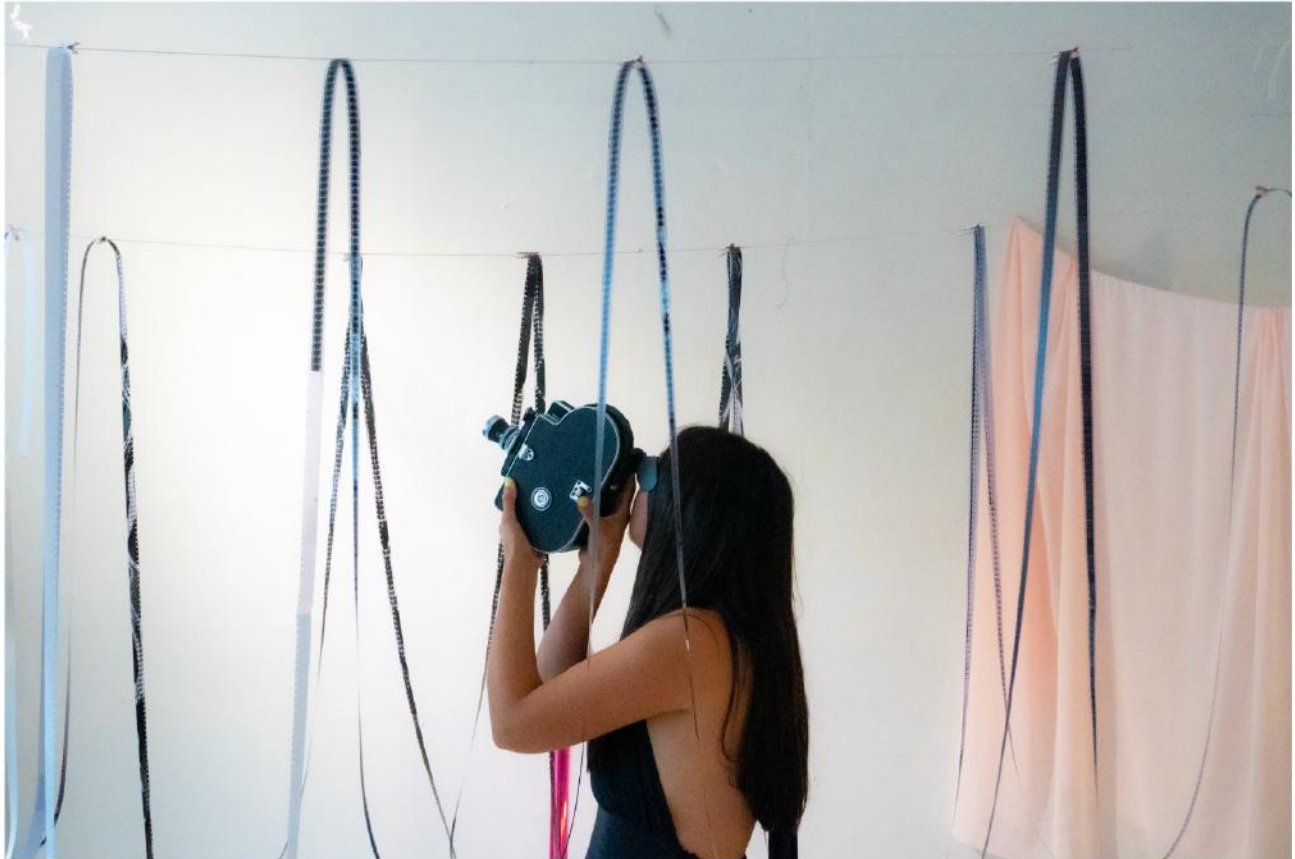


Photo by Laura Koskela.

Paola Fernanda Guzmán Figueroa is a visual artist and filmmaker. During her residency in New York, she has found a sense of community in more ways than one.

