Milagros de la Torre’s practice is rooted in both exhaustive research and personal history. She grew up amid the political upheavals in 1970s and 80s Peru and has been interested in photography since childhood. Her father had an ascendant career in the Peruvian military as a high-ranking counter-terrorism intelligence authority. Therefore, it is no coincidence that her work looks at photographic processes used throughout history that reveal darker sociopolitical motivations or implications.

Systems and Constellations was conceived when de la Torre was doing an inventory of past projects and returned to a 2012 series of the same name. Her work with human faces punctuates different periods of her career. This was an interesting discovery due to the fact that the artist was diagnosed with a memory condition called prosopagnosia or face blindness, which makes remembering people’s faces exceptionally challenging. Her diagnosis not only helped her recontextualize various life events, but also resulted in her pouring over texts and images in relationship to the human face. Her meticulous research and prosopagnosia diagnosis combined with an onslaught of technological developments in facial recognition inspired her exhibition at Artpace.

The video, titled Intervals, is a lyrical presentation of how humans have been measuring faces and what consequences of this have been for our civilization and its future. Images range from Egyptian diagrams of facial measuring to the 19th century state-sponsored theories of identifying characteristics and faces representative of criminals, individuals with mental disabilities, or those with illnesses, an early exercise similar to racial profiling. Intervals details systems used until 2020, and the new available technologies in facial recognition are astounding.

The delicate sculptural work on view Erased, Deleted, Omitted turns the idea of facial recognition technologies on its head. The 3D printed face is unrecognizable as an individual. The details and facial features are obscured by pixels offering the possibility that technology can indeed fail. Her inky portraits of children intentionally require close inspection and reveal facial diagramming superimposed over their faces. The red points and lines appear to puncture and slice their diminutive faces in aggressive, but subtle ways. Similar linear diagrams are utilized in her installation Recollection #1 featuring convex mirrors. Mirrors of this type are often used for surveillance and monitoring in order to “keep safe” people and property. They are placed strategically inviting the audience to interact with each of them. Finely etched into their surfaces are constellations of stars representing important dates in the artist’s life derived from her residency at Artpace. One, for example, is based on Artpace founder Linda Pace’s day of birth. De la Torre combines and re-translates both the mirrors and facial diagramming from what was once a discriminatory practice in the 19th century, for example, into an otherworldly and moving experience.

There is an intimacy, quietness, and depth in de la Torre’s Systems and Constellations. Each work encourages further examination of its diverse materials, surfaces, images, and the indisputable beauty of her work. The artist poetically offers for consideration the ideas of systems and science alongside the idea that human beings, faces in particular, are in themselves constellations.
Milagros de la Torre is a New York-based artist working since 1991. She studied Communications Sciences at the University of Lima and received a B.A. (Honors) in Photographic Arts from the London College of Communication, University of the Arts London. De la Torre was awarded the Rockefeller Foundation Artist Grant and was awarded the Romeo Martinez Prize and the Young Ibero-American Creators Prize (1998). De la Torre was awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship (2011), The Dora Maar Fellowship (2014), The Peter S. Reed Foundation Award (2016), and was the recipient of a ‘Merited Person of Culture Award’ from the Ministry of Culture in Peru (2016).

Her work has been exhibited broadly and is part of permanent museum collections including: The Art Institute of Chicago; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Blanton Museum of Art, Austin; Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge; Princeton University Art Museum, New Jersey; Yale University, New Haven; MIT List Visual Arts Center, Boston; El Museo del Barrio, New York; The RISD Museum, Providence; Diane and Bruce Halle Collection, Phoenix; Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts; Fonds National d’Art Contemporain, Paris; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid; Essex Collection of Art from Latin America, U.K.; Universidad de Salamanca, Spain; Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, Mexico; Museo de Arte de Lima, Peru; and Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires.