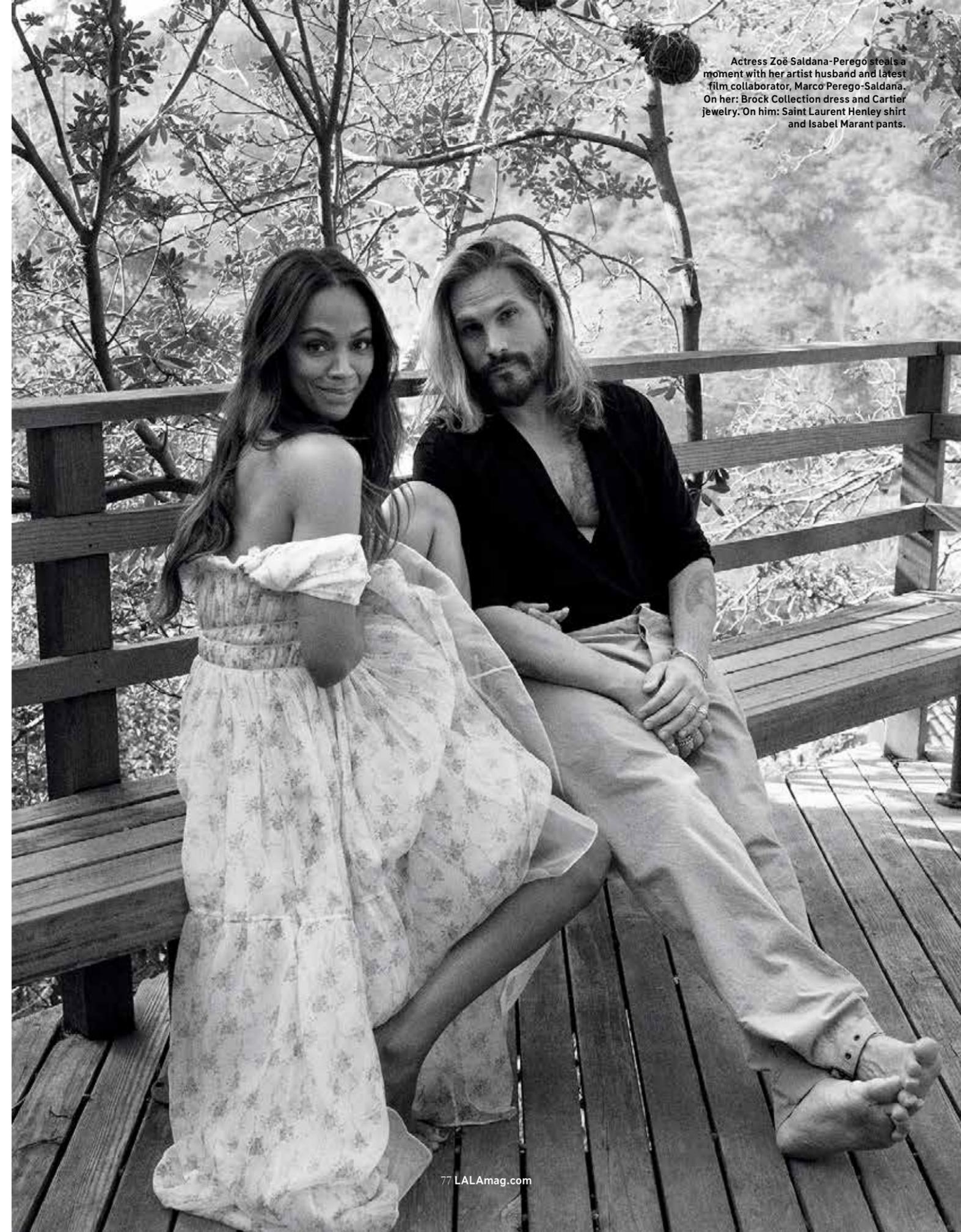


In Stillness and Growth

Actress Zoë Saldana-Perego commands attention on the silver screen with starring roles in blockbusters, such as *Star Trek*, James Cameron's *Avatar*, Marvel Studios's *Guardians of the Galaxy* and *The Avengers* series. In the midst of filming a new, as yet untitled David O. Russell project, she turns to a conversation with her visual artist and filmmaker husband, Marco Perego-Saldana, to shine a spotlight on his burgeoning practice, which grapples with complicated themes of immigration, life cycles and self-identity. Having moved to the US from Italy via Brazil 18 years ago, the former professional soccer player began his creative journey with colorful, somewhat pop paintings that alluded to double-edged motifs. He has recently found his voice flourishing via new mediums and a more conceptual practice that includes poignant sculptures of pillows carrying the narrative of immigrant children, carefully developed and manipulated mold paintings and meticulously drawn transparencies incorporating latex and wooden frames. After nearly eight years of marriage, the partners in life and parenting—of three boys, all under seven years of age—have finally come together for their first film collaboration: *Keyhole Garden*, a cinematic love story.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **MELODIE MCDANIEL**
PRODUCED BY **ALLISON BERG & JESSICA KANTOR**

Actress Zoë Saldana-Perego steals a moment with her artist husband and latest film collaborator, Marco Perego-Saldana. On her: Brock Collection dress and Cartier jewelry. On him: Saint Laurent Henley shirt and Isabel Marant pants.





Saldana-Perego wears a Brock Collection top, RE/DONE jeans and Cartier Love bracelet and necklace. Perego-Saldana wears a Gucci shirt, Isabel Marant pants, Cartier Love bracelet and pinky ring, Cartier Trinity pinky ring and his own Ugo Cacciatori earrings and ring.

“We may not understand what you are saying, what you are feeling or what you are creating, but we know we have to protect it. We know we have to push it forward. We know we have to defend it for you.”

—Zoë Saldana-Perego

chance to myself. As an immigrant, I am really fascinated by the idea of jumping into the unknown in that way.

ZSP: That reminds me of *Keyhole Garden*, which we worked on together and you

directed, produced and cowrote. How do you determine when to wear your director or producer hat versus your visual artist hat?
MPS: That’s a big question. They don’t intersect. They are different personalities of creating, and it’s like my mold paintings. There’s a sense of fighting against this organic element that’s growing. It’s like fighting against myself, and saying, “Oh, this day I dedicate to, you. Now, this day I dedicate to you.” I have this obsessive-compulsive form of myself, where I am obligated to create something every day. For me, what’s important is writing a lot and going to the studio too, thinking about an idea and developing it. In the end, I just have to have a form of expression. It’s a necessity, a way to survive.

