




Claudia Alarcón (standing at center) working with members of Silät producing a weaving.
PHOTO SERGIO ABRAHAM

When she was 12, **Claudia Alarcón** learned the *yica* stitch, which doubles as both a loop of yarn and a form of knowledge in the Wichí tradition. For generations, Wichí women in Argentina and Bolivia have taught their daughters and granddaughters the process of creating these stitches; Alarcón learned from her mother and her grandmother. More than two decades on, she still makes *yica*-based weavings.

Related Articles



The 2024 Venice Biennale: Our Critics Discuss Their First Impressions of a Show Unlike Any Other

Venice Biennale Moves Forward with Koyo Kouoh's 2026 Exhibition, Titled 'In Minor Keys'

To a Western onlooker, *yica* appear unassuming; they result in weaves that hang loose while still retaining a certain tautness, like a sweater that is baggy from being worn too many times. But for the Wichí people, life is impossible to imagine without these plainspoken stitches, because they exist both on the clothes they wear and on the crossbody bags they use to transport fruit plucked from a tree or goods bought at a market. Alarcón described *yica* as being imbued with unlimited importance.

“Our *yica* are always with us,” Alarcón told me recently by Zoom. “We cannot be without them.”

Suddenly, it seems the art world can’t be without them either. Alarcón’s art made using *yica* was a standout of last year’s **Venice Biennale**, where a set of modest weavings by her, made in collaboration with the all-female collective **Silät**, managed to compete with monumentally scaled installations. In his **review** for the *Nation*, critic Barry Schwabsky called the works “unforgettable.” Others seem to agree: her collaboration is the subject of a gallery show at **James Cohan Gallery** in New York, is currently featured in Brazil’s Bienal do Mercosul, and will go on view later this year at the De La Warr Pavilion in England, the Museo de Arte de São Paulo, and the Guggenheim Bilbao.



Claudia Alarcón and Silät's works at the 2024 Venice Biennale. At left is *Kates tsinhay [Mujeres estrellas / Star women]*, 2023, a work that depicts how Wichí women designed from the sky on *chaguar* threads.
PHOTO MARCO ZORZANELLO

By some measures, Alarcón's success marks a breakthrough for the Wichí, who have been "completely abandoned by the Argentine government," as the artist's London dealer, Cecilia Brunson, put it. A recent [article about Alarcón in *La Nación*](#), the paper of record in Argentina, began with a litany of firsts, noting that no other Indigenous woman before had ever sold her work as art, not craft, at Buenos Aires's arteBA fair.

But Alarcón talks with such modesty that it is easy to forget all of this. Speaking from her home in La Puntana, Argentina, last month, she quoted her mentor Margarita Ramírez: "Excuse my delay. It took a while to get here, but here we are."

Indigenous woman before had ever sold her work as art, not craft, at Buenos Aires's arteBA fair.

But Alarcón talks with such modesty that it is easy to forget all of this. Speaking from her home in La Puntana, Argentina, last month, she quoted her mentor Margarita Ramírez: "Excuse my delay. It took a while to get here, but here we are."

La Puntana, where Alarcón was born in 1989, had recently been wracked by rains so bad—a year's worth in just eight hours—that her community lost power, and she missed her James Cohan opening. That went unmentioned, because she instead focused on the power of her art, which she was determined to put before the public eye.

"We want to continue showcasing our knowledge, our ancestral weaving knowledge," she told me, speaking in Spanish and Wichí through a translator. "Before it was always seen as crafts, not as art. We want to show people the meaning that it has for us."

Crucial to achieving that goal has been Buenos Aires-based curator Andrei Fernández, who has helped bring Alarcón and Silät's art to the attention of curators and dealers, in part to rectify a gap in her own college education—her professors dismissed work by Indigenous artists as craft. "I thought these women couldn't show this art," Fernández said. "I wanted to show them a pathway to be able to do it."



Claudia Alarcón and Silät, *Nosotras, hijas de las estrellas [We, daughters of the stars]*, 2025.
PHOTO IZZY LEUNG

Perhaps Alarcón and Silät's work has played so well in museums and biennials because it resembles recently canonized fiber art by Western artists. Many of the Alarcón-Silät weavings contain bright, hard-edged swatches of color. Sometimes, there are visible figures and stars, but their weavings are dominated mostly by rectangles and other shapes. In form and medium, they recall the modernist abstractions of Anni Albers and Sophie Taeuber-Arp. Yet Fernández discouraged those comparisons, noting that this work is not merely a formalist exercise for Alarcón and Silät, who are using centuries-old patterns that they have remixed.

"I understand these references because I've studied these works," Fernández said, referring to modernist abstractions. "But after knowing [Alarcón and Silāt's] work, after knowing their process and their region, I see it as a language that they use. It's a way of modernity for other societies, but for them, these geometric figures and abstractions don't correspond to specific periods of time [in the past]. It has always been the present for them."



Un coro de yicas [A chorus of yicas], a 2024–25 installation by Alarcón and Silāt in the James Cohan Gallery show, is composed of 100 yica bags.
PHOTO IZZY LEUNG

According to Wichí lore, a group of women descended from the sky, where they existed as stars, and came to earth on fibers made from the *chaguar*, a plant in the same family as household bromeliads. When the women touched down, they proceeded to make weavings from these very fibers. The chaguar has occupied a central place in Wichí life ever since. As Alarcón put it, "It is a vital plant for women. We value this plant—we take care of it, and we treat it as best as we can."

