Claudia Alarcón & Silät

cecilia brunson projects

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 over one hundred women weavers of different generations from the Alto la Sierra and La Puntana Wichí communities.

Wichí society is clan-based and matrilocal. 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 Thañí/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, 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 and the 14th Bienal do Mercosul, Porto Alegre in 2025. 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. Claudia Alarcón & Silät's work is represented in public collections including the Guggenheim, New York; Tate, London; LACMA, Los Angeles; Museu de arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP); MALBA, Buenos Aires; the Denver Art Museum, Colorado; the Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minnesota; and the Gund Collection, Ohio, USA.

Selected exhibitions

2026	*Claudia Alarcón & Silät*, Museu de arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP), São Paulo Brazil
2025	*Everyday Anew*, the Gund, Gambier, Ohio, US
2025	*Claudia Alarcón & Silät*, De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, UK
2025	*Claudia Alarcón: Choreography of Imagination*, Cecilia Brunson Projects, London, UK
2025	*Claudia Alarcón and Silät*, James Cohan, New York, US
2023	*Claudia Alarcón and Silät	Nitsäphä: Wichí Stories,* Cecilia Brunson Projects, London, UK
2023	*Silät,* Hessel Museum at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, USA (as part of the Thañí/Viene del monte organization)

Selected group exhibitions

2025-26	*Arts of the Earth*, Guggenheim Bilbao, Spain
2025	*Geometrias,* Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP), São Paulo, Brazil
2025	14th Mercosur Biennial, Porto Alegre, Brazil
2025	*Text :: Textile*, Broodthaers Society of America, New York, US
2024-5	*La vida que explota: Gabriel Chaile en diálogo con Claudia Alarcón & Silät*, MALBA Puertos, Buenos Aires, Argentina
2024	*Stranieri Ovunque,* 60th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy
2024	*Cantando Bajito: Chorus*, Ford Foundation Gallery, New York, US
2024	*Claudia Alarcón & Silät and Anni Albers*, Cecilia Brunson Projects at the Armory Show, New York, US
2024	*Spin a Yarn*, Guild Hall, New York, US
2024	*Hecho a Mano*, Cecilia Brunson Projects, London, UK
2023	*Spin a Yarn*, Another Space, New York, US
2023	*Una Historia que Cura*, Salta Museum of Anthropology, Salta, Argentina

Selected awards

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

Blanton Museum of Art, Texas, United States

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 Latinamericano 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

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, United States

Tate, London, United Kingdom

Selected Works

Claudia Alarcón
Kates tsinhay [Mujeres estrellas / Star women], 2023
Signed bottom right
Hand-spun chaguar fibre, woven in yica stitch
192 x 203 cm (75 5/8 x 79 7/8 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

Claudia Alarcón & Silät
Inawop [La primavera / Spring], 2023
Hand-spun chaguar fibre, woven in yica stitch
177 x 135 cm (69 3/4 x 53 1/8 in)

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

Claudia Alarcón & Silät
Nitsäyphä [Pronunciar la fuerza propia / Pronounce one's own strength], 2023
Signed bottom left
Hand-spun chaguar fibre, woven in yica stitch
211 x 283 cm (83 1/8 x 111 3/8 in)

Claudia Alarcón
Los saltos de mi recordar [The leaps of my memory], 2025
Signed bottom right
Hand-spun chaguar fibre, woven in antique stitch
186.5 x 221 cm (73 3/8 x 87 in)

Claudia Alarcón & Silät
Wenachelamejen [Lo diferente / The Other], 2025
Signed bottom right
Hand-spun chaguar fibre, woven in yica stitch
159.5 x 152 cm (62 3/4 x 59 7/8 in)

Claudia Alarcón & Silät
Chelhchup [El otoño / Autumn], 2023
Hand-spun chaguar fibre, woven in yica stitch
187 x 176 cm (73 5/8 x 69 1/4 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 & Silät
Yachup [El verano / Summer], 2023
Hand-spun chaguar fibre, woven in yica stitch
164.5 x 156 cm (64 3/4 x 61 3/8 in)

Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Austin, Texas

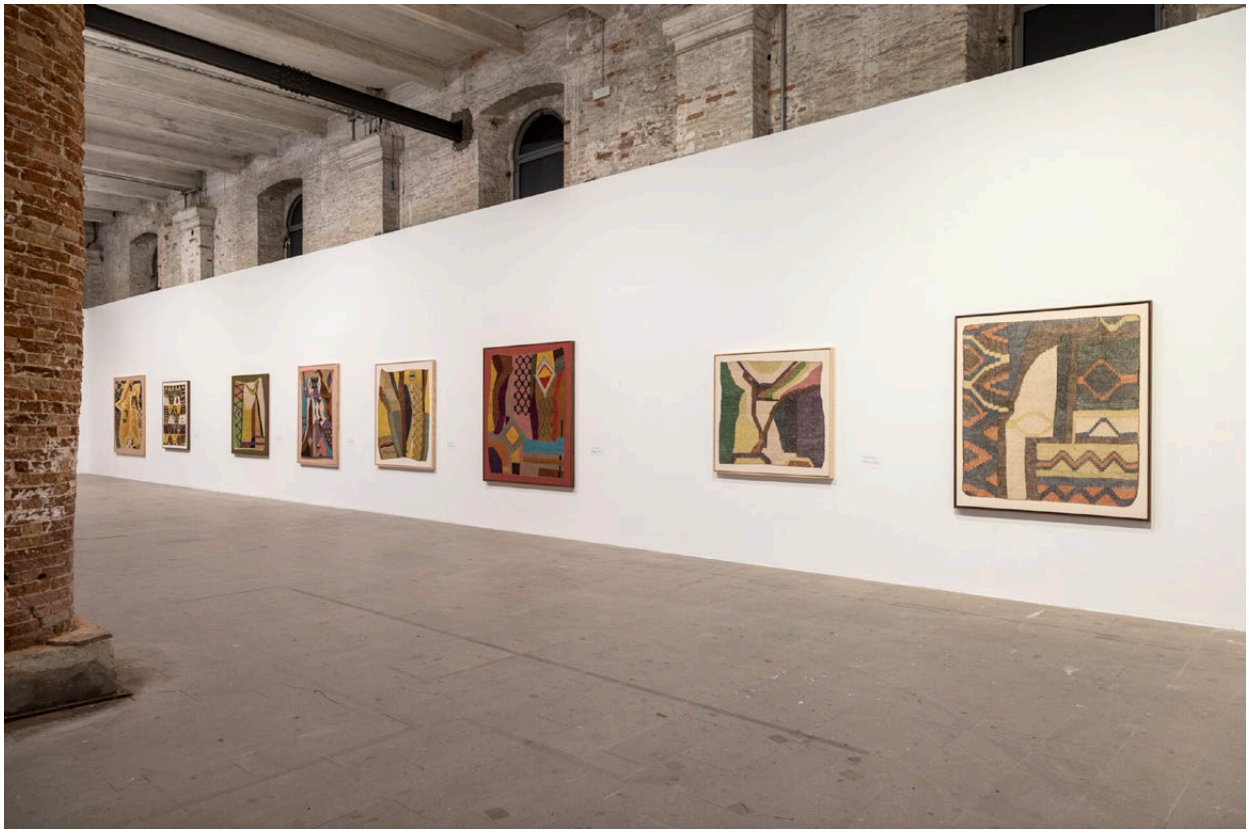
Exhibition History:
Stranieri Ovunque - Foreigners Everywhere, 60th International Exhibition of the Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2024