ZSP: So you’re saying you don’t totally have a grasp on that determination?

MPS: Right, I need to do everything. If I don’t find the space for myself to create, it’s going to be a very difficult day for me. When you do art, you are lonely and very isolated. The silence is your power, and it’s almost like you go to a priest every Sunday to confession—I’m coming from this very

Catholic guilty religion because I’m Italian. I believe a lot in God, but art for me is pure confession. Making a film is very different. It uses different tools, and it’s extremely collaborative. It was very much a learning process. You can learn from so many different people, but you need to keep your integrity in your voice, and you need to be lucky also to find the people who help you to keep your voice strong and alive. That’s really the key, because it’s extremely difficult, physically and mentally. To make a film is like a miracle. I spent all my money I earned making the film—everything they gave me for a writer and director and producer fee—I spent in therapy this year.

ZSP: I can attest to that! It was worth it. What excites you the most about the film?

MPS: It’s a story between illegal immigrants, but it also is the story of Adam and Eve in the sense that these two keys take away from the Keyhole Garden, which actually is Eden. It’s like when I told my parents I was going to live in another country without speaking English. It’s the idea of really believing to find something completely good outside of the known, but unfortunately, in this film,

ZOË SALDANA-PEREGO: Can I just say how good it feels to be your plus one? I can’t wait ’til I’m your plus one again at art events. Living vicariously through your lens is a lot of fun! Like today, I’m compelled to see you as other things besides my husband. So, reflecting a bit as we launch into 2021, what are you taking forward with you from last year?

MARCO PEREGO-SALDANA: Hmm, 2020 for us was an opportunity to go a little slowly and feel more, in a sense. It pushed us to really stay still and try to feel our feelings we have inside. I think I can speak for both of us, that in 2020, we grew a lot together—in our marriage, as a couple and as artists.

ZSP: That was the highlight.

MPS: Yeah, the beautiful part—because last year was so rough in so many other ways. Before COVID was happening, something that fascinated me is this thing called state of motion. It’s the scientific study of velocity—how when it’s very high, it’s like it’s spinning, but when the velocity is close to zero, it’s inertia. It explores the meaning of staying

still. I’ve been fascinated by slowing down and what it looks like to be still in every different form.

