

# La Máquina Humana

By

Marisa Cadena (Feb 2023)

The first thing I noticed opening the door to the taller was the odor: an acrid mix of turpentine, ink and sweat. The second was the taller's famed namesake: la máquina, a printing press so massive it required custom flooring to support it. Behind the machine stood a man with a denim apron and slicked-back hair gathered in a small knot at the nape of his neck. Feeling my presence, he turns. He smiles. Hola. Adelante. Come in.

I stumbled into the taller in 2021, where I met the denim apron-clad Polo Vallejo, whom I later learned is the master printer. He told me that the press was built in 1909 in Paris and had come to Oaxaca through the efforts of the artist and director of the La Máquina, Francisco Límon. The press may be one of 30 in existence and, last I heard, is the only one of its kind in Latin America. It is also the only stone lithography press in Oaxaca that can produce a high volume of prints. The stones are also special, dating back to the Jurassic period, weighing as much as 200 pounds, and have been used by hundreds, maybe thousands, of artists over the last two centuries. Polo explained that each artist draws onto the stone with a grease-based utensil, the image absorbing into the stone, which the ink will reveal once it has run through the press. This first run will be the base of the print, and the subsequent steps depend on the artist's choices of initial drawing materials and the number of colors they wish to use and could involve multiple processes to work the stone and image with turpentine, oils, soap, gum and acid for each additional inked color.

Although Polo is the master printer, every piece printed requires a group effort. The studio staff are talented artists themselves; Toño, Andres and Zenk all work in a choreographed dance to make a print. Every print. From mixing the ink, cleaning and prepping the stone, wetting the rollers, turning on the gears and feeding the paper to inspecting the prints for imperfections. And that's just the technical part. While unarguably this majestic 8 tons of machinery is impressive — it is the human factor that binds every creation that passes through its wheels and gears. La Máquina is an open studio in which all are welcome: artists, friends and

neighbors, travelers, and folks simply wandering past. Inside the studio, everyone is eager to share their love for the machine, show their works-in-progress and rifle through finished editions. The taller regularly hosts graphic artist residents from all over the world to work on la máquina, adding to the diverse roster of styles, colors, lines and techniques in the taller's collection of prints (and personalities).

I am not a printmaker, but I am a good friend of one: AJ Springer, who is doing a residency here at La Máquina Taller de Gráfica. My self-appointed job is to document her creative and technical process of making a lithograph on the giant press while sharing my opinion when asked and translating when necessary. I am a fly on the wall.

Except I am not.

I chat with everyone. It does not matter that I am not working on the press or that I have not technically been invited, like AJ. In just two short weeks, we both have a new family. Gossip and bad jokes, stories of love lost and found, tales of mischief and mistakes, and lots of laughter (and maybe a few tears) have all been shared beside the machine— and after it has been put to rest for the night, over a mezcal or two. This is the essence of La Máquina. It is about more than a machine. It is about people. Reminiscent of the printing press' belle époque origins, like a gathering in Gertrude Stein's living room, La Máquina is a refuge for every lost soul, tortured artist, amateur philosopher, and stranger — who will surely be a friend before he leaves.

**La Máquina Taller de Gráfica**

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