

Exhibition Brochure



Maria Gaspar

We Press Our Hands to the
Steel Curtain

August 22–November 21, 2026

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Chicago-based artist Maria Gaspar's artworks are rooted in what she calls "the politics of space." She investigates how the built environment shapes our psychic, emotional, and physical understanding of the world. Her inquiry is motivated, in part, by her experience living near Cook County Department of Corrections, in Chicago's Little Village neighborhood. The Cook County Jail is one of the largest single-site jail facilities in the United States, holding more than 9,000 people. Several works in this exhibition emerge from Gaspar's sustained engagement with the demolition of one block of the jail, including her 60+ hour durational video, *Clamour*. A new work commissioned by the Blaffer, *Disappearance Jail* (Texas), invites community members to punch holes in images of 318 jails, detention centers, and prisons currently active in the state.

We Press Our Hands to the Steel Curtain takes its title from a line in Gloria Anzaldúa's groundbreaking 1987 book *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Anzaldúa's text addresses the border wall dividing Mexico and the United States; Gaspar extends that metaphor to the walls of prisons, which are designed, similarly, to exclude, divide, and control. In new and recent works, Gaspar activates a set of recurring tactics—layering, casting, compressing, obscuring—moving across performance, photography, film, and sculpture. Together, these tactics invite viewers to imagine the possibility of landscapes and communities without detention centers, and to dream together of an alternative and more liberatory future.

Cover: *Disappearance Jail*, 2021-ongoing. Hundreds of perforated Archival Inkjet prints on rice paper. Courtesy of the artist.

About the artist

Maria Gaspar is a Chicago-born, first-generation, interdisciplinary artist negotiating the politics of location through installation, sculpture, sound, and performance. For the past decade, Gaspar has been recognized nationally for her multi-year projects that attempt to dismantle borders, transcend penal matter, and turn places of precarity into places of possibility. Formative works like “Radioactive: Stories from Beyond the Wall” and the “96 Acres Project” include site interventions at the largest single-site jail in the country, the Cook County Department of Corrections, in her childhood neighborhood.

Gaspar has received the Guggenheim Award for Creative Arts, the Latinx Artist Fellowship, the United States Artists Fellowship, the 3Arts Next Level Award, the Frieze Impact Prize, the Sor Juana Women of Achievement Award in Art and Activism from the National Museum of Mexican Art, and the Chamberlain Award for Social Practice from the Headlands Center for the Arts. Gaspar’s projects have been supported by the Art for Justice Fund, the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, the Robert Rauschenberg Artist as Activist Fellowship, the Creative Capital Award, the Joan Mitchell Emerging Artist Grant, and the Art Matters Foundation. Gaspar has lectured and exhibited extensively at venues including MoMA PS1 and El Museo Del Barrio in New York, NY; the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, TX; the Institute of the Arts and Sciences, Santa Cruz, CA; the African American Museum, Philadelphia, PA; the Pérez Art Museum in Miami, FL; and SOMA, Mexico City, Mexico.

Gaspar received her BFA in Painting from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, NY, and her MFA in Studio Arts from the University of Illinois at Chicago. She is Professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.



Disappearance Jail, 2021-ongoing. Hundreds of perforated Archival Inkjet prints on rice paper. Courtesy of the artist.





Detail *Invisible Things Are Not Necessarily Not There (After T.M.)*, 2023. 23 Glass casts. Ranges between 10"- 24" for each glass sculpture. Courtesy of the artist.

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Public Programs

OPENING RECEPTION

Saturday, August 22, 1PM—4PM

COCKTAIL RECEPTION WITH THE ARTIST

Friday, October 2, 5PM—8PM

PERFORMANCE

We Lit the Fire and Trusted the Heat (after Angela Davis)

Monday, October 26

CLOSING CONVERSATION

Saturday, November 21, 2PM—3PM

All Events at Blaffer Art Museum unless otherwise noted.

This exhibition is guest curated by Katja Rivera. *Clamour* is presented in collaboration with the Fine Arts Center in Colorado Springs. *Maria Gaspar: We Press Our Hands to the Steel Curtain* is supported by the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts at the University of Houston. The Blaffer Art Museum also receives exhibition support from the Andy Warhol Foundation, the Brown Foundation, and the John R. Eckel Jr. Foundation.

**Cynthia Woods
Mitchell Center
for the Arts**

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ALWAYS FREE OPEN TUE-SAT 12PM-5PM



Blaffer Art Museum at the
University of Houston