ZSP: I love that. I’m taking the slowing down forward, for sure, but also regrouping. Living in Los Angeles, the epicenter of where so much happens in film and now also in art, it’s this engine that demands so much. You find yourself, year after year, saying yes so much more. When everything was put to a halt, we got to really examine and rediscover the “why” in what we do.

MPS: It left me thinking if it’s necessary, what I do. I’m always going to be an artist, but how much importance and relevance can the work have in 2020? To slow down is to go deeper; it’s to go more radical. It’s about pushing the envelope more. I’m believing less and less in the idea of the object in the art world. I think we can make deeper connections with the art and develop it into something that’s more about the idea—something really meaningful, not just a selfish act. I believe it’s the responsibility of the artist to collaborate, create conversation

and push past the boundary to make something that is a reflection of people and how small we are in this big universe. Art is the only way I can express that because I’m actually extremely dyslexic, but in this form, I can communicate the radicality in the message.

ZSP: What projects have you been focused on lately to explore that?

MPS: I’m really attracted to my interviewer... I have a fantasy with her! Are you married?

ZSP: Can you stop?!

MPS: Okay, what I focus on lately... I am working on these invisible, radical drawings. You cannot see them, but when the light of the window comes through the studio, the drawing appears. I started to be fascinated by objects originally because they already have a certain history and pain, dreams, fragility, tears—that’s like a pillowcase. In the pillowcase, you make love, you dream, you cry, you’ll be lonely, you’ll survive, you’ll die... So I was collecting and spending time almost giving these objects a second shot. And maybe I was trying to give a second





On her: Wolford bodysuit, Brock Collection pants
and Cartier jewelry.
On him: Brioni shirt and Saint Laurent trousers.

The artist, in his Frogtown studio, with his sculptures of pillows invoking narratives of immigrant children and meticulous drawings, is interested in exploring the history and ideas behind certain objects.



God is not there. It's actually a love story, but it's very raw, and it was very challenging. I'm so lucky that I find incredible people like you to support me. Without you, it would be very difficult for a first-time director to make a film like that.

ZSP: And so many more!

MPS: Garrett Hedlund, Tom Waits, our producer Julie Yorn—they really helped to guide me and support me to put the movie together. It's impossible to think you can do this alone.

ZSP: The reason why I appreciate everybody that came was, they came for you, and nobody tried to change you. We may not

understand what you are saying, what you are feeling or what you are creating, but we know we have to protect it. We know we have to push it forward. We know we have to defend it for you.

MPS: And it was still hard, but thanks to you and everyone, I was capable at least to start and finish the project—even though I wanted to give up every single day because it was extremely emotional and exhausting. But I think we're quite proud. It's very, very honest. We're still editing, and now we are going into sound and color, finally.

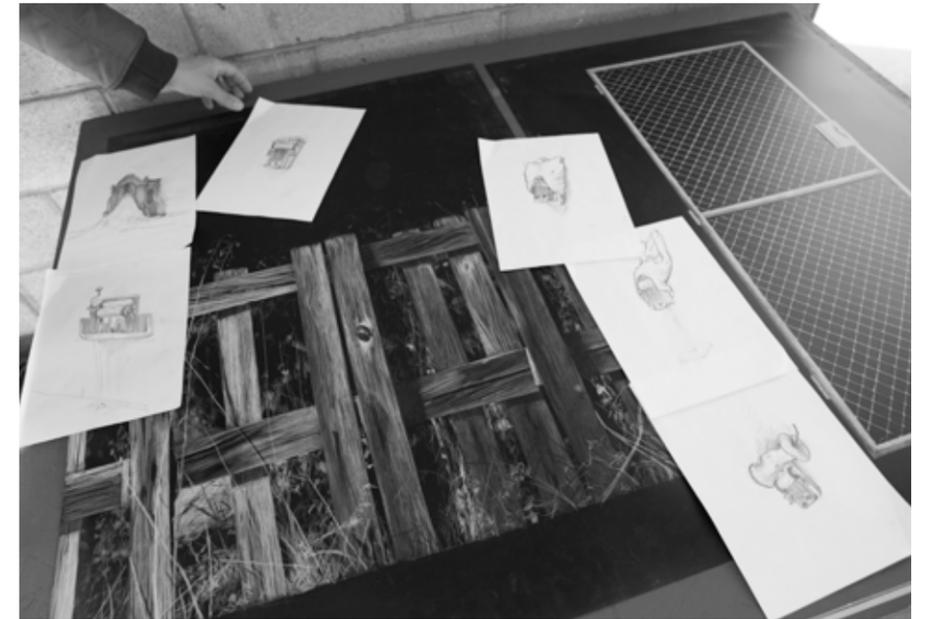
ZSP: Yes, I feel like you have really found your artistic voice in the last years or so.