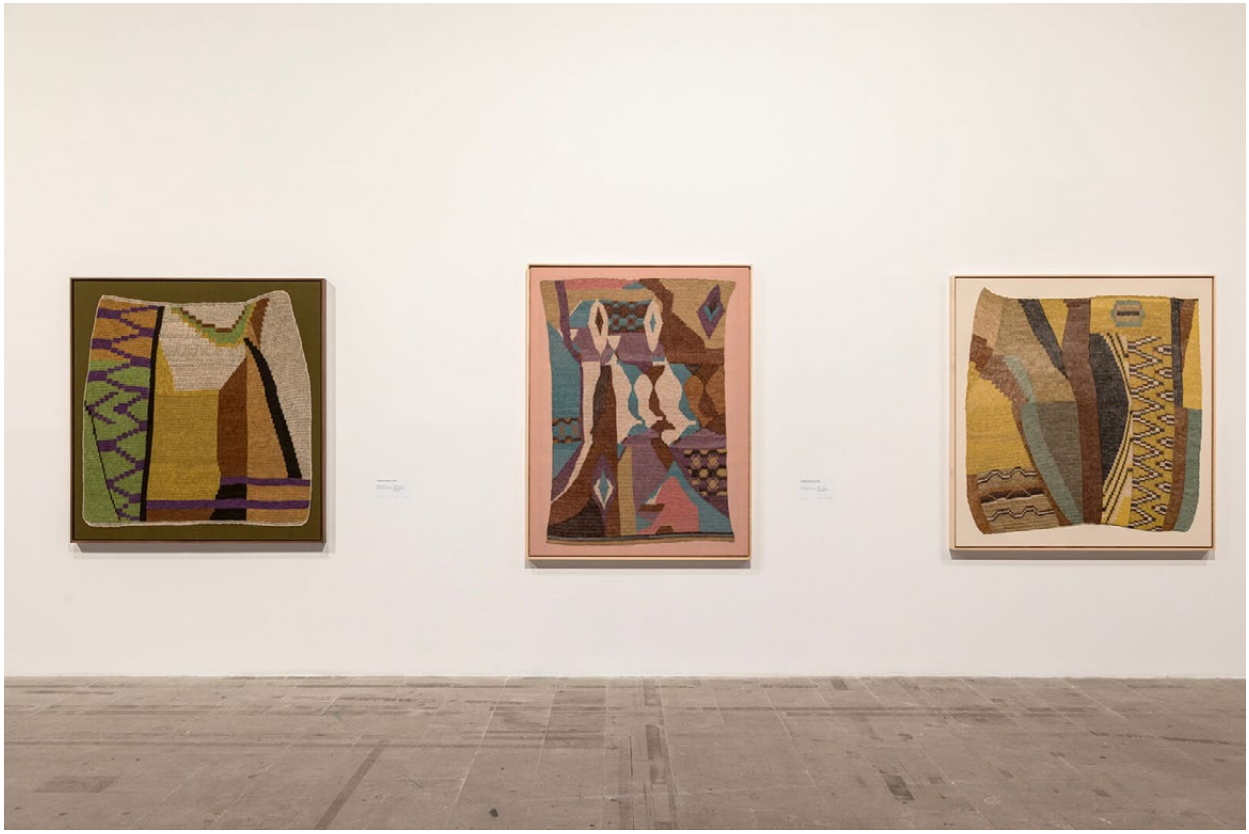
Claudia Alarcón & Silät
The Three Marias, 2025
Signed bottom right
Hand-spun chaguar fibre, woven in yica stitch
86 x 109 cm (33 7/8 x 42 7/8 in)

Claudia Alarcón & Silät
El futuro de fuerza ancestral y nuestras orejas, 2024
Signed bottom right
Crocheted acrylic wool
130 x 135 cm (51 1/8 x 53 1/8 in)

Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, North Carolina

Installation Views





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

Installation view, *Claudia Alarcón & Silät: Tayhin,* De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, 2025. Courtesy of De La Warr, photography by Rob Harris

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 14th Bienal do Mercosul, Porto Alegre, Brazil, 2025. Courtesy of Bienal do Mercosul, photography by Thiéle Elissa

Installation view of *Claudia Alarcón and Silät: Choreography of the Imagination,* 2025, Cecilia Brunson Projects, London

Installation view of *Claudia Alarcón and Silät: Choreography of the Imagination,* 2025, Cecilia Brunson Projects, London

Installation view of *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, photography by Olympia Shannon

‘Silät: The Flickering of Fabric,’ Andrei Fernández, published in *Aware Women Artists*, January 2025

Standing up, surrounded by immense carob trees and swirls of earth, speaking up in front of a circle of women looking at me attentively, with a distrust in their eyes that gradually turned into hope. That’s how I met Claudia Alarcón and some of the women who today make up the Silät collective.