Paola Fernanda Guzmán Figueroa, who was our and Residency Unlimited's Artist-in-Residence during July and August, is a visual artist and filmmaker. She works with film, analog experimentations, animation, installations, and performance. Her art reflects and raises issues related to fluidity, boundaries, family, and aging. Paola's work is based on her family members' narratives and lived realities and the geographical distance between them. Her art dissolves frontiers and connects the past with the present by evoking situations, stories, and bodies into constant motion and dialogue with each other.

Having now lived in Finland for more than ten years, Paola graduated with a degree in visual arts in her home country of Bogota, Colombia. She moved

to Finland to study for her Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Time and Space in the Fine Arts program at The University of the Arts Helsinki (Kuvataideakatemia).

We visited Paola's studio in Dumbo, Brooklyn, to talk with her about film, the importance of community, and how family as an inspirational theme encompasses her work.



Photo by Laura Koskela.

FILM AS A TOOL TO CREATE CONNECTION

Film is one of Paola's most preferred media, and she is one of the Co-Founders of the artist film collective [Kino Club](#) in Helsinki, which has been running since 2017. On the question of how she first got interested in film, she tells us:

“I describe myself as a visual artist and filmmaker because the term visual artist is very broad. My media is very broad too, but film has played a significant role in my life ever since I was a kid living in Bogota when my parents used to take me to watch art films. It was fascinating to have the opportunity to see these deep and valuable stories that weren't a part of mainstream media.”

“Another part of why film has been meaningful to me was the sense of community it brought me growing up”, she continues. “There was a cineclub in Bogota where the idea was that people come together to watch films as a communal act as opposed to a way to gain economically from it. I felt that there wasn't anything similar to it in Helsinki, so that's why I co-founded Kino Club Helsinki with some friends from my university, as a way to connect.”



Photo by Laura Koskela.

About Kino Club, she adds:

“We have done collaborations with other organizations as well. During my residency here in New York, I met an artist named Pavle Banović in Residency Unlimited. They told me about ‘d.u.o collective’, an initiative they run in their home country of Serbia, which supports young artists who haven’t had the opportunity to study art at an institution. We ended up collaborating with them, showing films from our seven-year archive during an event that Pavle and their collective put up in Belgrade, Serbia. All of this happened through my residency in New York, so it was very special.”

FEELING AT HOME IN THE NEW YORK COMMUNITY

On the topic of community and making connections, Paola also tells us about the differences between Finland and New York and how she has found not only the film community in New York but also a sense of community and belonging in the Latin American- and other immigrant populations here that have not been present in the same way back home in Finland.

“I really like Finland, but I sometimes miss that connection to the Latin American community. In Finland, people are careful to speak loudly or express themselves, but in New York, I’ve found that nobody really cares. New York has this energy that sometimes can be too much, but it has been perfect for me at this time of my life. I’ve met a lot of new people and made new connections, such as Leandro Villaro, an Argentinean photographer, editor, and director of programs in Penumbra Foundation, for example”, she says.



Photo by Laura Koskela.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY

A theme that is quite prevalent in Paola's art is the connection to her family and intergenerational relationships.

"Family is a central theme for me," she tells us. "Ever since I left my parents in Bogota, our connection has become even more important. I've always tried to find ways to keep in touch and keep my relationship with them. Also, living in Finland and learning the differences in our cultures regarding family and relationships has made me both question and embrace my own relationship with my family. In general, family brings about very important relationships that are also hard to avoid."

A perfect example of how family works as a close inspiration to Paola is the project she worked on while in residency here, the animated film about her grandmother, "Nanita, para siempre". The project has been ongoing for six years and started when Paola moved to Finland. Using the rotoscope animation technique, she creates animated sequences by tracing over live-action footage, frame by frame. She showed part of this work at Residency Unlimited's group exhibition "...an instinct to change things..." at the Trotter & Sholer Gallery earlier this August.





In the context of family and relationships, Paola also works with the idea of boundaries in her art. However, in this case, the concept of boundaries is not seen as limitations but instead centered around how there are always ways to overcome the geographical boundaries and barriers that separate Paola from her family.

