

Claudia Alarcón & Silät

Artist Biography

Claudia Alarcón (b. 1989, Argentina) is an indigenous textile artist from the La Puntana community of Wichí people of northern Salta. Alongside her individual practice, she leads the Silät collective, an organisation of one hundred women weavers of different generations from the Alto la Sierra and La Puntana Wichí communities.

Wichí society is clan-based and matrilineal. Weaving with hand-spun vegetal fibres from the local chaguar plant has been a communal, female-led activity for centuries, and is fundamental to the visual culture, narrative history and economics of the Wichí people. Its centrality is articulated in a mythological tale, in which beautiful women, living in the sky as stars, would travel down to earth on woven chaguar ropes to dine on the fish caught by fishermen. Upon discovering this, the men employed the help of birds to snap the ropes and the women were trapped on earth for evermore, but continued to weave and pass the knowledge from the world above onto their daughters. The parable suggests a passage from the naivety and freedom of childhood to the societal responsibilities of adulthood; girls are taught to spin chaguar and weave functional objects from the age of 12, their creations a way to provide financially as well as to sustain ancestral cultural practices. In another sense, learning to weave presents a further awakening, an entryway into a collective conversation between the women of the Wichí communities; the textiles, formed of geometric motifs drawn from the surrounding environment, are a method of communicating unspoken thoughts within a culture that values highly forms of non-verbal expression, and the messages found within dreams and subconscious intuition. Silät, the name adopted by the artist collective, means 'information' or 'alert,' and reflects the role of their textiles to convey messages and a shared cultural sentiment.

The Silät collective emerged from the Thaí/Viene del monte organization, a wider public project aimed at reviving ancestral textile traditions across the Salta region. Coordinated by Alarcón and working closely with curator Andrei Fernández since 2015, Silät explore the possibilities of artmaking within and beyond these traditions. The collective have evolved established techniques into new forms, producing large-scale images that exploit the textural intricacies and earthy colours of chaguar yarn and natural dyes. In coordinating the production of the Silät collective, and leading experimentations in material and subject matter within their practice, Alarcón supports creativity, independence and self-sustaining practices, and provides a means for women across generations to transmit a contemporary indigenous culture into the webs of international art dialogues, beyond ethnographic readings.

Claudia Alarcón & Silät's work was featured in the 60th International Exhibition of the Venice Biennale, *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere* in 2024. In December 2022, Alarcón became the first indigenous woman to be awarded a National Salon of Visual Arts prize by the Ministry of Culture in Argentina. Alarcón was also awarded the Ama Amoedo Acquisition Prize at Pinta Miami in 2022, and her work is represented in LACMA, Los Angeles; Museu de arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP); MALBA Collection in Buenos Aires; the Denver Art Museum, Colorado; the Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minnesota; and the Gund Collection, Ohio, USA. The artist's first institutional solo exhibition will open at the De La Warr Pavilion, UK in 2025.

Selected exhibitions

2025	<i>Claudia Alarcón & Silät</i> , De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, UK
2025	<i>Claudia Alarcón: Choreography of Imagination</i> , Cecilia Brunson Projects, London, UK
2025	<i>Claudia Alarcón and Silät</i> , James Cohan, New York, US (forthcoming)
2023	<i>Claudia Alarcón and Silät / Nitsäphä: Wichí Stories</i> , Cecilia Brunson Projects, London, UK
2023	<i>Silät</i> , Hessel Museum at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, USA (as part of the Thaí/Viene del monte organization)

Selected group exhibitions

2025	<i>Geometrias</i> , Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP), São Paulo, Brazil
2025	14th Mercosur Biennial, Porto Alegre, Brazil
2024-5	<i>La vida que explota: Gabriel Chaile en diálogo con Claudia Alarcón & Silät</i> , MALBA Puertos, Buenos Aires, Argentina
2024	<i>Stranieri Ovunque</i> , 60th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy
2024	<i>Cantando Bajito: Chorus</i> , Ford Foundation Gallery, New York, US
2024	<i>Claudia Alarcón & Silät and Anni Albers</i> , Cecilia Brunson Projects at the Armory Show, New York, US
2024	<i>Spin a Yarn</i> , Guild Hall, New York, US
2024	<i>Hecho a Mano</i> , Cecilia Brunson Projects, London, UK
2023	<i>Spin a Yarn</i> , Another Space, New York, US
2023	<i>Una Historia que Cura</i> , Salta Museum of Anthropology, Salta, Argentina
2022	<i>Die Farben des Waldes / Colours of the Woods / Los Colores del Monte</i> , Olaf Holzapfel in collaboration with Andrea Fernández and Grupo Thaí, Goethe-Institut Munich. Exhibited at Sabine Knust, Munich, Germany
2022	<i>Las oportunidades</i> , Centro Cultural Recoleta, Buenos Aires, Argentina (as part of the Thaí/Viene del monte organization)
2021	<i>III BIENALSUR</i> , Universidad Nacional Tres de Febrero, Buenos Aires, Argentina
2021	<i>La escucha y los vientos. Relatos e inscripciones del Gran Chaco (Listening and the wind. Stories and inscriptions from the Gran Chaco)</i> , Museo de Bellas Artes de Salta, Argentina; Fundación Migliorisi, Asunción, Paraguay
2021	<i>El momento del Yagrumo</i> , Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, San Juan, Puerto Rico (as part of the Thaí/Viene del monte organization)
2021	<i>Cardinales, camino a la ternura</i> , Museo Nacional Terry, Tilcara, Argentina (as part of the Thaí/Viene del monte organization)
2020	<i>La escucha y los vientos. Relatos e inscripciones del Gran Chaco (Listening and the wind. Stories and inscriptions from the Gran Chaco)</i> , ifa-Galerie, Berlin, Germany

Selected awards

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| 2022 | First Prize in the textile discipline, 110th National Salon of Visual Arts, Ministry of Culture of Argentina |
| 2022 | Ama Amoedo Acquisition Prize, Feria Pinta, Miami, Florida, USA |

Selected public collections

Denver Art Museum, Colorado, United States

The Gund Collection, Ohio, United States

LACMA, Los Angeles, United States

Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minnesota, United States

Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (MALBA), Buenos Aires, Argentina

Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP), São Paulo, Brazil

Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Salta, Argentina

Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, North Carolina, United States

Selected Works



Claudia Alarcón

Tewok Tes P'ante [El origen del río / The origin of the river], 2023

Signed bottom right

Recycled nylon, hand-spun, "yica" stitch.

Framed: 210 x 195 cm (82 5/8 x 76 3/4 in)

Unframed: 189 x 155 cm (74 3/8 x 61 in)

Exhibition History:

Spin a Yarn, Another Space, New York, USA, 2023-24

Spin a Yarn, Guild Hall, New York, USA, 2024



For her first UK exhibition at Cecilia Brunson Projects, Alarcón produced her first two narrative works. In this piece, she experiments with nylon threads and the possibilities provided by a synthetic colour palette to render imaginary worlds, as she relays a cosmogenic tale told in countless variations throughout the Gran Chaco:

All the world's water - which is also all that is life - was once contained inside a yuchán tree. But when one day a spear struck the great dorado fish, the tree's water burst through its thick bark like an avalanche. As the liquid flowed out it gave shape to the world. Tokuañ, a mischievous spirit, had broken the sacred rule and killed the great golden fish that maintained life's harmony. Tokuañ's disobedience begins the history of a world with people in it.

Nitsäyphä is a Wichí word that refers specifically to the explosion of water in this tale. It can also be used to describe the concept of 'connecting', in which timeless messages are shared and preserved by Wichí women by repeating a key gesture within their culture through the act of weaving. Claudia Alarcón and Silät have adopted the word *nitsäyphä* to define their own 'explosion of life' through free expression and creativity.



Claudia Alarcón

Kates tsinhay [Mujeres estrellas / Star women], 2023

Signed bottom right

Hand-spun chaguar fibre. Natural dyes from the native forest. Woven fabric, "yica" stitch.

Framed: 192 x 203 cm (75 5/8 x 79 7/8 in)

Unframed: 175 x 181 cm (68 7/8 x 71 1/4 in)

Exhibition History:

Stranieri Ovunque - Foreigners Everywhere, 60th International Exhibition of the Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2024

Claudia Alarcón & Silät, De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, UK, 2025



Weaving with chaguar fibres is fundamental to the visual culture, narrative history and economics of the Wichí people. Its centrality is articulated in a mythological tale, in which beautiful women, living in the sky as stars, would travel down to earth on woven chaguar ropes to dine on the fish caught by fishermen. Upon discovering this, the men employed the help of birds to snap the ropes and the women were trapped on earth for evermore, but continued to weave and pass the knowledge onto their daughters.

In Wichí communities, girls are taught to weave from the age of 12, their creations a way to provide financially. Crucially, the practice also holds spiritual associations, its continuation through generations offering a way to access and preserve the knowledge of these divine, celestial women.

Kates tsinhay [*Mujeres estrellas / Star women*] represents the heaven-abiding ancestors who first wove with chaguar. Their forms are indefinite, abstracted, and radiate a soft yellow glow. With the open texture and the diaphanous quality this creates, there is a dream-like ethereality to the stories cast in her work. Alarcón participates in this spiritual tradition, whilst also guarding and transmitting the stories of past generations.



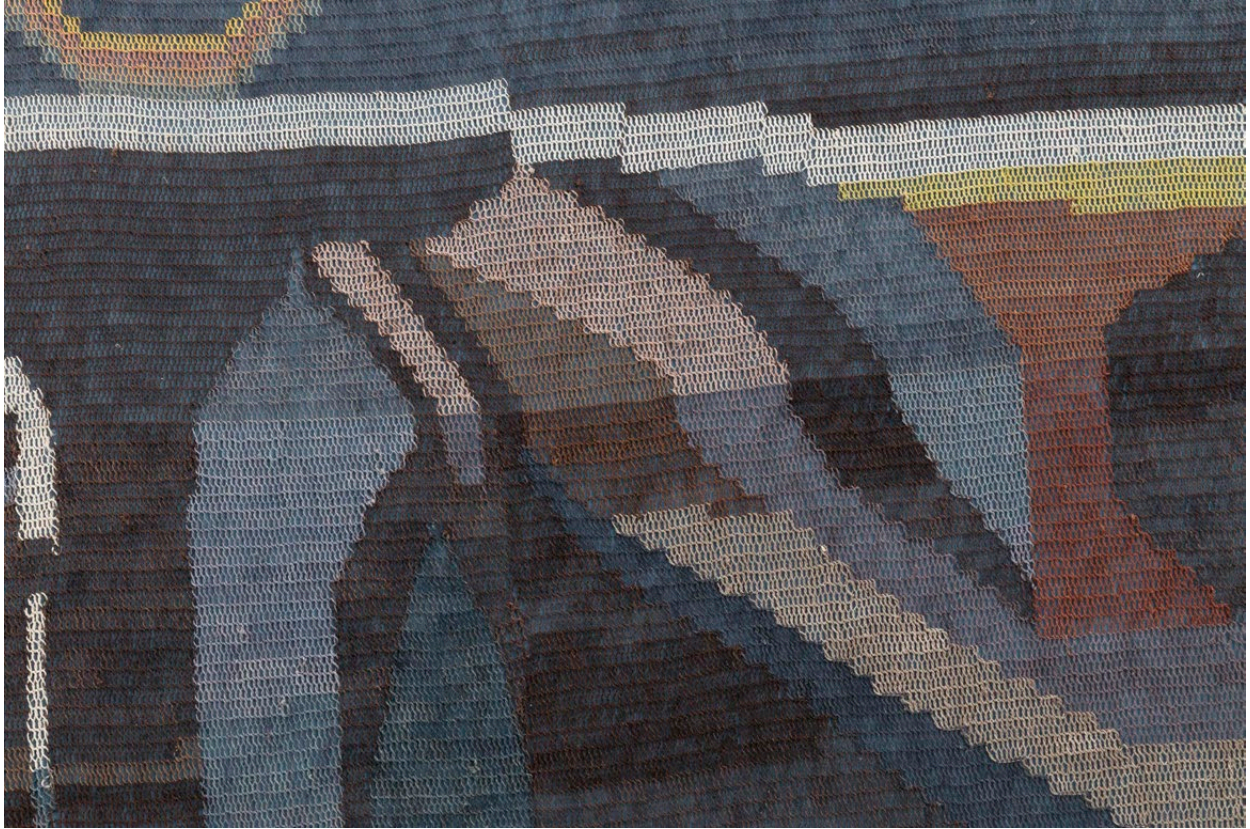
Claudia Alarcón & Silät (woven by Claudia Alarcón, Rosilda Lopez, Mariela Perez, Fermina Perez, Francisca Perez, Ana Lopez, Graciela Lopez, Margarita Lopez. Comunidad La Puntana, Santa Victoria Este, Salta)