In late 2015 I began to work with women weavers of the Wichi people. I was the coordinator for training programmes organised by Argentine state institutions.[1] These workshops were meant to ‘add value’ to the handicrafts made by women of an indigenous community, a territory that, paradoxically, was in conflict with that same state. The idea was to generate ‘innovations’ in counterpoint with a process of questioning and consultations about what to change and why.

A fabric can be transformed according to its use and presentation, but in and of itself it’s already an interrogation and a demonstration of what can be done by something that refuses to disappear.

Sending out a search party

In the three years after I began working in the part of the Gran Chaco situated in the province of Salta, Claudia Alarcón attended all of the workshops. I only got to know her voice two years after seeing her in the weekly meetings where increasing numbers of women were connecting as they brought their fabrics to try out new finishings and mixes, and, for the first time, to decide their prices themselves. Until then sales prices had been fixed by others. Men.

The other workshop participants and I quickly understood that the most urgent ‘innovation’ needed to safeguard the community was to get organised. So, although not yet completely conscious of what we were doing, we founded a women’s organisation. Together we began to look for a new outlet for the woven bags that people in the Gran Chaco had always made to carry messages and memories, and which had become one of the few ways they could earn an income.

Claudia was one of the first who dared to make a trip to the cities to sell the nascent group’s products. As the workshops turned into meetings and assemblies, between 2017 and 2021, we took part in circular economy, design and handicraft fairs as part of our search for people who would valorise the work that the Wichi people had refused, and are still refusing, to abandon. In those early years the group called itself Thañí/Viene del monte [Comes from the bush]. It broke up in 2023, and some of its leaders, including Claudia, founded Silät.[2]

A continuity

In the Wichi language, the act of weaving can only be described as a continuing action: tayhin (weaving) is an intransitive verb that can also refer to building, reconstructing and healing. Demóstenes Toribio[3] points out that when Wichi women weave images together, they are building, reconstructing and healing memories and imaginations as part of a long-term continuum. The territory is also continuously woven on the surface over which it extends, healing its vital transformations and thus producing its texture. The

soil, like a skin, conditions the shapes of the monte[4] and their fleece. In the woven body, the woven territory, the woven bag, the weaving is the message in which thicknesses are condensed.
They weave – reconstruct – heal images meant to be carried on the body as bags called yicas[5] in the Gran Chaco region of Argentina. The geometric shapes of the yicas are named as if they were fragments of living beings, animals and plants. They have a symbolic value superimposed on their practical use that freights them with meanings linked to various dimensions of community life. They are containers specifically used for gathering food, and, since the mid twentieth century, as a kind of currency to buy foodstuffs no longer found in the monte due to the deforestation resulting from agribusiness and other extractive industries.

Chaguar thread and the stars
Thread from the plant known as chaguar has always been of fundamental importance to Wichi women. They live with this plant, which is part of the monte just like them. They tell stories about how this plant never ceases to surprise them because of the shapes it can take and all it can do. It is their teacher and support. Wichi memory recounts that women originally came from the sky and descended on a chaguar thread. Before they were women, they were stars. Now, when they weave, they caress that radiance that was taken from them, while the chaguar transmits messages through its fragrance. The weaver and researcher María del Carmen Toribio says that chaguar fibre is capable of enormous transformations. It can adapt to all kinds of changes and thus teaches Wichi women about their own potential versatility.[6]

To work with chaguar you have to go deep into the monte to find these plants. This bromeliad grows in the chiaroscuro under the tree cover. You have to be very careful in cutting it so that the thorns around its leaves don't rip your hands. A spear improvised from a tree branch and a machete are used to gather the leaves, which are then peeled and crushed to loosen the fibres. After being soaked and dried, they are spun onto the weaver's body. A thigh is used so that a hand smeared with ashes can twist the fibre while the other hand holds the resulting thread.

