

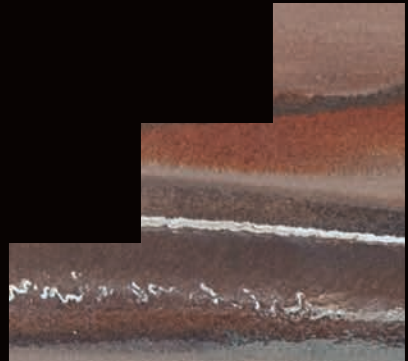
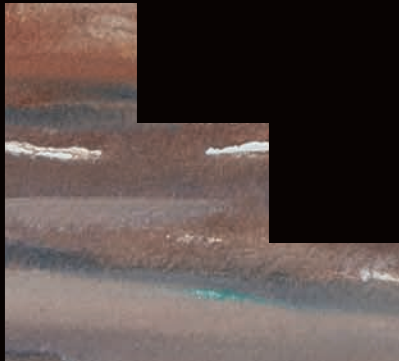
SU ARTE, SU VIDA



2024 Kresge Eminent Artist



THE KRESGE FOUNDATION



NORA CHAPA MENDOZA

SU ARTE,

SU VIDA

NORA

CHAPA

MENDOZA



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SU VIDA  
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2024 Kresge Eminent Artist

**THE KRESGE FOUNDATION**

**Nichole Christian**  
Creative Director,  
Editor, and Lead Writer

Art Direction  
and Graphic Design  
by I-R-I-S

The annual Kresge Eminent Artist Award salutes an exceptional artist in the visual, performing or literary arts for lifelong professional achievements to metropolitan Detroit's cultural community.

Nora Chapa Mendoza is the 2024 Kresge Eminent Artist.



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SEEING  
NORA:  
EYE AND  
MIND

Vince Carducci

Toward the end of an interview about being named the 2024 Kresge Arts in Detroit Eminent Artist, Nora Chapa Mendoza was asked what of her practice, at this stage in her long, productive career, continues to most excite her.

Her response was immediate and unequivocal: "The abstract paintings." In listening to the interview, I kept thinking about an essay by the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. While Merleau-Ponty was writing about painting in general, he could have just as easily been writing about Mendoza's abstract works.



Mendoza, in her description of the abstract painting process, acknowledges that it's a dialogue between the artist and art object coming into being. I would go further and say that Mendoza's abstract painting takes place at the existential threshold between inner being and outer nature, which concerns Merleau-Ponty in "Eye and Mind."

The "eye" Merleau-Ponty is talking about is more than the physical organ through which we encounter the world outside our bodies. He's talking about visibility in general and how painting makes us aware of that aspect of our being in the world. As Merleau-Ponty writes: "[O]ur fleshly eyes are already much more than receptors for light rays, colors, and lines. ...They are computers of the world, which have the gift of the visible as it was once said that the inspired [person] had the gift of tongues."<sup>1</sup> Further, Merleau-Ponty goes on to say: "Of course, this gift is earned by exercise," which is the iterative process of the act of painting as experienced over time by the artist in the studio.

Later in "Eye and Mind," Merleau-Ponty quotes Surrealist Max Ernst that "the role of the painter is to grasp and project what is seen in [themselves]."

This is something that is most readily apparent, I would argue, in abstract painting where the referents of the outside world, which is to say, representational imagery as traditionally understood, are absent and visibility in its purest form is made palpable. It is something that Mendoza sensed early on in her development but apparently took a while for her to come to terms with.

In the interview, Mendoza states that she always wanted to paint abstracts but started with traditional methods of representation, typically of the figure, often of women. Then one day, she began to listen to what the painting was trying to tell her and, as she says, "I started throwing the paintings around and seeing what would happen."

In characterizing her process as one of the work "telling" her what it wants to be, Mendoza is describing the relationship between her embodied being and the pictorial event unfolding beneath her. Indeed, often in the abstract works – with their cascades of color and built-up surfaces – one might say that the paint has a mind of its own and that Mendoza goes with the flow as it were until equilibrium has been achieved and a work can be considered finished.

<sup>1</sup> Quotes from "Eye and Mind" by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, translated by Carleton Dallery and collected in *The Primacy of Perception* (Northwestern University Press, 1964), have been modified for gender neutrality.

*Untitled blue landscape,*  
undated. Acrylic on canvas.



Where that process begins and where it ends can be seen in works such as “Blue in Flight and Flight of the Spirit” (all works ca. 2017). In the former, the pigment’s aqueous nature is prominent with washes of blue and purple unfurling under skeins of opaque white skirting along on top.

In the latter, the paint’s materiality is foregrounded with solid pigment flooding the surface of the picture plane and layers of impasto giving texture to the picture’s surface. References to the natural do appear from time to time as in works such as “Canyon” – where earth tones evoke windblown sand, a patch of blue the desert sky, and a swath of purple running diagonally across the canvas a ridge – not depicting a particular Western landscape but projecting a feeling one might have of being absorbed in it.



This sense of reversal in the relationship between the artist and the visible is one of Merleau-Ponty's key insights into painting as "a magical theory of vision." That the inspiration of the artist is not just one of projecting outward but of taking in:

We speak of "inspiration," and the word should be taken literally. There really is inspiration and expiration of Being, action, and passion so slightly discernible that it becomes impossible to distinguish between what sees and what is seen, what paints and what is painted.

That is the heart of Mendoza's abstract paintings and her gift to us.



*Canyon*. Undated.  
Acrylic on canvas.

**VINCE CARDUCCI** is Dean Emeritus at the College for Creative Studies and a 2010 Kresge Artist Fellow.

# Credits and Acknowledgments

## About The Kresge Foundation

The Kresge Foundation was founded in 1924 to promote human progress. Today, Kresge fulfills that mission by building and strengthening pathways to opportunity for low-income people in America’s cities, seeking to dismantle structural and systemic barriers to equality and justice. Using a full array of grant, loan and other investment tools, Kresge invests more than \$160 million annually to foster economic and social change.

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Unless otherwise noted, photos used throughout this monograph are from the personal collection of Nora Chapa Mendoza and the Mendoza family. Every effort has been made to locate and credit the holders of copyrighted materials.

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