Nitsäyphä [Pronunciar la fuerza propia / Pronounce one's own strength], 2023

Signed bottom left

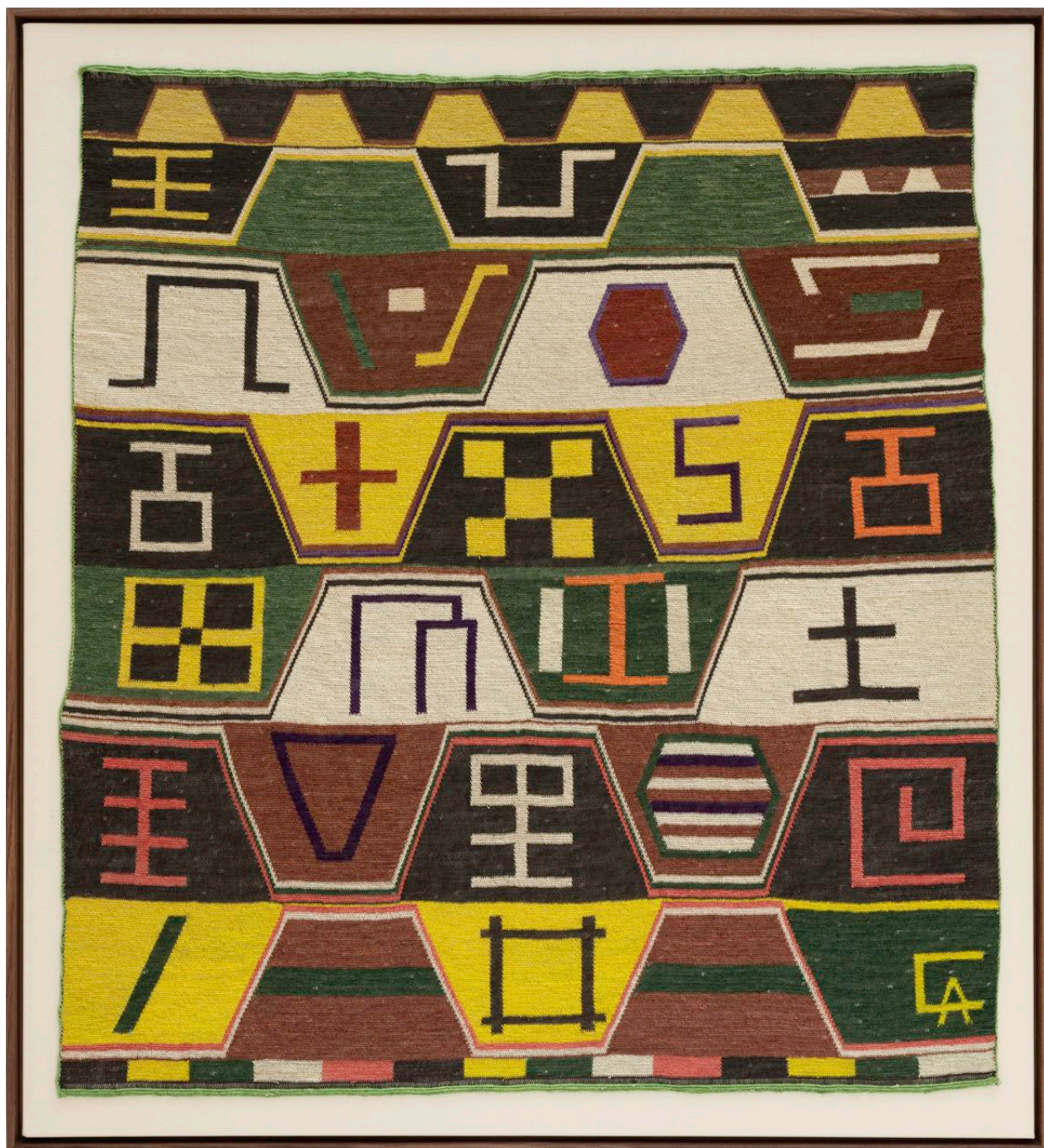
Hand-spun chaguar fibre. Natural dyes from the native forest. Woven fabric, "yica" stitch.

Framed: 211 x 283 cm (83 1/8 x 111 3/8 in)



Nitsäyphä [*Pronunciar la fuerza propia* / *Pronounce one's own strength*] is the largest work to date by Alarcón and the Silät collective. It celebrates the community's close relationship with the river and the plants which sustain them and form the material and colour of their textiles.

The work illustrates a cosmogenic story told in many variations across the Gran Chaco region of the birth of the river. It is told that all the world's water was once held inside a yuchán tree. When the tree was struck with an arrow by Tokua, a mischievous spirit, the water erupted from the tree, and with it, all the life on earth. The Wichí word 'Nitsäyphä' refers to this specific explosion of life. It is also a concept adopted by the Silät collective to convey the freedom of creativity and expression, and the independence brought about by their artistic production. This artwork is drawn from the idea of this early river that held all the world's life and energy, and provided a home for the Wichí people. It is woven from hand-spun vegetal fibres from the chaguar plant using the 'yica' stitch traditional in Wichí textiles. The colours are achieved using only natural dyes, which vary in availability throughout the changing seasons; the colours in this work are predominantly sourced in springtime from the flowering black carob, described by Alarcón as a companion to the Wichí people, providing fruit and shade as well as dyes.



Claudia Alarcón

Fwokachaj kiotey [Orejas de mulita/quirquincho / Armadillo ears], 2023

Signed bottom right

Hand-spun chaguar fibre. Natural dyes from the native forest. Woven fabric, antique stitch.

Framed: 152.5 x 139 cm (60 x 54 3/4 in)

Unframed: 133 x 122 cm (52 3/8 x 48 in)

Exhibition History:

Spin a Yarn, Another Space, New York, USA, 2023-24

Stranieri Ovunque - Foreigners Everywhere, 60th International Exhibition of the Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2024



In her striking geometric works, it is evident how Alarcón anchors her creations in the visual language of the Wichí people, who produce functional woven objects using motifs that evoke fragments of living beings. Alarcón's artworks mark an important contribution to the rich tradition of geometric abstraction in South America, and to the strand of art history that includes Josef and Anni Albers' exploration of pre-Hispanic South American weaving traditions.



Claudia Alarcón

Honat lasilatiq! [*Tierra hermosa llena de sabiduría!* / *Beautiful land full of wisdom!*], 2024

Hand-spun chaguar fibre, natural dyes from the native forest, woven fabric, antique stitch.

Unframed: 82 x 49 cm (32 1/4 x 19 1/4 in)



Claudia Alarcón & Silät (Melania Pereyra, Nelba Mendoza. Comunidad Chowhay, Alto La Sierra, Salta.)

Yachup [El verano / Summer], 2023

Hand-spun chaguar fibre, natural dyes and aniline dyes, woven fabric, "yica" stitch

Framed: 164.5 x 156 cm (64 3/4 x 61 3/8 in)

Unframed: 136 x 122 cm (53 1/2 x 48 in)

Exhibition History:

Stranieri Ovunque - Foreigners Everywhere, 60th International Exhibition of the Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2024



Claudia Alarcón & Silät (Mariela Pérez, Fermina Pérez, Francisca Pérez. Comunidad La Puntana, Santa Victoria Este, Salta)

Inawop [La primavera / Spring], 2023

Hand-spun chaguar fibre, natural dyes and aniline dyes, woven fabric, "yica" stitch

Framed: 177 x 135 cm (69 3/4 x 53 1/8 in)

Unframed: 159 x 104 cm (62 5/8 x 41 in)

Exhibition History:

Stranieri Ovunque - Foreigners Everywhere, 60th International Exhibition of the Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2024



For their exhibition at Cecilia Brunson Projects, Alarcón designed a series of abstract pieces, woven with members of the Silät collective, which explore the changeability of nature. Based on times of the day or seasons, they refer more to colour and atmosphere than to anything material. Exploiting the textural intricacies and earthy colours of chaguar yarn, there is an ever-changing interplay between the open weave and the environment, the richness of the natural dyes modulating as we move around the works and as the light changes.

The taught visual language of symbols and geometric patterns in this textile tradition provide a ground for these images, but bend to the forms of pure colour that spill across the works and animate them, like rushes of water, shards of light or a sudden breeze. These forms break the pattern as if the weaver is led astray by wandering thoughts, or overcome by a sudden change in their surroundings. There is something of the spontaneity of gestural abstract painting, here achieved in a medium reliant on calculation and slow, deliberate processes. They speak to the value placed on intuition by these artists, and a proximity between weaving and thinking.



Claudia Alarcón & Silät (Ana Lopez, Graciela López, Margarita López, Anabel Luna. Comunidad El Bordo, Santa Victoria Este, Salta.)

Chelhchup [El otoño / Autumn], 2023

Hand-spun chaguar fibre, natural dyes and aniline dyes, woven fabric, "yica" stitch

Framed: 187 x 176 cm (73 5/8 x 69 1/4 in)

Unframed: 160 x 142 cm (63 x 55 7/8 in)

Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP), São Paulo, Brazil

Exhibition History:

Stranieri Ovunque - Foreigners Everywhere, 60th International Exhibition of the Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2024

Geometrias, Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP), São Paulo, Brazil, 2025



Claudia Alarcón

Ta'ni t'äj wet mak ta otakie [Caparazón de tortuga y el futuro / Tortoise shell and the future],
2023

Signed bottom right

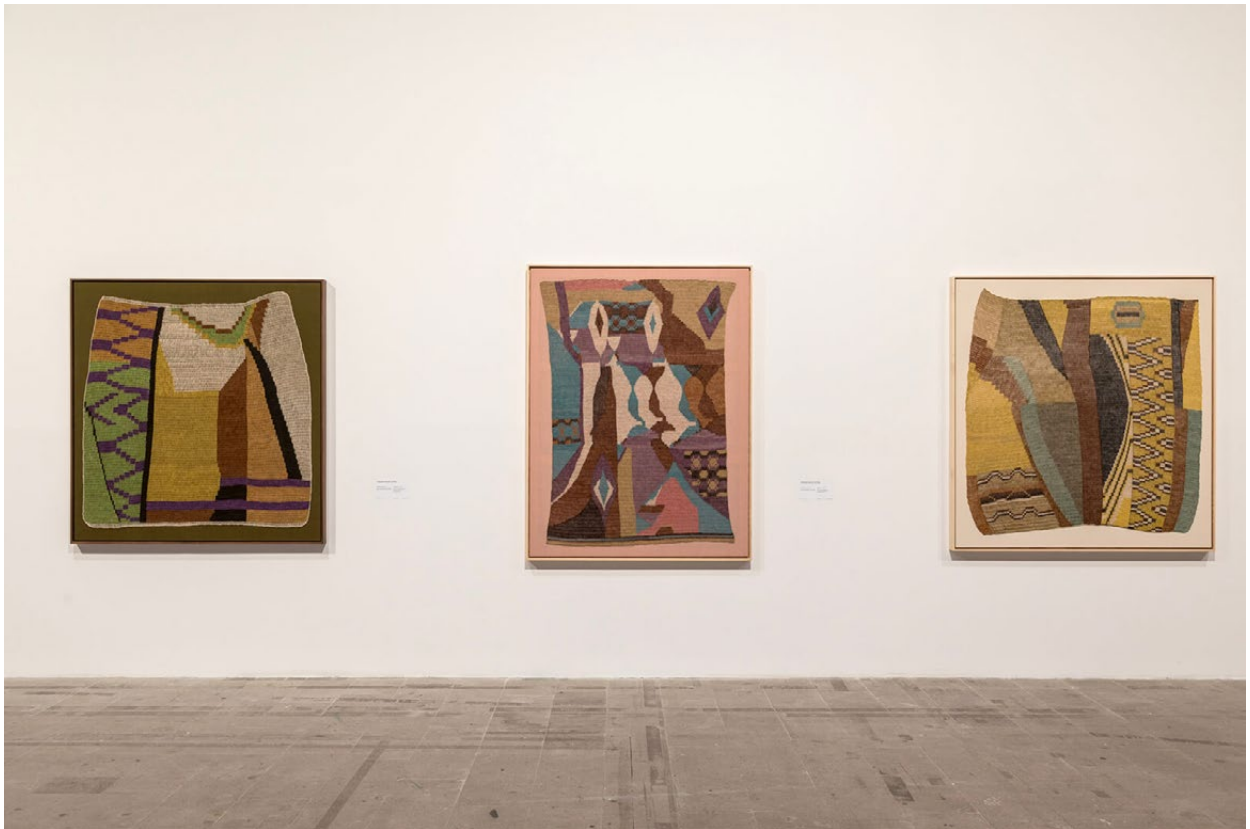
Crocheted acrylic wool

156 x 127 cm

61 3/8 x 50 in

Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (MALBA), Argentina

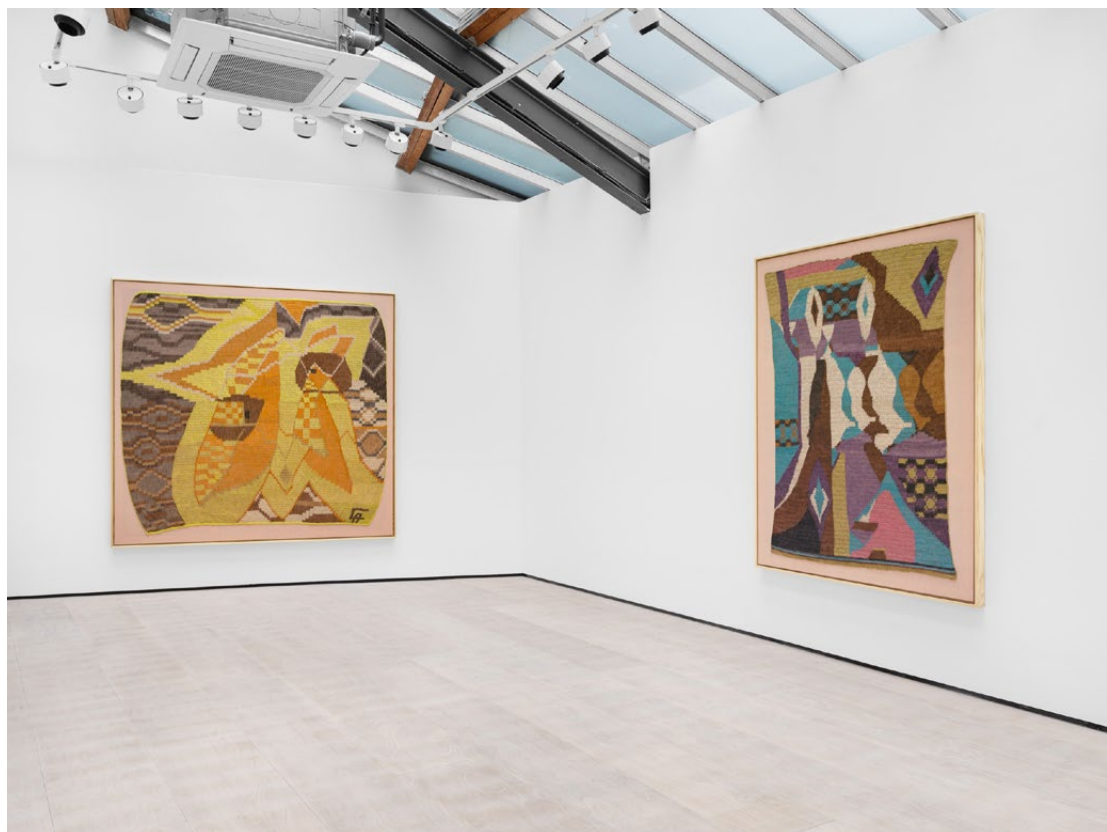
Installation Views



Installation view, *Stranieri Ovunque - Foreigners Everywhere*, 60th International Exhibition of the Venice Biennale, Venice, 2024. Courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia. Photo by Marco Zorzanello



Installation view of *La vida que explota: Gabriel Chaile en diálogo con Claudia Alarcón & Silät*, MALBA Puertos, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 2024-25. Courtesy of MALBA Puertos, photography by Santiago Orti & Diego Spivacow



Installation view of *Claudia Alarcón and Silät / Nitsäyphä: Wichí Stories*, 2023
Cecilia Brunson Projects, London



Installation view of *Claudia Alarcón and Silät | Nitsäyphä: Wichí Stories*, 2023
Cecilia Brunson Projects, London



Installation view from *Silät*, Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, 2023. Master's thesis exhibition curated by María Carri. Photo: Olympia Shannon 2023.



Installation view from *Silät*, Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, April 1 – May 28, 2023. Master's thesis exhibition curated by Maria Carri. Photo: Olympia Shannon 2023.

Archival Images



Gathering chaguar
Image courtesy of curator Andrei Fernández



Claudia Alarcón, processing chaguar to be spun into yarn
Image courtesy of curator Andrei Fernández





Image courtesy of curator Andrei Fernández



Image courtesy of curator Andrei Fernández



Presentation during the exhibition *Silät*, Hessel Museum of Art, CCS Bard College, NY
 The village of Alto de la Sierra in Salta, Argentina
 Images courtesy of curator Maria Carri and Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College; New York.



Presentation during the exhibition *Silät*, Hessel Museum of Art, CCS Bard College, NY
 The village of Alto de la Sierra in Salta, Argentina
 Images courtesy of curator Maria Carri and Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College; New York.



Presentation during the exhibition *Silät*, Hessel Museum of Art, CCS Bard College, NY
 The village of Alto de la Sierra in Salta, Argentina
 Images courtesy of curator Maria Carri and Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College; New York.



Presentation during the exhibition *Silät*, Hessel Museum of Art, CCS Bard College, NY
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Presentation during the exhibition *Silät*, Hessel Museum of Art, CCS Bard College, NY
 The village of Alto de la Sierra in Salta, Argentina
 Images courtesy of curator Maria Carri and Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College; New York.





Images courtesy of curator Andrei Fernández and Delfina Foundation

BOOKS & THE ARTS / SEPTEMBER 4, 2024

The Coming of World Art at the Venice Biennale

At one of the oldest biennials on the planet, a glimpse of a more global idea of art history is on view.

BARRY SCHWABSKY

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Bouchra Khalili's *The Mapping Journey Project*, 2008–11.
(Photo by Marco Zorzanello / Courtesy La Biennale di Venezia)

It was more than 200 years ago when Goethe, thunderstruck by a German translation of the 14th-century Persian poet Hafez, began conceiving of his idea of *Weltliteratur*, or world literature: “a universal possession of mankind” transcending the boundaries of nations and also, implicitly, of the received history of European literature that traces its descent from Greece through Rome to the various national vernaculars of the modern era. “The epoch of world literature is at hand,” Goethe told his friend Johann Peter Eckermann, “and everyone must strive to hasten its approach.” The progressive value, at the time, of the idea of world literature can be gauged by the fact that this idea found its place even in *The Communist Manifesto*.

Many Western artists became fascinated by Asian art in the late 19th century, and with that of Africa and Oceania in the early 20th century. Likewise, Western modernism’s influence was felt around the world. But the possibility of a “world art” is of far more recent vintage. Consider one of the first of the great recurrent international art exhibitions, the Venice Biennale, which started in 1895. Actually, it’s misleading to speak of the Biennale, as it exists today, as a single exhibition: It is a vast complex of exhibitions, consisting of a large central show with a different curator for each edition (this year, it’s the Brazilian Adriano Pedrosa); a multitude of national “pavilions” presenting solo or group exhibitions chosen according to each country’s rules; and any number of “parallel events” tied only loosely to the rest of the Biennale and each other. It’s such a sprawl that the only way not to miss more than you see is to skip out on it altogether.

The first of the national pavilions was that of Belgium, inaugurated in 1907. The first non-European country to open a pavilion was the United States, in 1930, quickly followed by Egypt two years later, still the only country on the African continent to have a permanent pavilion in the Giardini del Biennale, the main exhibition grounds. The first Asian nation to present was Japan, in 1956; the first Latin American pavilion was that of Venezuela, also in 1956. But the 30 national pavilions housed in the Giardini still mostly belong to European states; since the 1990s, many nations have rented temporary quarters throughout the city to house their biannual

presentations. Until fairly recently, the main curated exhibitions remained dominated by European and North American artists. If there's been anything like a world art taking shape, in parallel with Goethe's hope for a world literature, it has spent a long time waiting in the wings.

Sadly, I missed the 2022 Biennale—I still wasn't quite ready for intercontinental travel after the Covid pandemic. The main exhibition then, "The Milk of Dreams," organized by the Italian curator Cecilia Alemani, was widely lauded. If I understand the show correctly, part of Alemani's project for that show was to posit a history of recent art almost entirely devoid of men. In retrospect, the idea is hardly surprising; so prolific has been the presence of women and gender-nonconforming artists in contemporary art that it's hardly a constraint to limit one's choice to them.

This year, Pedrosa's "Foreigners Everywhere" attempts something comparable to Alemani's conceit, but in a way—given the Biennale's history—even more radical: a history of recent art almost entirely omitting Europeans and Europe's diaspora. I'm not sure the result was as pleasurable and instructive as Alemani's show two years ago seems to have been, but it offered plenty of food for thought to any open-minded visitor. Indeed, there is an ironic reflection here: that this (presumably provisional) pushing of the mute button on Europe, in order to be effective, could only have taken place in Europe. Pedrosa's show has been received less kindly than was Alemani's—see, for instance, Jason Farago's brutal takedown in *The New York Times*—but I found it fascinating: a commendable, if uncertain, attempt at providing a glimpse of what world art could be.

As my friend and *Artforum* colleague Pablo Larios has written, curating a biennial "is less an act of revolutionary artistic vision than a balancing act requiring massive logistical and political circumspection." And while that may be true, Pedrosa has clearly worked hard to get his proposed revolution organized. As usual, the curated show is divided between the Biennale's main pavilion in the Giardini and the sprawling premises of the Arsenale, a complex of former shipyards not far away, where some of the more recently added national pavilions have also been sited. It's in the Giardini that Pedrosa has placed the *nucleo storico* (historic core) of his exhibition: two rooms jam-packed with more than 100 20th-century works, mostly paintings, divided into two categories: abstractions and portraits. The point of the first section is that the signal genre of modernist art—even accepting the conventional account of its multiple origins in pre-World War I Russia, France, and the United States—made itself at home throughout the world, always differently and sometimes drawing on local traditions (e.g., the incorporation of forms reminiscent of Arabic calligraphy by Rafa al-Nasiri and Mohammad Ehsaie). With just one work each by so many artists—many of them very engaging, but most of them small and few of world-historical quality—it's hard to know how deep any of this went. A more convincing case for world abstraction might have been made by choosing, say, five major works each from 10 of the most outstanding painters from around the world, illuminating the scope of each one's personal interpretation of what abstract painting can be, thereby doing more to challenge the assumed dominance in this field of Europeans and Americans. Perhaps understandably, Pedrosa was not prepared to give the same kind of space and individual attention to his historical exhibits as to the contemporary art that is, after all, the Biennale's main concern.

Pedrosa's choice of portraiture as a dialectical counterpoint to abstraction is puzzling: Why not representation in general, or some other mode of it—landscape, for example, which might have told us so much about how artists see their homelands as well as, so often, their places of emigration or exile? According to the catalog, the section on portraits is meant to suggest the multitude of ways to represent the figure precisely at a time of a "crisis of representation around that very figure." Point taken. Not only thanks to the stimulus of abstraction, but also through encounters among various not easily commensurable local and regional traditions of representation (among them the European fine art tradition), artists felt the need to experiment, to attempt new syntheses. The problem is that, based on the evidence here, not so many of those attempts jelled. But who really knows? I'd hate to think of anyone trying to extrapolate the gargantuan oeuvre of Diego Rivera from the rather incoherent little 1915 Cubist portrait on view here. In art as in life, awkwardness can be endearing, but the sheer quantity of half-baked solutions here makes for a glum presentation, despite the presence of strong works by artists both well-known (Tarsila do Amaral, Frida Kahlo, Wifredo Lam) and more obscure (the Dominican Jaime Colson, the Iraqi Fai Hassan, the Singaporean Lai Foong Moi).

Those sections on artists from what I don't like calling the Global South—the term, used numerous times in the catalog, can homogenize so many vital differences—are echoed and inverted in a historical section of the presentation at the Arsenale. Pedrosa turns his theme inside out with a section called "Italians Everywhere," featuring artists who were part of Italy's vast 20th-century emigration, particularly to South America, but also to Africa, Asia, and North America. This is by far the most "European" part of Pedrosa's show, but it is enlivened and given point by the artists' varied understandings of how European their work should remain, and in what ways, and to what extent, it should attempt to engage formally or thematically with their adopted cultures. Again, with just a single work by each artist on view, it is impossible to reconstruct their effort to engage with the unfamiliar realities they'd entered in any concrete way, but that such an engagement had happened becomes implicit.

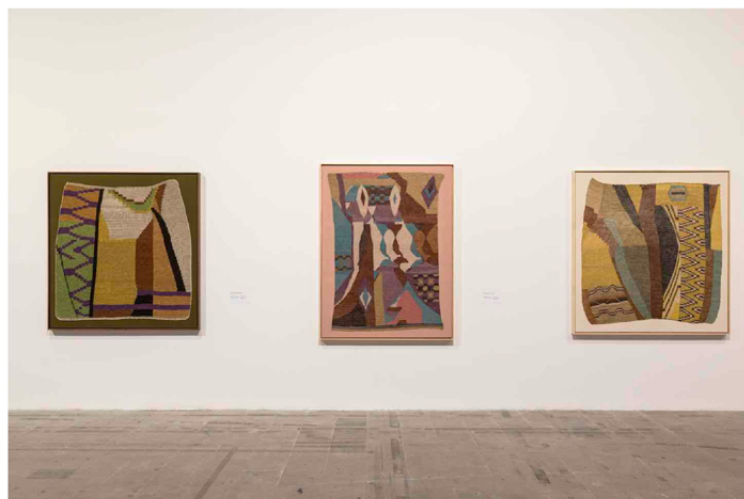
Brilliantly, "Italians Everywhere" has been installed using the beautifully inventive display system created by the Italian Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi in 1968 for the São Paulo Art Museum: plate-glass "easels" supported by big blocks of concrete, which make the paintings appear to float in the room. The glass also reveals the backs of the paintings, and on the glass verso are the objects' labels—ostensibly allowing viewers to approach the works in an unmediated way, informing themselves about what they've seen afterward. Of course, this reveals Bo Bardi's bent toward a Western modernist formalism at odds with Pedrosa's own essentially anthropological concern in assembling his global village—elsewhere, the labels avidly highlight the artists' biographies, ethnicity, sexual orientations, and so on. Notwithstanding, viewers are free to see things as formally or as contextually as they please, but it's good to have the tension between the two perspectives highlighted.

One doesn't come to a Biennale in expectation of a history lesson, but Pedrosa's brisk traversal of an alternative modernism amounts to a bracing call for a wholesale reexamination of the stories we depend on in order to understand contemporary art. He doesn't propose a new narrative, but he does present enough material to show that the old one will no longer do.

As for the contemporary offerings at "Foreigners Everywhere," it's often hard to see how they connect to Pedrosa's *nucleo storico*. Most of the recent art on view, diverse as it may seem at first, falls into one of three broad categories. Those most closely connected to the historical pieces are works, mostly painting and sculpture, that in one way or another continue the formal investigations of the modernists—but these (or so it's my impression) are the least numerous and least striking of the three groups. The second category is constituted by what in the past would have been understood (and generally dismissed) as folk or naïve art: figurative, often narrative painting by artists who seem to have taught themselves, and who might have been working for a small community or even just for themselves, without much consciousness of the potential existence of what I've called world art. Paradoxically, these works have great particularity in their subject matter but tend to share many stylistic traits despite their far-flung origins. Untutored ways of picturing turn out to be similar everywhere; it is the developed and refined traditions that cultivate difference.

But what dominates the show—and most of the national pavilions as well, which I'll get to shortly—is what I call international installation art: room-filling assemblages of diverse materials, objects, images, and, increasingly, sounds and video imagery. Such works take a given three-dimensional space as a support or container, almost as a painter takes a blank canvas as a support onto which colors can be applied at will, or even objects mounted. These immersive works tend to look either very "poor" or very expensive. The idiom is familiar and without markers of any local artistic lineage, even if the overt content—basically, the choice of materials with which to fill most of the room—intends to speak of distinct and often geographically particular experiences. Is this world art incarnate? I don't think so, because it lacks an implicit filiation with the other two genres of art on view, the quasi-modernist and quasi-folk genres. It can incorporate them—using such works as raw material the way it uses anything else, indifferently—but it doesn't make aesthetic common cause with them.

It's impossible, in the hours spent walking through an exhibition of this scale, not to note such generic similarities among the works on view, but that's not why I'm here. The real goal is to see at least a few things that somehow transcend categories, that are striking and memorable to the extent that they seem unclassifiable, perhaps even despite an initial appearance of familiarity. I could have wished for more of those moments in "Foreigners Everywhere," but they were not entirely lacking. Unforgettable for me were several works by Claudia Alarcón, an artist from the indigenous Wichí people of northern Argentina, born in 1989. Most of her works here are credited as a collaboration with Silāt, described as "an organisation of one hundred women weavers of different generations from the Alto la Sierra and La Puntana Wichí communities." Framed and behind glass, Alarcón's works could appear to be simply modernist abstract paintings made by other means: woven rather than painted, an idea anticipated in the *nucleo storico* by woven abstractions by Monika Correa (from India) and Olga de Amaral (from Colombia). And why not? Their complex beauty, their richness of form and color, would stand comparison with anything by, say, Brice Marden or Amy Sillman. But one senses a different impulse in operation when looking at Alarcón's work: a distinct communicative urgency, and a grafting of diagrammatic and pictorial ways of evoking complicated meshes of times and places. As a result, even without being able to verify it, one is not surprised to read, on the exhibition's wall label, that "these artworks stem from stories dreamt and told by elders in the community which warn of the relationships humans forge and break with all living things." But how do those dream stories transmit themselves in an international exhibition attended by people outside their community of origin? We don't hear the voice of the elders. What is lost and what is gained in their silence?



Three works by Claudia Alarcón.
(Photo by Marco Zorzanello / Courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia)

To make a first acquaintance with such art is one of the things that makes a visit to the Biennale worthwhile. Another, sometimes, is to have one's previous impressions confirmed. I first saw *The Mapping Journey Project* (2008–11), an eight-screen video installation by the Moroccan-born, Vienna-based artist Bouchra Khalili, in 2014 at the New Museum in New York, where it struck me, as I wrote at the time, as a brilliant and poignant use of a "minimalist aesthetic... (immobile camera, repetitive structure, reduction of the human presence to the hand and the off-screen voice)" to convey the absurd and thankless experience of migrants expending incalculable time and energy on moving around Europe in search of work. Each screen shows nothing more than a map on which we see someone's hand drawing the vectors of a person's peregrinations while we hear their narration of it in voice-over. In concert the eight videos tell us all we need to know about the conflict between the ineffectuality of all efforts to stem the fundamental human impulse to move in search of the means of life, and the sanguine resourcefulness of those who find themselves, whether by choice or necessity, on the move. I'm even more convinced, seeing it again after a decade, of what an extraordinary work it is.

Seeing Khalili's installation in the same show as Alarcón's weavings means seeing each one differently than one would by seeing them separately. It raised a fundamental question about art's function in a


world perspective. Through its charting of travels whose unforeseeable ends are at the mercy of fortune and opportunity or their absence, *The Mapping Journey Project* becomes a paradigmatic representation of lives that are uprooted, diasporic, errant—and the very form of the video installation, a genre of recent vintage dependent on a technology whose very production is dispersed across a global supply chain, reflects this itinerancy. Alarcón's works are immediately recognizable as a form of abstraction that, whether connected or not, makes sense with reference to developments in European and American art of the last century (but also, perhaps, to other art forms eccentric to those developments, such as contemporary Australian Aboriginal painting). Yet they also call on us to see them not only as products of the prototypical modern artist pursuing an individual intuition, but also as the singularly rooted expression of an age-old community strengthened by resistance to settler encroachment. Again, the very material out of which Alarcón's works are made—the fibers of the chaguar plant, native to her people's terrain—and her techniques of weaving reflect this insistence on cultural continuity and an ineradicable connection to place. How to arrive at a perspective that accords equal understanding to both—how to feel the value, beauty, and vulnerability of each without blinding oneself to the value, beauty, and vulnerability of the other—is a question perhaps beyond the capacity of any art exhibition to communicate.

If the curated portion of the Biennale suggests the imminence—just beyond the horizon, perhaps—of a synthesis of once-unrelated forms, histories, and activities under a new sense of world art (if only under the watchful eye of that indispensable master of ceremonies known as the curator), the persistence of the national pavilions as anchors of the Biennale reminds us that the ungainly yet seemingly still-indispensable idea of the nation-state, in all its prejudice and restrictiveness, persists.

These days, in their presentations in Venice, many of the contributors are trying desperately to overcome their own limitations—with varying degrees of success. In the Swiss pavilion, for instance, a Swiss-Brazilian artist with the extraordinary moniker Guerreiro do Divino Amor has come up with what I'd vote the worst national presentation of the year, a heavy-handed, satirical send-up of a purported Swiss sense of superiority under the title of, yes, "Super Superior Civilizations." Far better was the Austrian pavilion, where Anna Jermolaewa wittily charts her experience as an immigrant in Vienna after she fled what was then still the Soviet Union in 1989 and the surreality of much of what she experienced before her emigration—for instance, in the new video piece she made for her presentation in Venice, *Rehearsal for Swan Lake* (2024), which takes off from her recollection that in Soviet times, when the news was too troubling and ambiguous to be reported, the television stations would just repeatedly broadcast performances of Tchaikovsky's ballets. The Netherlands pavilion presents an exhibition of sculptures by members of the Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise (Congolesse Plantation Workers Art League, or CATPC), also co-credited to the Dutch artist Renzo Martens (who helped found the collective, but whose precise role in the exhibition remains strangely unclear), rebuking European colonialism and the multinational corporations that continue to exploit workers in Africa.

Even more than the curated show, the pavilions this year have gone all in on installation art, but lovers of painting won't want to miss the first-ever Ethiopian Pavilion, in an off-grounds palazzo, where painter Tesfaye Urgessa is showing some ambitious compositions that would not look out of place next to works by major Western artists such as Nicole Eisenman or Dana Schutz. But my vote for outstanding pavilion—and maybe for the finest work on view in the whole Biennale—goes to Egypt, where Wael Shawky's mesmerizing video *Drama 1882* documents a theatrical presentation, really a kind of cross between a pageant and an opera, that represents with Brechtian clarity an anti-colonial rebellion in Alexandria in 1882. "There was a revolt led by the Egyptian Colonel Ahmed Urabi against the Egyptian monarch," Shawky has explained, "calling him a traitor because he fell prey to the British and French. The interesting thing about this discourse is the idea of the foreigners—what does it mean to be 'foreigners'? Who were they? They were the occupiers—it was not the idea of immigrants that we have today." Crucial differences may be erased in our eagerness to share a deracinated, depoliticized foreignness.

Implicitly, Shawky seems to be challenging his own country, his own government—which has made the presentation in Venice possible—and also Pedrosa's understanding of the foreign as an existential condition we might presumably all share: an ultimate sense of not being at home in the world that is part and parcel of modern life, even (I suspect) for Indigenous communities that grow closer together in response to nation-states that recognize them only with difficulty. But that very real sense of foreignness is something different from the political confrontation with powerful others that Shawky evokes, and that is glaringly on view elsewhere in the Giardini: The Israeli pavilion is locked, with a sign explaining that the artist, Ruth Patir, will allow it to open only "when a ceasefire and hostage release agreement is reached." When I passed by, the pavilion was being guarded by three armed Italian soldiers in camouflage. Through the plate-glass façade, I could see in the back of the space a video being projected to no audience, with what looked like animated footage of ancient statuary—dead history coming uncannily alive.

The world literature augured by Goethe has arrived only at the price of a certain homogenization—just think that it now seems to be mainly in the hands of a few international publishing corporations, not those of poets and scholars (barring a handful of unknowns in Sweden). Perhaps the conflicts to which Shawky points still stand in the way of the emergence of a true world art. And yet anyone in the world, I imagine, should be captivated by the formal magic he's expended on the representation of a revolt that may never find its resolution. 

Barry Schwabsky

Barry Schwabsky is the art critic of *The Nation*.

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The Best Booths at the Armory Show, From Hybrid Selves to Beautiful Body Horror

BY ALEX GREENBERGER September 5, 2024 9:23pm



The crowd at the Armory Show, with sculptures by Dyani White Hawk, Jim Denomie, and George Morrison at center. ALEX GREENBERGER/ARTNEWS

Was it the uncertain economy? A summer hangover? The fact that **Frieze Seoul** happened **simultaneously**, nearly 7,000 miles away? The Armory Show opened in New York on Thursday, and the energy that could be felt at past editions of this fair—the biggest in the city—was generally not present.

One might have expected something more dramatic, given that the Armory Show has gone through big changes in the past year. This was the first edition of the 30-year-old fair staged under Kyla McMillan, who **took the reins as director** from Nicole Berry two months ago, and the first held fully **under Frieze's ownership**. The results of those behind-the-scenes shifts will likely play out in future years. For now, however, the fair remains largely the same.

The art on view left something to be desired. Few of the fair's 235 galleries opted for attention-grabbing stunts (a good thing), and even fewer took big risks with the art on view (a bad thing). What could be seen, mainly, was a flood of interchangeable figurative paintings and so-so abstractions—more, even, than is usual for a selling event like this one.

But amid all that bland fare, there are some satisfying shockers. It's all too easy to walk right by Jimmy Wright's kinky drawings of S&M sex at Corbett vs. Dempsey's booth, or to miss Naturee Utarit's painting of a woman pointing a gun at a Giorgio Morandi still life, on view at Richard Koh Fine Art's presentation. My advice? Slow down and bask in these works' weirdness. Consider them a reminder that gems lie in the rough—if only you know where to find them.

To point you in the right direction, here are nine booths to see at the Armory Show before it closes on September 8.

I Gusti Ayu Kadek Murniasih at Gajah Gallery



Works by I Gusti Ayu Kadek Murniasih, including *Kejadian* (Incident, 2004) at left. Photo : Alex Greenberger/ARTnews

The Armory Show's most memorable artwork is this woefully under-recognized Indonesian artist's 2004 painting *Kejadian (Incident)*, featuring a foot speared by a pole. The painter, who worked under the name Murni, immortalized disturbing subjects such as this one to respond to violence against women—a timeless subject that she encountered early on, having survived a sexual assault by her father at age 9. More than simply acting as a record of traumatic events similar to that one, Murni's paintings are also stylistically subversive. Murni explicitly drew on the spare forms oft seen in placid landscapes from the Balinese village of Pengosekan, then moved them in a less peaceful direction.

In lesser hands, Murni's art would have been overly serious and impossible to endure. But her body horror often has a humorous edge, and that makes it invigorating. Witness the case of *Plek Menjengkelkan (Annoying Colds, 2000)*, in which a plugged-up nose emits gigantic, suffocating beads of snot, offering gross-out nastiness and sick pleasure in equal measure.

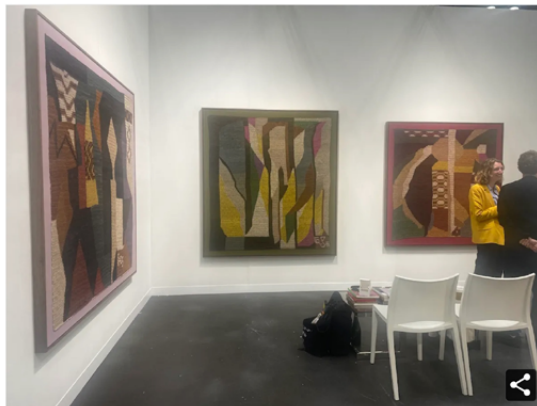
Yüksel Arslan at Galeri Nev and Galerist



Works by Yüksel Arslan, including *Arture 482, Man 123: Cures* (1997) at second from left.
Photo : Alex Greenberger/ARTnews

Calling Arslan an artist is technically wrong, as he did not believe he was one, and anyway, such a label cannot encapsulate the genre-defying sensibility evident in his drawings, which variously depict human heads, masks, and landscapes belonging to faraway places. Born in Istanbul and based for part of his career in Paris, Arslan was known for his "Artures," drawings made from pigment with his own bodily fluids, blood, spit, and urine among them. The wall text for the works brought to the fair by these two Istanbul galleries neuters his bizarre media, referring to it all as "natural materials," but even so, one cannot possibly tame a piece like *Arture 482, Man 123: Cures* (1997). That drawing features an array of penises, some of which are erect and outfitted with constrictive devices. Ostensibly, this drawing collects remedies for ailments unknown, making it emblematic of Arslan's zany practice of cataloging objects and ideas that intrigued him.

Claudia Alarcón & Silät at Cecilia Brunson Projects



Works by Claudia Alarcón & Silät.
Photo : Alex Greenberger/ARTnews

Alarcón, an Argentinian textile artist who often works with the Wichí collective Silät, is **a standout of the current Venice Biennale**, and she has wowed viewers once more with new collaborative pieces that abstract landscapes into colliding geometric planes. These pieces here are made from chaguar, a plant native to the Salta region of Argentina where Silät is based, and they are produced in such a way where they are allowed to hang loose, so that gaps are visible between the threads. These works look back to textiles by modernist women such as Anni Albers and Lenore Tawney, this time with a new emphasis on Indigenous imagery. The collaborative pieces are the main attraction here, but Alarcón holds her own solo, too, with the 2024 piece *La presencia permanente del sol con su resplandor [The ever-present sun and its radiance]*, whose crocheted wool threads, in shades of neon green and red, live up to the work's title.

Maria A. Guzmán Capron at Nazarian / Curcio



Work by Maria A. Guzmán Capron at the Armory Show.
Photo : Alex Greenberger/ARTnews

The self is multiple in Capron's visually resplendent textile works, in which people's bodies merge and contort. These works can be considered metaphors for Capron's identity. She was born in Milan to Colombian and Peruvian parents, and is now based in Oakland, California—she can hardly be boiled down to one nationality or culture. In that way, her art, made using cast-off textiles that she stitches together, is an expression of her own hybridity. In one work, a mother-like figure holds a child, whose patchwork form ends up being subsumed by its parent. Works such as that one make a strong for why Capron will likely emerge as one of the stars of La Trienal, the recurring survey of Latinx and Latin American art at El Museo del Barrio, which will open this year's edition later this month.

Diana Sofia Lozano at Proxyco



Works by Diana Sofia Lozano at the Armory Show.
Photo : Alex Greenberger/ARTnews

A similar form of hybridity can also be found in Lozano's sculptures resembling flowers gone rogue. Lozano, whose parents are both botanists, has **previously said** that her work could be compared to "flowers in drag," and indeed, her blooms are extravagant and unruly, adorned with gangly faux vinery that sticks out in all directions. Some even appear like animals, bearing claw-like hooks extending from chains that threaten to pierce anyone who dares to touch them. In real life, it is possible to categorize flora, essentially allowing botanists and biologists the possibility of reining in disorderly vegetation. Lozano's plant life, on the other hand, cannot be restrained.

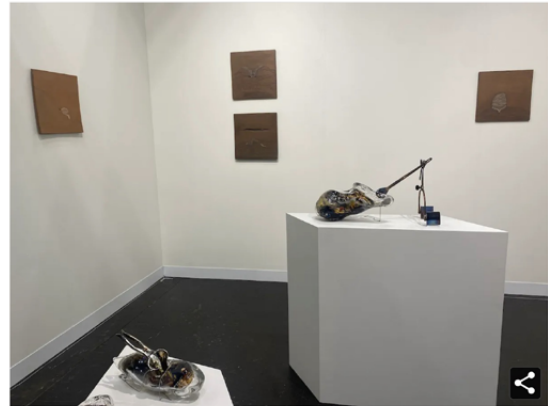
Ay-O at Whitestone Gallery



Ay-O, *Olympic Skiing*, 1982.
Photo : Alex Greenberger/ARTnews

Now in his 90s, Ay-O continues to prove himself one of Japanese art history's stranger characters. *Olympic Skiing* (1982), one of the works featured here, exemplifies his Technicolor style, with an athlete kicking up pink, warping snow as he descends a mountain slope. But this booth quietly reorients Ay-O's practice, pitting these works against a few made during the 1950s, when his art was a lot more sedate. *Rockaway Beach A* (1958), made the year that Ay-O departed Tokyo for New York, where he would later fall in with the Fluxus artists, is a canvas whose unevenly painted lower half has been partially been cut away. (Black mesh appears in place of the excised canvas swatch.) The work, which includes a piece of found wood affixed to its surface, suggests an artist wrestling with the disappearing boundary between painting and sculpture, and settling for some combination of the two mediums.

Roksana Pirouzmand and Haena Yoo at Murmurs



Works by Roksana Pirouzmand and Haena Yoo at the Armory Show.
Photo : Alex Greenberger/ARTnews

The two artists in this booth, a star of the Presents section for young galleries, both make sculptural works dealing with the notion of resilience. Pirouzmand, who recently gained acclaim for her appearance in the Hammer Museum's Made in L.A. biennial, is here showing a sculpture composed of casts of hands that are piled atop one another. Though severed from the bodies from which they came, these hands form a tower of sorts that evinces its own strange strength. Yoo creates blown glass sacs containing a mixture of organic and inorganic objects—pebbles, a necklace, and a mysterious liquid in one. Another contains a saw that threatens to cut into the sculpture's exterior, but the glass surface keeps this torture tool from slicing through.

Denyse Thomasos at Olga Korper Gallery



Denyse Thomasos, *Untitled*, ca. 1990s.
Photo : Alex Greenberger/ARTnews

Thomasos's abstract paintings often make a motif out of repeating grid-like forms, which for her acted as **metaphors for means of containment**. But the joy of looking at Thomasos's art is noticing how this late Canadian artist broke down the very sense of order that she worked so hard to construct. The untitled, 17-foot-long painting from the '90s at the core of Olga Korper's booth, for example, could hardly be viewed as rigid: Thomasos allowed her grids to drip onto one another, causing them to appear to melt into her paintings' dense backgrounds. One's eye grows dizzy trying to make sense of it all, but the experience of taking in a gargantuan canvas like this one is nothing less than liberating.

Anastasia Samoylova at Wentrup



Works by Anastasia Samoylova at the Armory Show.
Photo : Alex Greenberger/ARTnews



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In Conversation with Claudia Alarcón

Words by

Alena Dower

Congratulations on a beautiful presentation of your work. Upon seeing your pieces at The Venice Biennale, I was struck by how the irregularly shaped weaving sat within the rectangular frames. It felt both totally comfortable yet subversive at the same time. Does this reflect the position of the work at the exhibition?

We were overjoyed by the incredible possibility that my artworks and those by the Silât collective could be there in Venice, exhibited alongside the work of artists from all over the world. It is a huge achievement, something actually inexplicable, which I know is the culmination of our insistence on always pushing forward with this ancestral art.

We are proud to take our work, made here with the materials of our native forest, to another place so far away and so important. It excites me to know that we are not alone, that in this exhibition there are so many connections. There are other people and indigenous groups who perhaps have the same problems as us even though they live in territories very different from ours.

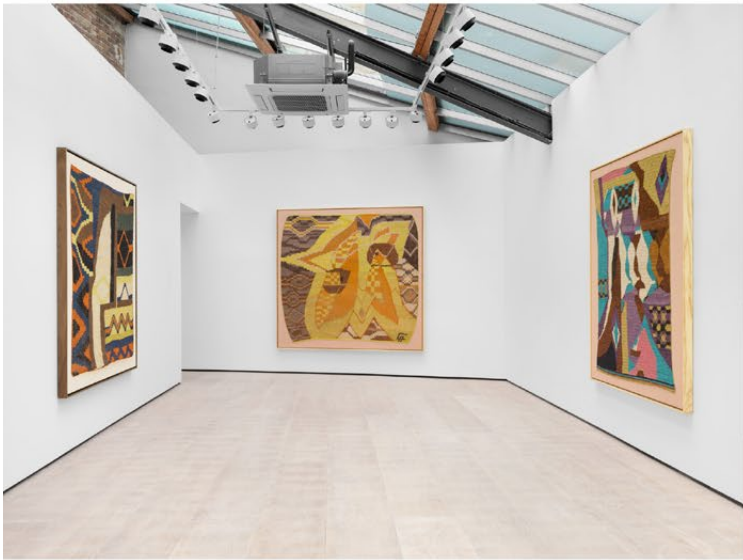
These irregular or organic forms almost appear stretched out. One might assume weaving to take on a straight edge, or to be a solitary or sedentary activity, but the work seems freed from these notions. This makes me want to inquire about your looms specifically and how they inform the process?

To weave with chaguar fibre, which the people of the Gran Chaco have always used to make bags and fishing nets, first you have to go deep into the forest to look for the plants, which grow under the shade of certain trees. Chaguar plants must be cut very carefully so that the thorns that outline their leaves do not cut your hands. The women usually use a machete and make a kind of spear from a tree branch. After peeling the leaves to get the fibres, you have to beat them to loosen them before they can be spun against our bodies. The fibres are spun on the surface of your thigh, with hands covered in ashes; the ashes of different woods vary the colour and texture of the thread. The threads are dyed with roots, bark, leaves or seeds – the colours of the forest – as well as with aniline dyes to achieve brighter colours such as fuchsia.

One thread is held in tension between two supports, such as rods or sticks planted in the ground. There, we begin to weave in the space in between, using a needle or a thorn. Larger pieces are woven between two or three women, or if it is a small piece, one woman alone can weave it on the back of a chair. The largest piece made by the Silât collective was woven by seven women. We carried it from house to house, and gathered together in twos or threes to weave at once from either end. The weavers are guided by drawings, sometimes made with a computer and sometimes by hand, or from sketches incised into the ground.

The chaguar has always been very important for the Wichí women, the weavers. We live with the chaguar, it is part of our land just like us. When we take it from the forest, it brings with it its beautiful fragrance and it makes us happy. The aroma of the chaguar stays with it even when it is dyed and woven. It is the smell of our land. The chaguar never ceases to surprise us, with everything it can do and the new forms it takes.





Installation view, 'Claudia Alarcón & Silät / Nitsäyphä: Wichí Stories', Cecilia Brunson Projects, October 2023. Courtesy of the artists and Cecilia Brunson Projects. Photography by Eva Herzog

From learning about your work; words that consistently come to mind are: preservation, responsibility, duty alongside privilege, resistance, expression, joy. How do you negotiate the potential tensions between the former and the latter? Or are they less distinct than one might assume?

We always weave. In particular, we weave bags, which we call *hilu* in our native language, and when we speak in Spanish we call *yicas*. We weave into the *yicas* the shapes that our mothers and grandmothers taught us. There is great beauty there and we know we cannot lose these traditions. In the past, people from outside our community did not understand that everything we know goes into our weavings. We have suffered a lot of poor treatment and poor payment for our work as weavers.

One day, we began to make large-scale textiles, encouraged by a woman who began to work with us, Andrei Fernández. At first, we called her *Suluj*, white, but later we began to call her *Chisuk*, rebellious woman, because she motivated us to do things we had never done, or even thought about doing, things that have allowed us to begin to value our work and see it celebrated in many places.

The work ties into a wider history of geometric abstraction in Latin America. Is there a certain essence of the Wichí visual culture you are trying to reveal or maintain? Could you describe this?

The geometric shapes we make in the fabric have meanings; each one is a message. Some shapes reference birds, footprints, cat's eyes, our landscape. In the images we recall our ancestors and see that they are still part of us.

When I learned to weave, I was taught how to make the turtle's shell and the carancho's claws. In our fabrics, you might see squares and rhombuses in different colours, but we see symbols that are part of a language, a language that speaks of the beings that live with us in the native forest.



Installation view, 'Claudia Alarcón & Silät / Nitsäyphä: Wichí Stories', Cecilia Brunson Projects, October 2023. Courtesy of the artists and Cecilia Brunson Projects. Photography by Eva Herzog





Installation view, 'Claudia Alarcón & Silät / Nitsäyphä: Wichí Stories', Cecilia Brunson Projects, October 2023. Courtesy of the artists and Cecilia Brunson Projects. Photography by Eva Herzog

With this aim to circulate and preserve the Wichí's inherited language, does an event such as The Biennale and an involvement in the global art market present an opportunity in the way it operates and the way artworks are handled and protected?

I believe and trust that yes, we are making a contribution so that more is known about my people, about their beliefs and their history, but also their lives in the present. And it is important for my own people to see the extent of recognition and value for our culture that we can find outside our communities.

I do not think we will see the impact yet, but it is already happening. The important thing is that everyone now knows that we are here, part of this land, alive and resisting. We are always in solidarity, seeking respect and value for us and our work, for who we are and what we want to be, in honour of our ancestors. We will continue fighting!



(Top left) Claudia Alarcón processing chaguar fibres for weaving, Santa Victoria Este, Salta, Argentina, 2023. Courtesy of Andrei Fernández (Top right) Detail: Claudia Alarcón, 'Kates tsinhay [Mujeres estrellas / Star women]', 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Cecilia Brunson Projects. Photography by Eva Herzog (1) Claudia Alarcón, 'Kates tsinhay [Mujeres estrellas / Star women]', 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Cecilia Brunson Projects. Photography by Eva Herzog (2) Claudia Alarcón & Silät, 'Yachup [El verano / Summer]', woven by Melania Pereyra and Nelba Mendoza, 2023. Courtesy of the artists and Cecilia Brunson Projects. Photography by Eva Herzog (3) Claudia Alarcón & Silät, 'Chelchup [El otoño / Autumn]', woven by Ana Lopez, Graciela López, Margarita López and Anabel Luna, 2023. Courtesy of the artists and Cecilia Brunson Projects. Photography by Eva Herzog (4) Claudia Alarcón & Silät, 'Nuestros tejidos son nuestra alegría [Our weavings are our happiness]', woven by Rosilda López, 2024. Courtesy of the artists and Cecilia Brunson Projects. Photography by Eva Herzog (5) Claudia Alarcón & Silät, 'Fouyeli [El invierno / Winter]', woven by Maria Pacheco, 2023. Courtesy of the artists and Cecilia Brunson Projects. Photography by Eva Herzog (6) Claudia Alarcón & Silät, 'Inawop [La primavera / Spring]', woven by Mariela Pérez, Fermina Pérez and Francisca Pérez, 2023. Courtesy of the artists and Cecilia Brunson Projects. Photography by Eva Herzog

Claudia Alarcón (b. 1989, Argentina) is an indigenous textile artist from the La Puntana community of Wichí people of northern Salta. Alongside her individual practice, she leads the Silät collective (2023), an organisation of one hundred women weavers of different generations from the Alto la Sierra and La Puntana Wichí communities.

Claudia Alarcón & Silät are currently included in the 60th International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale. In December 2022, Alarcón became the first indigenous woman to be awarded a National Salon of Visual Arts prize by the Ministry of Culture in Argentina. Alarcón was also awarded the Ama Amoedo Acquisition Prize at Pinta Miami in 2022, and her work is represented in the MALBA Collection in Buenos Aires, Argentina, the Denver Art Museum, Colorado and the Minneapolis



Art Market Eye
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Art Market Eye | The Biennale Venice effect at work

There are so many discoveries to be made at Adriano Pedrosa's international exhibition this year

Georgina Adam

2 May 2024

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Illustration: © Katherine Hardy

This year's Venice Biennale, curated by Adriano Pedrosa, has been distinguished by its emphasis on the Global South and a strong emphasis on little-known artists, many of whom are being shown for the first time in the Serenissima.

"The great thing about the curated sections this year is that there were so many finds to be made," says the Milan-based art adviser Alex Errera, "unlike art fairs, where collectors and dealers constantly complain that there are no more discoveries [to be made]."

He is not talking about the market for deceased artists such as Etel Adnan, Amrita Sher-Gil, Wifredo Lam or Carmen Herrera—all chosen by Pedrosa as part of his Stranieri Ovunque (Strangers Everywhere) curation. They are already known, as are market stars such as Mark Bradford or Simone Leigh; Errera says that after Leigh represented the US in 2022, he was inundated with calls from clients wanting to acquire her work.

"It's a compliment and an honour to be chosen for the Biennale, but Ibrahim El-Salahi, who was prominently featured in 2022 and is present in the portraits section this year, is so well established that it doesn't change his market," says Toby Clarke of London's Vigo Gallery, which represents El-Salahi. "But it is different for an emerging artist, being chosen can be an amazing opportunity," he says.

One example among many showing for the first time in Venice is the Argentine textile artist Claudia Alarcón and the Silât collective. Their finely woven works are made with natural dyes and feature traditional geometric forms evoking the cycles of nature. The work was shown by Cecilia Brunson Projects in London during Frieze last year, where it was discovered by Pedrosa. Alex White, the gallery director, told me: "The Biennale has had an amazing effect, we have had so much great feedback, it has been quite emotional." The gallery will be showing more of her work at the Armory Show in September, this time paired with the German artist and weaver Anni Albers.

Asked about prices, she gave a range of \$25,000-\$50,000 but conceded that they are likely to rise, albeit slowly. "This is a long-term relationship," she said. And Claudia herself said in an artist statement: "We never imagined this [being at the Biennale], and it is very satisfying because we have been discovered and made visible. What I want from this occasion is for this to be a way out for those of us who live in these places and have many needs, some basic like water and food." Living in "these places" refers to the region on the borders of North West Argentina, where the nearest airport is nine hours by bus away.

"There is a lagging effect with the art market," Errera concludes. "The Biennale continues for another six months, and it takes time for curators, collectors, dealers and everyone in the market to process and filter the information, to arrive at a consensus. But there's no doubt that some currently unknown artists will be picked up by other galleries, and you will be hearing more about them over the coming years."



DIARY

VENICE DIARIES: FINE YOUNG CANNIBALS

By Pablo Larios

April 17, 2024 2:49 pm

Performers from Bárbara Sánchez-Kane's *Prêt-à-Patria* at the Arsenale, April 17, 2024. All photos: Pablo Larios.

SHARE



“THIS SHOW IS CHANGING PEOPLE’S LIVES,” an artist said to me on the windy evening following the Sixtieth Venice Biennale’s Tuesday pre-opening. She wasn’t kidding. Deftly telling a story about artistic self-invention by marginalized groups, curator Adriano Pedrosa’s “Foreigners Everywhere” is the rare mega-show that renders a deep picture with a deceptively light curatorial hand. For, beneath its astringent title, “Foreigners Everywhere” reveals a tender, accessible narrative about the global reception of cross-border artistic modernism in the twentieth century—and how this syncretism reaches into the lives of artists working today. Alternating between moods of exuberance, defiance, and postcolonial melancholy, the show celebrates the continued dialogue between artists a century ago and those living and working in our own pluralistic moment. For artists such as WangShui or Frieda Torenzo Jaeger—both given ample space in the Arsenale—polyvocality has taken the place of monadic artistic movements. WangShui’s “Cathexis” series of hand-etched aluminum panels, installed to block light from the room’s windows, look like ghostly, faded ciphers in some otherworldly script. Torenzo Jaeger’s work harks back to Mexican mural traditions, but also contains sapphic imagery and an explosion of wartime blues.

It is precisely in today’s hybrid cultural space, the show argues, that there is renewed artistic possibility: As the US-born painter Louis Fratino said to me in the Central Pavilion, “I didn’t know whether I would ever see Bhupen Khakhar’s works in person,” alluding to a 1985 oil painting by the Indian artist (1934–2003), an influence of Fratino’s whose work was placed beside his own, fragmented compositions populated by jubilant bodies at the club or in repose at home. Khakhar’s homoerotic bathing scene (*Fisherman in Goa*, 1985) and Filippo de Pisis’s bourgeois still lifes (for example *Il nudino rosa* [The Pink Nude], 1931) lent Fratino’s contemporary scenes, such as the jiving nightlife monument *Metropolitan*, 2019, a nuanced historical dimension that I couldn’t see before.

Every artist has their private canon of influences: the artists who speak to them, knowingly and unknowingly. The insight that we invent our traditions, rather than simply being defined by them, is central to European modernist thought. Today, it’s easy to make an enemy of modernism. But the fact is that European modernism, together with the brutal truth of coloniality, was connected to the syncretic, cosmopolitan modernisms that emerged through artists working in Mumbai, Kingston, Manila, or Osogbo, who often related complexly to the very European movements that influenced yet also alienated them. What, then, is the link between the dizzying batik abstractions (undated) of Yoruba high priest Šàngódàre Gbádégesin Àjàlá, or artist and Wichí artisan Claudia Alarcón’s recent geometrical abstractions, and the European modernist histories that conditioned our vision to even categorize these as “abstract”?

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FORTY

Cleverly, Pedrosa finds a bridge in the exhibition's dialogical urtext: poet Oswald de Andrade's *Manifesto Antropófago*, first published in São Paulo in 1928 and launching a polemical theory of cultural "cannibalism." In this cubistically jarring text, de Andrade urges artists from colonized regions not simply to reject European models, nor to copy them, but to redigest them until they arrived at a syncretic, autonomous, and "cannibalistic" culture: "Those who came here weren't crusaders. They were fugitives from a civilization we are eating," he wrote, with characteristic inversion.

"She moved forty times," a woman told me on Tuesday in front of a hazy, kaleidoscopic self-portrait painted by her mother, Filipino painter Anita Magsaysay-Ho, in 1944. The work is displayed in a salon-style assembly in the Central Pavilion's near-overwhelming mezzanine section: the triumphant, moving "Nucleo Storico: Portraits," containing over a hundred historical portraits of twentieth-century artists working, mostly, in colonized regions. "Now I traveled here just to see this." The woman's mother poignantly rendered herself while a young woman, cleaning her brush before her easel. "For us, we had a mother who 'also' painted—but she was an artist, not only a mother and a wife." Like the many works in this delicate, transhistorical show, Magsaysay-Ho's painting feels effortlessly contemporary. It speaks to the infinite versatility of artists in remixing, reusing, redoing, and—yes—cannibalizing the traditions that oppress, frustrate, but, equally, define us. Every definition is a chance for redefinition.



Claudia Alarcón at the Arsenale.

• REVIEWS

July 11, 2024, 3:19 pm CET

“ Foreigners Everywhere — Foreigners Everywhere ” 60th Venice Biennale of [Anna Castelli](#)



①
Fiber fabrics of *chaguar* fabrics with an antique point by the women of the Silat group of the Alto La Sier community. Photograph by Clara Johnston.

The 60th International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale, curated by Adriano Pedrosa and inaugurated last April, from the title “ Foreigners Everywhere – Foreigners Everywhere ”, promises to reposition ourselves in the face of “ multiple crises that influence the movement and existence of people within countries, nations, territories and borders ”¹ through the works of queer, outsider, indigenous artists. It is a Biennale that wants to stimulate reflection on multiple levels, forcing us, on the one hand, to confront the otherness and exclusion – by asking ourselves who is considered “ foreigner ” and why – and on the other, inviting us to recognize the universality and pervasiveness of this condition, suggesting that the dynamics of belonging and identity are issues that require collective understanding and response.

I don't think I'm wrong in stating that among the insiders, at least the basic ones in our latitudes, this proposal was met with some expectation, curiosity and enthusiasm as it responds to the desire for a less westernized art world, in favor of a polyphonic where different art stories are told that arise from “ other ” ways of seeing. But, during the inauguration days, the attitude of many spectators communicated a certain disorientation and the comments in the following days confirmed this first impression by stating that the exhibition seems to get lost in its ambitions. Starting with Nicolas Bourriaud who, in his review on “ Spike Art Magazine ”, argues that this Biennale does nothing but lose its focus to become “ a safe space for the essentialization of folklore ”², many have wondered if Pedrosa's exhibition has succeeded in its intentions, posing questions that are not obvious with respect to the curatorial strategies put in place.

The writer has no certain answers but has had the opportunity to stay in some countries of the Global South in recent years by visiting artists, museums, indigenous communities and to know firsthand some realities from which the artists presented come. Traveling through these countries, the theme of identity, closely interconnected with the indigenous problem, is strong and in itself raises multiple expectations and open questions. In the nations I have visited, among the populations of Paraguay, Chile, Bolivia, Argentina and Brazil, indigeneity today represents a challenge rather than a legacy of the past, how we are used to considering it through our colonial looks. It is a question of developing a concrete relationship of belonging to the world and ensuring that it is recognized politically, as well as historically. Indigeneity questions the superficiality of a modernity which, for example during the creation of national states, has presumed to be free from any obligation towards natural presences and pre-existences, with the dramatic consequences that followed. Among the inhabitants of Chaco, for example, on both sides of the border between Argentina and Bolivia, you often hear people say: “ My cousin has become Bolivian/Argentine within one night ” “ My cousin became Bolivian / Argentine overnight ” “ My cousin became Bolivian / Argentine overnight ”.

And here a significant problem of this Biennale emerges. The words of Jimmie Durham, who has always fought against those who adjected him as a Cherokee artist, come back to me. In an interview with Dirk Snauwaert, Durham stated: “ You can't lose your own identity. I wish I could lose my own identity. All my life I wish I could. The problem is you can't ”³. His battle was to make us understand that identities are not fixed, as represented in the dioramas of museums, and he did not want to be marginalized or branded with labels. It seems that Pedrosa also touches on this theme, indeed makes it a workhorse, but that this almost turns against it because this Biennale gives geographies a preponderant importance and develops through a synecdoche that is based on the idea that the work of art tells the identity of the artist.

Indigenous artists have a strong presence at the International Art Exhibition and their works can be found at the Corderie dell'Arsenale and at the Central Pavilion, where the collective MAHKU (Movimentos dos Artistas Huni Kuin) painted a monumental mural on the facade of the building. As in the case of MAHKU, the works of indigenous artists are often collective, not personal, and reflect a shared dimension of doing. These works embody a collective responsibility, where the multitude is not only human, but also includes non-human presences. We are immersed in a world of acting principles, of presences that ask, that demand, that moan and that scream. As sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui reminds us, entities *Ch'ixid*, a word that Cusicanqui herself learns from the Aymara sculptor Víctor Zapana, they are neither white nor black, but they are both at the same time: "The snake is both above and below, it is both male and female; it belongs neither to heaven nor to earth, but inhabits both spaces, such as rain or underground river"⁴.



① 2 3

Claudia Alarcón & Silât. 60th International Art Exhibition-The Venice Biennale, *Foreigners Anywhere - Foreigners Everywhere*. Photograph by Marco Zorzanello. Courtesy The Venice Biennale.

The collective and inclusive aspect of indigenous art questions the idea that the identity of an artist can be represented through an individual work – which is instead a specific requirement of the art market. Not surprisingly, Pedrosa himself underlines how, during his research, the theme of kinship ties – so dear to anthropologists – among artists has emerged organically: Andres Curuchich and her granddaughter Rosa Elena from Guatemala, Abel Rodríguez and her son Aycoobo from Colombia, Fred Graham and her son Brett, Māori artists from Aotearoa-New Zealand, Joseca and Taniki Yanomami of the Amazon, Juana Marta and her daughter Julia Isidrez from Paraguay, just to name a few. In reality, the blood bond highlighted has something to do with it because identity is fluid and indigenous art is often linked to cosmologies, that is, the ways of telling the genesis of the world orally, but also visually. These are not fixed tales but, like whale songs, they evolve slowly over time including elements of modernity. Pedrosa also underlines how the exhibited works reveal an interest in "craftsmanship, tradition and handmade"⁵, that is, those techniques that have sometimes been considered marginal in the field of fine arts. But is this really of interest? Within an indigenous paradigm, the transmission of knowledge is not only the passage of a profession or a know-how but of a real living connected to epistemology, to mythology, to the subsistence of the community. An example of this are the textile works of Claudia Alarcón and Silât of the Wichí people community in the north of Salta, Argentina, exhibited in the corderie. These women work, spin and dye the fibers of the *chaguar*, an autochthonous plant that collect in specific periods of the year and only in necessary quantities. Fabric is the way women have to express themselves to their people. It is symbolically and spiritually linked to the female universe that supports the community. Starting from inherited weaving practices, the drawings that arise from stories dreamed of and told by the elderly are composed in order to warn about the relationships that man establishes and breaks with all living beings.

With its over 300 artists, Pedrosa seems to ask us to embrace and understand the many contexts that populate this international showcase. However, does it really provide us with the necessary tools to enter the complex worlds that inhabit it? The ambition of this exhibition would perhaps have required an even more daring and performative curatorial approach even if nobody can deny the future potential that this review will make us explore and imagine.

1 <https://www.labiennale.org/it/arte/2024/intervento-di-adriano-pedrosa>.

2 <https://spikeartmagazine.com/articles/review-foreigners-everywhere-venice-biennale-2024>.

3 Dirk Snauwaert interview with Jimmie Durham in *Jimmie Durham*, Phaidon Press, London and New York, 1995, p. 32.

4 S. R. Cusicanqui, *A mundo ch'ixi es posible. Ensayos desde a present en crisis*, Tinta Limón, Buenos Aires, 2020.

5 <https://www.labiennale.org/it/arte/2024/intervento-di-adriano-pedrosa>.

60th Venice Biennale, “Foreigners Everywhere”

Ben Eastham



View of 60th Venice Biennale, “Foreigners Everywhere,” 2024. Works by Claudia Alarcón & Silät. Courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia. Photo by Marco Zorzanello.



April 19, 2024

60th Venice Biennale, Venice

April 20–November 24, 2024

The title “Foreigners Everywhere,” derived from the neon text works by Claire Fontaine that hang over the entrances to both sites of the international exhibition at the Venice Biennale, holds out the promise of a productive confusion. In the Italian expression visible on the reverse of the English, *stranieri ovunque*, the phrase carries a more overt implication of strangeness with the same edge of hostility, so that the visitor might brace themselves for a series of encounters that are—like the experience of foreignness itself—bewildering, unsettling, and fundamentally unsafe.¹

But there is no need to do so. Because while the adoption of a bilingual sign as motto for the Biennale’s centerpiece exhibition suggests that its curator, Adriano Pedrosa, will embrace the miscomprehensions that are commensurate with translation, the reality is that everything will be explained to you. No space will be left for misunderstanding or its correlate, interpretation. The frustration of this exhibition is not that of the exile who, in a strange land, is unable to make sense of their surroundings but rather that of the tourist who is prevented from straying beyond the Potemkin village in which everything has been arranged to illustrate a point.

This is not to say that there are no good works in the exhibition. There are many, and Pedrosa should first be credited for bringing so many artists onto the stage whose names might be unfamiliar to visitors and for the genuine pluralism of his selection. There are early hints of a more expansive version of the idea of “foreignness” than the experience of being outside one’s homeland, and a group of paintings by Emmi Whitehorse at the opening of the Arsenale introduce what promises to be a rewarding theme. These ostensibly abstract compositions are pictorial representations of the artist’s native landscape in the US Southwest, incorporating the inconsistent flow of time and resembling a musical score more than a photographic image.

In a similar vein is Dana Awartani's restorative installation of red and orange hanging silks, each "medicinally dyed" according to Ayurvedic methods (*Come, let me heal your wounds. Let me mend your broken bones*, 2024). For all the soothing effects of the light strained through these screens, closer inspection reveals that each strip is scarred with the patches of rough stitching made to repair rents representing sites in the Arab world destroyed by conflict. These works do not challenge the boundaries between figuration and abstraction—or indeed linear time and three-dimensional space—so much as disregard them as the artificial constructs upon which an entirely different way of seeing depends. Here is "foreignness" as not just physical displacement but as the alternative constitution of perceptual frameworks.

The problem is that the show is itself unwilling to make a comparable jump. It is hamstrung in this respect by a determination to draw attention to the categories it claims to be dismantling, a paradox most apparent in its conventional museological arrangements and neatly encapsulated by the inclusion on every wall text of the artist's birthplace and residence.² The constant reminder that these works are products of cultures foreign to the imagined viewer—and I could not escape the sense that there *was* an imagined viewer—makes it very difficult to move beyond the structures of identity and attribution that one might expect the exhibition to disrupt. Beneath this lurks a latent presumption about what is foreign to whom—or what is canonical and what is extraneous to it—that is revealed by the exhibition's excessive protestations. Take the description of Santiago Yahuarcani's paintings as "neither derivative nor dependent on Western art history." This only begs the question, who said that they were?

The most memorable work in the show is that which succeeds in slipping these binds. Bouchra Khalili's multiscreen installation of maps on which hands trace the lines of their owner's migration (*The Mapping Journey Project*, 2008–11) is affecting precisely because each subject tells their own story. A series of textiles by Claudia Alarcón with the collective Silāt are among a number of abstractions to remind visitors that creative practice is not only a means of carrying forward a community's specific cultural heritage but also a mechanism for the generation of aesthetic experiences that can travel beyond the circumstances of their production (a canvas by Etel Adnan supports the point). Evelyn Taocheng Wang's homages to Agnes Martin (notably *Colored Cotton Candies and Imitation of Agnes Martin*, 2023) are possessed of a lightness that makes them pleasingly difficult to pin down. It is to their credit that, while it would be easy to write about these paintings in the buzzy terms of authenticity, contested authorship, or hybridity, it would be insufficient to communicate their effects.

Here is a glimpse of "foreign" as signifying something closer to "uncategorizable" than "other," and I found myself wishing that the curators had resisted the urge to compartmentalize that sees works arranged into groups united by some formal or biographical affiliation. This legislates against the production of those unpredictable effects that come from placing works into unexpected or counterintuitive relations, and feels symptomatic of a desire to keep a leash on the show's meaning. Indeed, for all that the stated intention of the exhibition is to destabilize the idea of both "foreignness" and its flipside of "familiarity," it rarely succeeded in disordering my experience of the world to the point that I felt myself to be a stranger within it. The arrangement of the exhibition places the visitor squarely at the center of a global culture, representatives of which are convened for their appreciation. The otherness of these works is so insistently foregrounded as to constrain their potential to estrange me—the viewer—from myself.

The clearest expression of the decentering potential of art remains Arthur Rimbaud's "I is another," and it might be because poetry is so well adapted to using a shared medium to express feelings exceeding its conventions that I found myself drawn to works operating at the points at which language breaks down. Onto the hunks of marble, granite, and quartzite that comprise her sculpture series "Scrittura" [Scriptures] (2020–23), Greta Schödl has handwritten the words that signify the rocks in Italian—respectively *marmo*, *granito*, and *quartzite*—in repeating lines that fill the flat surface with characters, burnishing the holes at the center of the initial "q" or conclusive "o" with gold leaf to create a visual rhythm. This doesn't read like an Adamic act of naming so much as a recognition of the insufficiency of the word and the concept it circumscribes to fully account for reality. The failure of language here breaks open the world, insisting that the viewer attend to the living strangeness of even the most inert material. It's a little like the experience of repeating a word so many times that it not only loses its conventional meaning but becomes music.