One way they honor the chaguar is through the tradition of *tayhin*, or weaving. The process is not an easy one. In [videos made available online](#), you can watch with awe as women athletically hack the deep-rooted chaguar out of the ground and then repeatedly pound it with bars, turning its leaves into flimsy strips that can then be made into threads. Those threads are then dyed brilliant hues—mint green, buttery yellow, and cool turquoise—using seeds, bark, leaves, and more. Some weavings are then hung from trees, where they are visible to birds flying by. "When a bird comes to the village, there's a message," Brunson said.

The act of weaving has always been a collective endeavor for the Wichí, but it has come to take on a new valence over the past decade, thanks in large part to Fernández, who has helped lead workshops around the country's Salta province with Wichí women since 2015. At those workshops, women can discuss their needs as they weave, all the while divining new directions for their art. "I wanted to offer this tool of knowledge to generate social improvement for everyone," Fernández said. (Fernández is not officially a part of Silāt, but she has acted as a collaborator since its inception.)

In 2017, Alarcón and other Wichí women formed a group called Thañi (Viene del monte), and they began bringing their work to design fairs and craft markets in Argentina. "Until then," Fernández wrote in an [essay](#) for the Archives of Women Artists Research & Exhibitions (AWARE), "sales prices had been fixed by others. Men." Now, the women set their own prices and were able to assume control of their market, with any profits routed directly to their community, which has routinely faced periods of poverty.



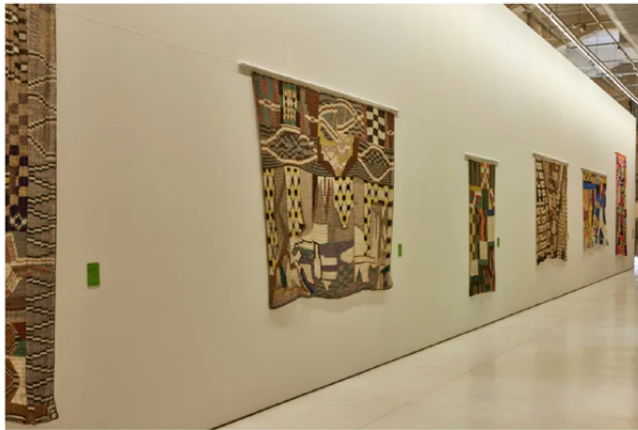
Claudia Alarcón, *Lucero del alba* [Morning star], 2024.
PHOTO IZZY LEUNG

In 2023, the year that the collective had its first international solo show, at Bard College's museum, some members of Tha'ni left and formed Silät, which translates from Wichi to "message," "notice," or "alert." Fernández said, "This new group proposed to work with art but especially to have autonomy from the state projects that had helped to found Tha'ni and demanded to participate in the decisions taken by the group."

Silät's membership now counts around 100 women. Its weavings are produced collaboratively in smaller groups that are sometimes multigenerational. "Some weaves are made by a great-grandmother, a grandmother, a daughter, and a granddaughter," Brunson said.

Brunson saw the Bard exhibition, and then began showing Alarcón and Silät's work that same year. The artists had already been exhibiting at art centers in Argentina, but they were not yet well-known abroad, so she found herself surprised when her gallery's exhibition quickly sold out. "That had never happened to me before," she said. "I thought it only happened at Gagosian!"

Museums have responded in kind, with Alarcón works landing in the collections of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Minneapolis Institute of Art, the Denver Art Museum, and the Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires. The latter museum staged a show last fall at its Puertos outpost, where Alarcón's art was placed alongside grand sculptures by Gabriel Chaile, another rising figure of the Argentine art scene.



Claudia Alarcón and Silät's weavings at the Bienal do Mercosul.
PHOTO RAFAEL SALIM

When seen in galleries, Alarcón and Silät's weavings tend to be framed and hung on a wall. Yet she and the collective have begun branching out, exhibiting large-scale weavings that are shown unframed, as may appear in the forests of Salta. Several such works currently appear at Brazil's Bienal do Mercosul, whose organizer this year is Raphael Fonseca, a curator at the Denver Art Museum who helped acquire Alarcón's work for his institution. He said Alarcón was quickly "gaining experience in this very Western art system," and had adapted their work accordingly. But, he added, Alarcón's art remains connected to Wichi tradition. "It responds to a collective way of living that's a part of her life," he said.

Notably, each weaving is titled, as any other Western abstract painting might be. Alarcón provides the names, but they are adapted from the words of a shaman that she relies upon to continue a connection with Wichi lore. When Alarcón visits the shaman, he narrates "the story of [her] ancestors," Brunson said. "Claudia and Andrei are very close to him." And so, even this aspect of her practice is a collaborative effort, something reinforced by a 2024 weaving in the James Cohan show. It features strung-together black triangles, rows of beige striping, and two mountain-like forms, and it has a title that could also stand in well Alarcón and Silät's practice as a whole: *¡Nuestra fuerza es unirnos! (Olahiajutejwek)*. It translates to "Our strength is to unite!"