“I live in Helsinki while my brother lives in Spain, and my sister lives here in New York, so even though the sea in between keeps us apart, it also connects us in a way. Besides genetics and nostalgia, there is this geographical connection of water between us”, she smiles.



Paolas previous work, from left to right: Photo documentation from her installation work "Returning to the Island", Project Room Gallery, Helsinki 2021-2022. 16mm shot from her film "Mommy say something to the camera, Mom!", 2021.

TIME TRAVELING WITH WATER AND HAIR

Paola also mentions another source of inspiration for her work: personal and conceptual value items. Two examples of these items are aquariums and her own hair. She explains:

“My approach to art has a very conceptual side to it. For example, I’ve had a close connection to aquariums ever since I left Colombia. When I was living there with my parents, we had an aquarium with fish, and when I left, my parents wanted to keep the aquarium. Every time I returned to Colombia, I could see my parents getting increasingly attached to the aquarium, the fish almost becoming like their new kids. In a way, it became a connection between my parents, my siblings, and me.”

Paola has used both an aquarium and hair in her performance *Time Travel*, which happened earlier this August on Governors Island. In the performance, the audience was invited to follow her as she walked with a small aquarium containing water and her hair. Through transporting the aquarium and using a plastic hose to add air into the water, Paola intended to explore the emotions of longing and the desire to give life to something that isn’t alive anymore.



Paola performing "Time Travel" at El Retiro Park, Madrid 2020. Photo by Belén Díez.

Paola tells us that she shaved and saved part of her hair when she first moved to Finland. She never had an urge to save her hair before, but this time, it was a feeling of necessity, a need, that made her keep it. She started experimenting with putting the hair in water, giving it a constant movement and flow, turning it from just hair into something new. She tells us:

“For me, hair has become something more than just hair. It carries a lot of genetics, so even though it’s dead and not connected to you anymore after you cut it, people could still know you and your family through your hair, which is fascinating to me”.

“There are also similarities between hair and analog film,” she continues. “Just like hair strands containing DNA information, a roll of analog film also contains information in the form of film frames. Film is also developed in water, so in that way, there is also a sort of conceptual connection between film and aquariums; they can both be used to give life.”

Paola has previously showcased Time Travel in other cities and venues, including the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in South Korea (2022) and at El Retiro Park, Madrid (2020).

[You can see the video of her performance on Governors Island here.](#)

WHAT IS NEXT FOR PAOLA?



Photo by Laura Koskela.

Paola’s residency has now come to an end, this being the conclusion of her experience in New York:

“This residency program has really marked my life professionally and personally. I’m so thankful for all the experiences I got. I met curators and artists and visited many museums and exhibitions. I developed and continued my animation project ‘Nanita para siempre’ and started my upcoming film ‘Braiding the Future’. The best way to describe New York is by mentioning with words what it meant to me: Harlem, Subway A&D, Deli, mi Familia, Anthology Film Archives, underwater Bolex, exhibitions,

Mono No Aware, long walks, Dumbo, KinoClub in Serbia, Salsa, neighbors, new friends, aquariums, backache, museums, Latinoamérica, Jonas Mekas, Penumbra, and Theo.”

With the residency behind her, Paola has a lot to look forward to being back in Finland again. Her film “Mommy say something to the camera, mom!” will be shown at Doclisboa International Film Festival, which is happening later this month. In November, she is exhibiting part of the work she developed while in our residency, at Oodi Library in Helsinki, mainly her two films “Nanita, para siempre” and “Braiding the future”. Paola is also preparing for new exhibitions happening in 2024, one in Porvoo Art Hall, one in Galleria Huuto in Helsinki, and another in the Northern Photographic Centre in Oulu.

As the cherry on the cake, a wedding is also on the horizon for Paola, as she got engaged to her boyfriend while he visited her in New York. It’s a fitting way for Paola to wrap up her New York experience, continuing to explore the importance of family while simultaneously marking her time here as the start of her own.

If you want to see more of Paola and her work and upcoming projects, you can follow her on [her instagram](#), [her website](#) and [FCINY’s socials](#).

By: Nela Silfverberg

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