The thread is dyed with roots, bark, leaves and seeds – the colours of the monte. Artificial dyes can be used to imbue the fibres with bright, sometimes phosphorescent colours. Afterward they are stretched between two brackets, perhaps poles thrust into the ground. The distance between them depends on the size of the future fabric, created hanging in the air using a needle or thorn. The most important element is the movement of the hands – light, choreographed and constant – using the thread to draw eyes, the name given to the holes in the weave that allow the fabric to expand. They are eyes that can open.

The collective imagination
The Wichi people are organised into numerous communities in the provinces of Salta, Chaco and Formosa in northern Argentina. In Santa Victoria Este, a municipality bordering Bolivia and Paraguay, there are more than a hundred Wichi communities. Each exercises its own authority and in turn belongs to the Lhaka Honhat organisation, coordinated by a young woman, Cristina Pérez. Lhaka Honhat has ardently defended its territory for decades, winning its legal recognition as the collective property of five peoples who existed before the establishment of the Argentine state.[7] Property held in common means shared ownership of a territory. Although it is organised and divided into subunits for its use, everything belongs to its inhabitants – and not just the human ones.

For these people, images are also a communal territory from which springs a collective imagination. The woven images are jointly-owned property, although each weaving is a particular manifestation to be completed through its use. The person who makes a fabric can sell or exchange it for whatever they need, but the shapes and messages are not theirs alone. Ownership can be transitory and authorship fluid, in line with the Wichí people's understanding that the same body can be inhabited by different beings.
A weaver can generate an interruption, a change in the continuity in which her work is inscribed, but this modification can be repeated by another member of her community without any conflicts about copying or appropriation. But what happens when the change produces a new, additional value?

A silät

The term silät, meaning message, was the name given to the first pieces made for contemplation that the Thañí weavers made for the 2020 exhibition La escucha y los vientos[8] that I curated in the Berlin ifa-Galerie as an experiment in collaborative creation.[9] With the help of the Salta artist Yannitto Guido (born 1981), the Thañí weavers worked in subgroups with different materials and made bigger pieces, on a scale that makes them look like banners, or as if the weavings were an outcry.

When I asked Claudia what words could describe these collectively-made fabrics, she told me the group agreed that they should be called silät, because they are a message meant for people who don't know that Wichi women continue to weave just as their ancestors did.

After participating in contemporary art fairs where this work was presented in 2020, in the following year Claudia was invited to show her work at the Cecilia Brunson Projects gallery in London. She insisted that this be done along with work by the Silät weavers. We called the show Nitsäyphä,[10] a Wichi word for the explosion when spring water first begins to flow, and their own power as well. The opening of a space to see and realise one's own destiny.

[1] This was part of the Proyecto Bosques Nativos y Comunidad in conjunction with the technical team of the INTA (Instituto Nacional de Tecnología Agropecuaria de Argentina) of the Agencia de Extensión Rural de Santa Victoria Este, Salta, Argentina.

[2] In July 2024 this group brought together 120 women of different generations who worked as an association to make pieces to be sold on the art market and distributed as utilitarian textile handicraft objects through various commercial outlets.

[3] The Wichí people's communicator. He is a member of the Consejo de la Lengua Wichí Lhämtes and a bilingual (Wichi-Spanish) translator for Acceso a la Justicia. He works as an interpreter during the interviews and testimonials given by the women of the Silät collective and the spiritual teacher Caístulo.

[4] The "monte" (bush) is an Argentine ecoregion mainly marked by the predominance of shrubbery, located at the foot of the Andes mountains in the northeast, central and northern provinces of Patagonia. The Wichí say that they live in and with the monte, in the Gran Chaco. In Argentina the word monte has acquired a political dimension related to the defence of this territory in the face of advancing agribusiness, and because it was the theatre of revolutionary rural guerrilla warfare in mid-twentieth century northern Argentina.