MPS: Oh my god, I don't think my work was very good at the beginning.

ZSP: I loved your work in the beginning!

MPS: Yeah, but right now, with the tools and the depth and the time to reflect on it, to risk a little bit more—all of that helped me to be a better artist. Conversation and community are really what make great artists. Spending time with different artists helped me to grow, like you—you're an amazing artist.

ZSP: We really have been doing a lot together lately. How would you say our togetherness and family time this past year has influenced your artwork?



MPS: Oof! That's a big question! Working with you, my wife, was one of the most challenging, fascinating and incredible things I've ever done. You're a force of nature. You're a completely inspiring element and so very raw, like a sculpture. I believe I married you because you're so raw. All our lives we try to go away from our raw. We try to teach our kids to behave, but they're so raw and connected. I am fascinated by this mystery of raw. We decided to call our son Cy because Cy Twombly spent all his life trying to come back to painting like a child. I think for me, working with you was learning the raw, learning how special you are and how pure you are in that element.

ZSP: I wish I was a little less hard, but...

MPS: You can be hard and strong with everybody else, but please don't be hard with me.

ZSP: You're so in tune with your fragility and you're so confident to share it. My approach to my fragility is to guard it. My favorite aspect of collaborating with you was the realization that I don't have to hit something so hard to feel it. I can just maybe walk closely to it; I can just whisper to it, and I can still get the same result. It may take longer—or it may be faster—but it doesn't have to be so rough. I didn't have a choice but to trust you. That's difficult for actors to wrestle with, but I was like, "He's my husband, and well, he has my back—for better or worse." You made that vow.

MPS: I don't know if there would be a *Keyhole Garden* without you. I don't know if anybody can play what we wrote in the way you play because you approach things in this incredible dynamic. And I learned to dance around that dynamic.

ZSP: The subject of the film was difficult. I have so many opinions and feelings about it from the inside, from the outside, as a woman, as a first-generation immigrant, and living with that heaviness was big. But also, you come out of it with that realization that you have to have these conversations. We have to address the way that we are treating each other, talking about each other or blatantly erasing each other. We have to talk about those consequences, and are we ready to pay those prices? If we're not, how do we change? *Keyhole Garden* was such an uncomfortable conversation that we're living through day by day.

MPS: Yeah, if we don't wake up and start to really change our behavior, we keep eating each other. One day it's about this minority; one day is about that race. Every time there is some



On her: Saint Laurent blouse, belt and shorts, STAUD boots and Cartier jewelry.
On him: Saint Laurent shirt and pants, Paciolini shoes and Cartier jewelry.

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—Marco Perego-Saldana

issue, but the primary problem is understanding how humans behave with one another.

ZSP: That’s interesting because I feel like the RP for 2020 for the Perego-Saldana family would be both of us yelling at a camera going, “Feel sorry for me!” “No, feel sorry for me!” But we also were able to develop so many tools for working through challenges as life partners, as parents and when we work on creative projects together.

MPS: Many tools. The first thing is to slow down. Second, let the other person finish talking. Be present and try your hardest to understand what the person is feeling. I get very emotional about this because when we are capable of really listening to each other and slowing down, we can do everything together.

ZSP: I don’t think we’re going to figure it out completely. We just finally collaborated officially on a project, and it had its challenges, curveballs, magical moments. I think that every opportunity will grant us the ability to finesse what didn’t work before, but I don’t ever want to strive for an unrealistic life because it just means that I’m not going to be present with the life that I have. And I liked the rough. I like our life!

MPS: It’s beautiful.

ZSP: I like our growing pains. It’s like, “How do you become impersonal with someone who is so personal to you?” When you’re working, collaborating and creating with your most intimate partner, it’s going to be passionate. Passion isn’t beautiful all the fucking time. Passion sucks, man. Passion is exhausting, and that’s my take on it. I own it. I own every experience that we went through, and I’m happy. I’m grateful that it didn’t break us. And maybe we’ll rest a little bit, and we’ll slow down. That way we’re nice and healthy when we get back in it again.