

Press Release

## Oswaldo Pitoé

Towards the Past: Memories of the Gran Chaco

31 January - 2 May 2025



Oswaldo Pitoé, Untitled, 2023, acrylic and metallic paint on plywood panel

Cecilia Brunson Projects presents *Towards the Past: Memories of the Gran Chaco*, the first UK exhibition by Oswaldo Pitoé (b. 1963), an indigenous Nivaclé artist of the Paraguayan Chaco. Pitoé first came to prominence in Europe in the landmark exhibition *Trees* (2019) at Fondation Cartier, Paris, which positioned him as an important emerging voice advocating for the preservation of indigenous ways of living in union with the forest and its ecosystems.

The exhibition takes its title from *yma guaré* (towards the past), a Nivaclé expression loaded with an intense and palpable feeling of nostalgia. It reflects the sentiments at the heart of these works: a longing for a way of life in the forest and a deep melancholy for everything that is lost.

Pitoé was born in Pedro P. Peña, a village on the banks of the Pilcomayo River on the Paraguay-Argentine border. In 2006, his hometown was destroyed by a shift in the river's path and its inhabitants were forced to move inland to Cayin' o' Clim, a Nivaclé community located on the outskirts of the Neuland Mennonite colony of the Gran Chaco.

The colony was established in 1947 after thousands of German-speaking Russian Mennonites fled the Soviet Union during World War II, and now occupies territories belonging for centuries to the indigenous peoples of

the Paraguayan Chaco. Conditions in Cayin' o' Clim are harsh, marked by brutal policies of discrimination that keep indigenous people living in extreme poverty and disconnected from their ancestral ways of life.

In this site, an unusual convergence of two exoduses that led the Nivaclé people to find themselves foreigners in their ancestors' land, artistic expression has persisted in the form of a collective mission named Artes Vivas. This collective was established through a long-term collaboration between indigenous artists and the Swiss anthropologists Ursula and Verena Regehr, who have promoted their activities since 1998 through exhibitions and publications. Pitoé continues this mission, his work serving as a visual expression of the community's resistance to erasure.

Painting on wooden panels collected from houses and carpentry shops across the colony, Pitoé conjures images from the accounts of elders and from his childhood memories. He depicts a way of life on the brink of oblivion: scenes of subsistence practices, of the sacred armadillo species and bottle trees threatened by rapid deforestation, and of the Arete Guasu, a carnival celebration in which deceased relatives are remembered and invited to return to the world of the living.

Spectres of a lost past, the images bear witness to the deep bond Pitoé's community holds with their disappearing environment, its animals, trees, and other non-human beings. Almost dreamlike in their atmosphere, with figures suspended and engulfed by their landscapes, the images inhabit a non-existent space of memory, desire and imagination, communicating in their quietude a loss of autonomy in the dispossession of their territories and the move towards resettlement, forced assimilation and wage labour.

For this exhibition, Pitoé's wood panels are paired with work by Francisco Matto, a leading artist of the School of the South movement in the mid-20th century. Collecting pre-Colombian art and ethnographic objects on his travels through South America, Matto sought a communion between the modernist urges towards abstraction and the geometries and mysticisms of the continent's ancestral arts. A kinship in the two artists' work underlines a longer history of wood painting in the region, and the revival of a visual world of compressed and organised formations in which human, landscape and spirits become enmeshed in one.

*Cecilia Brunson Projects is grateful for Fernando Allen and Fredi Casco's collaboration and guidance on this project, and for their ongoing work with the artists of Artes Vivas.*

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