[5] Yica is a word in the Quechua language. It is used in the Salta region of the Chaco when speaking in Spanish about a kind of square-shaped bag used by local people as part of their everyday outfits, worn at the hip with the strap crossed over the chest like a backpack.

[6] In a lecture given as part of the Jornada de Arte Textil held at the MALBA (Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires), February 2024.

[7] Since the early 1980s they have asked for a single ownership title, with no subdivisions, in the name of all the indigenous communities that inhabit what used to be called the Lotes Fiscales 55 y 14 del Departamento Rivadavia, in the province of Salta. Since the Argentine state failed to reply, in 1998 the Asociación Lhaka Honhat, under the sponsorship of the CELS, filed a complaint with the Inter-American Human Rights Commission. In 2012, the Commission issued a report on the merits of the case declaring that the communities' rights had been violated and ordering the payment of reparations. Because of the State's non-compliance, in 2018 the case was submitted to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. "The Court determined that the State violated the right to community property. In addition, it determined that the State violated the rights to cultural identity, a healthy environment, and adequate food and water, due to the ineffectiveness of State measures to stop activities that were harmful to them." https://www.cels.org.ar/web/2020/04/la-corte-interamericana-de-derechos-humanos-condeno-al-estado-argentino-y-fallo-a-favor-de-las-comunidades-indigenas-saltenas/

[8] See https://untietotie.org/en/event/the-listening-and-the-winds/

[9] I worked as a curator from 2012–17, when I took a break from this practice to immerse myself in the monte, where I coordinated social economy workshops. I took it up again in 2019 to work with the Argentine artist Gabriel Chaile.

[10] See https://www.ceciliabrunsonprojects.com/artists/151-claudia-alarcon-%26-silat/

Archival Images

Gathering chaguar
Image courtesy of Andrei Fernández

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

Images coutesy of Andrei Fernández and Delfina Foundation

Chaguar fibres dyed with natural dyes
Image courtesy of Andrei Fernández

Image courtesy of curator Andrei Fernández

Claudia Alarcón & members of Silät weaving
Image courtesy of 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 coutesy 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 coutesy of curator Maria Carri and Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College; New York.

ArtNews, by Alex Greenberger, May 2025

Claudia Alarcón and Silät Are Weaving a New Kind of Fiber Art

BY ALEX GREENBERGER May 5, 2025 5:00am

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

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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.

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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 Silät'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 Silät 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 Silät, but she has acted as a collaborator since its inception.)

In 2017, Alarcón and other Wichí women formed a group called Thañí (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.

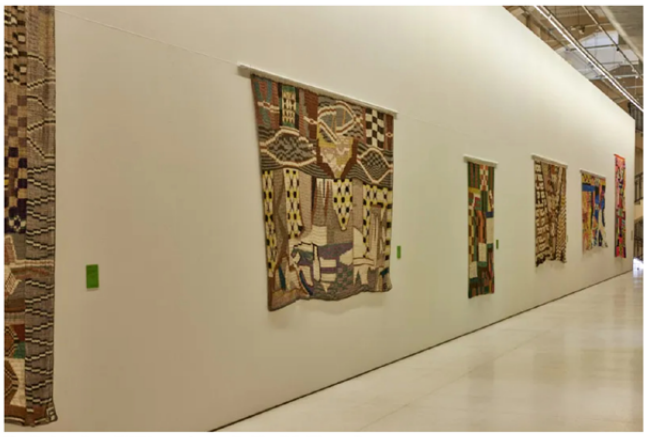
Claudia Alarcón, *Lucero del alba [Morning star]*, 2024.
PHOTO IZZY LEUNG

In 2023, the year that the collective had its first international solo show, at Bard College's museum, some members of Thañí left and formed Silät, which translates from Wichí 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 Thañi 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 Latinamericano 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 acquired 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 Wichí 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 Wichí 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 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 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!"