This emptying out of language into music also animates Gabrielle Goliath's exceptional multi-screen video installation *Personal Accounts* (2024), in which the survivors of patriarchal violence relate their experience to camera against a monochrome blue background. Yet their words are withheld and their stories pared down to the moments at which their throats catch or they are forced to take a deep breath, producing a hubbub of inarticulate sounds overlaid by a single melody sung a cappella. It is an extraordinarily moving assertion of the liberatory potential inherent in the creative failure of our conventional forms of articulation, and for the value of artistic expression more generally.

That legibility is not consistent with significance is driven home by Romany Eveleigh's mesmerizing paintings. Consisting of repeated O's scratched into white paint, they call to mind a passage in Anne Boyer's *Garments Against Women* (2019) reflecting on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's justification for the intellectual inferiority of women. Observing a little girl who would "write nothing but O's; she was always making O's, large and small," and who gave up writing once she saw herself in the mirror, Rousseau concludes that linguistic facility was secondary in women to the desire to be beautiful.³ Eveleigh's paintings might be taken as support for Boyer's counterargument that these O's constituted the girl's secret language and infinitely expanded literature, "each O also an opening, a planet, a ring, a word, a query, a grammar. One O could be an eye, another a mouth, another a bruise, another a calculation."

The girl stopped writing when she looked in the mirror not because she admired herself but because her O's were written backwards. She was reading what she had written, the hidden meaning of which must always elude Rousseau, might have been designed to defeat his reason. Eveleigh's paintings also evade control and categorization, might need a mirror or a codebook, carry meanings that cannot be corralled into conveniently representative categories, might like the girl's writing be translated as "I understand the proximate shape of the fountain" or "Apples are smaller than the sun." These are what Boyer calls "revolutionary letters in the code of Os," and in this unbound language can be found a radical freedom that the intellectual architecture of this exhibition too often closes down.

This is the first in a series of responses to the 60th Venice Biennale by e-flux Criticism. Reviews of selected national pavilions, as well as appraisals of its overarching themes, will be published over the coming days and weeks.

Notes

- 1 The iterations of Claire Fontaine's ongoing series exhibited at the Biennale pointedly replace the masculine "i" of *stranieri*, or foreigners, with a backwards "e."
- 2 The exhibition literature also takes great pains to remind viewers how many of the artists in the exhibition have not shown as part of the Biennale before. In itself this fact is laudable, but its inclusion at the bottom of each relevant artist's wall text only serves uncomfortably to suggest that novelty was among the criteria for selection.
- 3 Quotes taken from Anne Boyer, *Garments Against Women* (London: Penguin, 2019), 98–100.

Category

Migration & Immigration,
Nationalism

Ben Eastham is editor-in-chief of e-flux Criticism.

Subject

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Cultura

Claudia Alarcón, arte wichí que va a la Bienal veneciana

- La tejedora norteña trabaja el chaguar y se presentó ayer jueves a la tarde en el Malba, junto a otras destacadas artistas textiles.
- En la entrevista, prefirió expresarse en wichí con un traductor.
- Acaba de ser elegida para la sección principal de la Bienal de Venecia y viene de un 2023 consagradorio.



MARÍA GABRIELA
CISTERNA



"En estos momentos yo me encuentro aquí, y les quiero mandar este audio a todas las personas que no me conocen aún", pronuncia en wichí Claudia Alarcón. Su voz tiene una cadencia pareja, habla despacio **en su lengua materna**, como en un tiempo que nos parece ajeno.

Nacida en 1989 en la comunidad salteña donde reside, Claudia Alarcón trabaja el chaguar con imágenes contemporáneas y complejos ensamblajes geométricos. Sorprendió en el último arteBA, en la galería salteña Remota, en el barrio joven de la feria, con un tejido que se vendió en 3000 dólares. **2023 fue su año de eclosión:** participó de una importante muestra en Nueva York y pasó a una galería londinense. Alarcón, sin embargo, sigue enraizada en el monte salteño.

Tuvimos un primer contacto hace algunos meses, en Tilcara, y luego hace pocos días intercambiamos audios, también a través de **un traductor en su idioma, Demóstenes Toribio**, porque es en wichí que ella siente que se expresa de manera óptima. Se presentará esta tarde en **un seminario en el museo Malba**, junto a otras artistas de piezas textiles norteñas.



Gran paño de Chaguar: Alarcón y una de las integrantes del grupo Silat.

¿Qué sabemos nosotros de una mujer que conoce el sonido del Monte, su lenguaje y el de todos sus seres? Que ella nació y vive allí, que la imaginación de su pueblo **engendra imágenes con sus manos**, que no son solamente sus manos, sino las de todas las personas wichí, con figuras y mensajes de sus ancestros que se proyectan al futuro. **Lo ancestral hacia el futuro**, como ella suele decir.

Esta artista de la comunidad wichí de La Puntana, en Santa Victoria Este, Salta, participará de la **60ª Bienal de Venecia 2024** invitada por su curador, el paulista Adriano Pedrosa, para la selección oficial. Comienza el 20 de abril y Alarcón está de lleno en la previa.



La mata de chaguar o caragatá, de donde se obtienen las fibras.

Junto con ella, también participará Silat, el grupo de mujeres y compañeras a quienes coordina. Este año, el tema de la Bienal Internacional de Arte de Venecia son los migrantes -*Extranjeros en todas partes*-, pero no solamente aquellos que **cambian de territorio físico**, sino también los que se mueven en diferentes culturas, que van y vienen, o viven entre los límites y contradicciones de esos universos multiculturales.

Chaguar, arte en clave del Monte

La fibra de **chaguar** –o caraguatá, una mata de la familia de las bromeliáceas extendida en del Gran Chaco– supone toda una labor previa: las artesanas separan las fibras, que son de distintos grosores, y luego las tuercen sobre las piernas usando ceniza hasta obtener un hilo de textura fuerte.



El trabajo con la fibra de chaguar para darle firmeza.

Las mujeres del Monte bajaron del cielo en hilos de chaguar; es decir, desde antes de vivir en la tierra, ellas tejían. Tal es el mito de esta comunidad. “El tejido es nuestra vida”, dice también Claudia Alarcón. **Nosotras siempre hemos tejido.** Es lo que proviene de nuestros abuelos, abuelas, de mi madre y todas esas personas que han recorrido este camino, el que ahora nos toca andar”, dice a Clarín Cultura a su paso por la ciudad jujeña la semana pasada.



El tejido ancestral que hoy dialoga con otras culturas y códigos de representación artística.

“Si las cosas forman un mundo, es porque ellas se mezclan sin perder su identidad”, escribe el filósofo italiano Emanuele Coccia en La vida de las plantas. El chaguar refleja esta **metafísica de la mixtura**.

En la vecindad del río Pilcomayo, las mujeres wichí construyen las imágenes de su mundo, los patrones que tejen y toda su geometría son abstracciones de los seres que viven en el Monte –**los ojos del jaguar, las patas del zorro**, las orejas de la mulita, el lomo del surí, la panza de la iguana, las semillas del chañar–; esta tela representa el territorio de todos sus habitantes, no solamente los humanos.

En la experiencia intercultural, también hay mezcla, lo propio de cada mundo se entremezcla; estos objetos e **imágenes hechos en chaguar saltan entre categorías**, a las que se oponen y dislocan desde diversas maneras de vivir y comprender la existencia. Difieren de las experiencias urbanas, occidentales y hegemónicas.

“Siempre digo que estos tejidos tienen que poder entrar y salir de esas categorías preestablecidas”, explica la investigadora y curadora Andrei Fernández, que acompaña a las mujeres wichí desde los comienzos de este trabajo y forma parte del grupo Silät. Arte, artesanía, valor, patrimonio, artista, individuo, creación, obra, imagen, son estos algunos de los conceptos externos que se imponen buscando dar sentido a estos objetos y sus artistas.



Tejedoras de la comunidad de Vichibonito.

“Hay una tensión siempre con esto del **trabajo colectivo y la propiedad comunitaria**, le llamo autoría fluida”, explica la investigadora. ¿A quién le pertenecen las imágenes? “Me parece posible que **nos pertenezcan transitoriamente**, que sean nuestras cuando propiciamos que existan, pero ¿podemos pensar que son solo nuestras? No estamos solos en nuestros cuerpos; nuestra memoria no es solo construida por las experiencias propias”, agrega.

Silät, el mensaje y la artista

En wichí, la palabra Silät **significa anuncio o mensaje**. Es el anuncio ancestral **encarnado en los tejidos** de esta artista, que no es puro individuo, sino también muchas voces y pueblo. “Desde los doce años empecé a hacer el hilo, aprendiendo algo para lo que no se requiere saber escribir, sino que se trata de utilizar la sabiduría del tejido que sabemos hacer las mujeres wichí”, explica Alarcón sobre su práctica.

“Observando a mis hermanas que conforman hoy el grupo Silät, ellas realmente son el mensaje. Es el mensaje para todo el mundo entero, que se entere el mundo de nosotras, las de este lugar y de nuestro trabajo. Nosotras, que **mantenemos nuestra lengua y nuestro tejido**, las columnas que nos sostienen”, agrega.

Para acabar con la exigencia de pureza

Las corrientes historiográficas clásicas argentinas suelen narrar a los pueblos indígenas en tiempo pasado. Dentro de una educación formal extendida, muy probablemente la percepción que tengamos sobre ellos sea la de una realidad extinguida. Al menos, **no como los verdaderos y originales individuos “puros”**, sin la mezcla –otra forma de interculturalidad– que trae naturalmente el vivir en el mundo contemporáneo. Sin embargo, la exigencia de pureza original tal vez no sea más que **otra forma de imposición colonial**, de exigir inmutabilidad y salvaguarda a personas que son vitales y llevan vidas fluidas entre distintas culturas.

La artista wichí habla de una sabiduría alojada en el pensamiento, que atraviesa generaciones y sabe de su valor y belleza. “Lo que tengo para contarles es que hemos puesto a nuestro grupo el nombre Silät, anuncio, para que se sepa que vivimos aquí, aún existimos los wichí. Y en este grupo hacemos obras de arte”, afirma Claudia.

En *Materia vibrante. Una ecología política de las cosas*, la filósofa Jane Bennett se refiere a la idea de convocar a las personas a imaginar para las cosas otros roles, aparte del de portadoras de la necesidad. La materia tiene **una vitalidad intrínseca**, y estos tejidos y paños en chaguar, grandes como banderas, pero también las yicas –esas bolsas, quizá lo más conocido, del tejido típico wichí– cuentan las historias del pueblo, expresan una ontología más generosa en el reconocimiento de otros seres, llevan un mensaje de resistencia. “Las formas culturales son en sí mismas poderosos ensamblajes materiales dotados de una fuerza de resistencia”, escribe Bennett.

Transformar la realidad con el arte no es un cliché

Pronto Silät se convertirá en una cooperativa. Los tejidos serán, también, una herramienta para mejorar las condiciones de vida del pueblo wichí.

“Se está refaccionando una casa para que sea un centro cultural y espacio de encuentro. Está la propuesta de generar materiales para los docentes en territorio wichí, y que tengan una educación realmente intercultural. También está el proyecto de poner un punto de venta de alimentos saludables en el Monte. Todo esto que se está logrando con los tejidos tiene que traducirse en una mejor calidad de vida”, sostiene Andrei Fernández.

“Es una tarea inmensa porque necesitamos muchas cosas para que cambie. En primer lugar, que tengan garantía de acceso al agua potable, que hoy no tienen. Que se mejoren los caminos y se respete su cultura, que la educación y salud sean interculturales. Siempre se está trabajando y peleando por la defensa del territorio”, añade la curadora.

Hace énfasis, además, en su preocupación porque **la historia del arte dominante siga atravesada de colonialismo y racismo**. Porque en ella, por ejemplo, no caben las indígenas wichí, dado que el arte les pertenece a las ciudades y, como contrapartida, se excluyen otras experiencias de mundo.

La invitación a la sección principal de la Biennale veneciana, que arranca a mediados de abril, es claramente un paso que **fractura esos relatos** habilitando otras posibilidades del arte.

Estas grandes banderas, los colores del Monte y sus figuras, **el aroma de las fibras** estarán en Venecia desde el 20 de abril de este año. Serán objeto y mensaje, el Silät, de la presencia de todo un pueblo. “Cuando me pongo a tejer, recuerdo que estoy siendo indígena, siendo lo que soy. Esto es lo que tengo para compartir”, concluye Alarcón en su idioma.

MALBA/ Jornada de arte textil. Desde las 11 hs. A las 16 Claudia Alarcón participa junto a Lucrecia Lioni y Celina Eceiza. Moderan: Guillermina Baiguera y Verónica Rossi