The Art Newspaper, by Anna Brady, June 2025

London Gallery Weekend 2025
Preview

Folklore, mythology and tradition: five must-see shows at London Gallery Weekend

Our pick of exhibitions of female artists whose practice is rooted in cultural traditions, processes and storytelling

Anna Brady
3 June 2025

Members of the Silät collective, whose woven works will be on show at Cecilia Brunson Projects during London Gallery Weekend
Courtesy of Andrei Fernández and Cecilia Brunson Projects

Reflecting a broader revival of interest in folklore, mythology and traditional processes and rituals, several exhibitions at London Gallery Weekend this year show artists looking back, not forward, for inspiration—a refreshing antidote to our AI-dominated world.

Some artists are indigenous to a particular culture—the aboriginal artist Emily Kam Kngwarray, for instance—while some are borrowers, such as New Zealand-born Francis Upritchard, a self-confessed "magpie" who collects influences from ancient mythology to science fiction.

Here are five shows of female artists that bring tales and traditions from Argentina to Australia to South Korea to the streets of London.

Anna Perach: A leap of sympathy

Richard Saltoun, 41 Dover St, W1S 4NS, until 24 June

Born in Ukraine but now based in London, Anna Perach takes her exhibition theme from the work of the philosopher Henri Bergson, who said that we must take a "leap of sympathy [faith]" in order to empathise with and relate to others. Perach's tufted, wearable sculptures, drawings and glass sculptures, set out across Saltoun's three Mayfair spaces, explore how ancient folklore and storytelling can influence our personal narratives and sense of self, and society's idea of identity and gender.

Perach's protagonists often play with the idea of the "monstrous" body—witches and the like—and one body of work central to this exhibition is *The Uncanny Valley*, a creepy procession of 12 tufted heads leading visitors through the gallery. Some feature multiple or oversized eyes, some none, playing with the idea of gaze and identity. The work takes its inspiration from the Russian folktale Vasilisa the Beautiful, in which a series of heads surround the witch Baba Yaga's house in the forest.

A leap of sympathy will travel to East Gallery in Norwich in September 2025.

Francis Upritchard's Any Noise Annoys an Oyster (2024), in balata rubber and bronze
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

Francis Upritchard: Sing Siren

Kate MacGarry, 27 Old Nichol Street, E2 7HR, 6 June-12 July

Francis Upritchard's uncanny, darkly playful sculptures draw on all manner of inspiration—ancient art, folklore, the natural world and science fiction. "I'm magpieing," she once told *The Art Newspaper*, "I'm always mixing."

The New Zealand-born artist's new show with Kate McGarry includes figurative sculptures in rubber, bronze, ceramic, textiles, stone and glass, alongside works on paper, made initially for her recent exhibition at Kunsthal Charlottenborg, appealingly titled *Any Noise Annoys an Oyster*. Her works have a way of evoking everything and nothing in particular—forms reminiscent of mythological animals, dinosaurs, and ancient creatures. "I try and embrace how incorrect memory can be," Upritchard says in a statement. "I'm working the material in reference to human bodies, but remembered human bodies. For me it's quite important, the incorrect and the not looking just right or just so."

Mythological inspiration is strong in these new works—such as *Medusa*, with eels not snakes for hair, and *Sing Siren*, references the mythical women who would lure sailors with their song —as are Classical references, in the forms of ceramic vessels decorated with scenes from Greek mythology.

Soyoung Hyun, Shadow (2024)
Courtesy of the artist

Soyoung Hyun: Invitation to a Ritual

IMT Gallery, Unit 2, 210 Cambridge Heath Road, E2 9NQ UK, until 29 June

This, the first UK solo show for Paris-based Soyoung Hyun, includes two bodies of related work by the South Korean artist: her *Purification box* and *Shadow* series. Both bodies of work deal with memory and the blurred line between presence and absence, drawing on personal and cultural rituals as well as Japanese ceremonial vessels and Beninese ceramics.

The *Purification box* series consists of clay vessels decorated with volcanic stones from Mount Etna, serving as memory boxes, to hold and externalise past traumas, obsessions and habits. The *Shadow* series, meanwhile, takes its inspiration from Korean folklore, in which shadows are seen as evidence of life. Hyun uses clay to sculpt the shadows of vases and flowers into solid form, giving permanence and weight to something ephemeral and intangible.

Installation view, Claudia Alarcón & Silät: Choreography of the Imagination at Cecilia Brunson Projects
Photography by Lucy Dawkins, courtesy of Cecilia Brunson Projects

Claudia Alarcón & Silät: Choreography of the Imagination

Cecilia Brunson Projects, 3G Royal Oak Yard, Bermondsey St, SE1 3GE, until 25 July

Cecilia Brunson, originally from Chile, champions the work of South American artists in a very personal way, from a gallery attached to her family home in Bermondsey. For London Gallery Weekend, Brunson is showing the work of Claudia Alarcón, an indigenous textile artist from the Wichí community of northern Salta in Argentina. The artist is also part of the Silät collective, led by Alarcón and made up of of 100 multi-generational women weavers from the Alto la Sierra and La Puntana Wichí communities.

Their textiles, perhaps familiar to you from their inclusion in last year's Venice Biennale, are woven from fibres of the native chaguar plant, a material and practice integral to Wichí culture —the weavings are thought to communicate unspoken thoughts and the messages of dreams and the subconscious. Their geometric designs are part of a part of a strong tradition in South America, and the gallery points out that Anni Albers collected chaguar textiles from Salta, using their design and weaving method as inspiration for her own work.

Emily Kam Kngwarray: My Country

Pace Gallery, 5 Hanover Square, W1S 1HQ, 6 June-8 August

Now recognised as a giant of Australian painting, Emily Kam Kngwarray (around 1914-1996) will receive her first solo show at London's Tate Modern this July. To coincide, Pace will open an exhibition of the Aboriginal artist's work at its London gallery, in collaboration with the Melbourne-based gallery D'Lan Contemporary.

Kngwarray was an Elder of the Anmatyerr people of Australia's Northern Territory and custodian of Alhalker, her ancestral country, which runs deep through all of her work. Her paintings also embody the idea of the Dreaming, a foundational concept of Aboriginal culture which encompasses their spiritual beliefs, lived worldview and creation stories.

Although Kngwarray only began painting seriously in 1988 when she was in her 70s, she produced an enormous body of around 3,000 works in the eight years before she died. The group of works on show at Pace chart her development from early organic forms to the minimalism of her last works. It will also include contemporary batik works by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists inspired by Kngwarray.

The Financial Times, by Melanie Gerlis, June 2025

The Art Market + Add to myFT

How indigenous art became in demand

Works from previously overlooked communities are gaining in prominence, raising questions of cultural respect and financial fair share

'My Country 14' (2007) by indigenous Australian artist Kudditji Kngwarreye © Courtesy of Paul Williamson

Delicate, geometric chaguar plant weavings hang from tree branches in London's Cecilia Brunson Projects gallery. They showcase the skills of Silät, a collective of more than 100 women of all ages from north-west Argentina's Wichí people. Led by Claudia Alarcón, the group's practice originates in making fishing nets and bags sold at local craft markets. The weavings are a striking example of how art made by indigenous people and communities is gaining prominence in commercial exhibitions. But with increased demand, also come new considerations for the art market, stretching from questions of cultural respect to fair financial share.

Museums have taken note, notably London's Tate, which acquired Moore's "kith and kin" from Venice, in partnership with the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art last year. Tate Modern's next exhibition is of the Northern Territory artist Emily Kam Kngwarray, one of the more visible 20th-century indigenous artists on the international scene, while its forthcoming annual Turbine Hall commission comes courtesy of Norway's Northern Sámi artist Máret Ánne Sara. In 2022, Sara was one of three artists who marked the rebrand of the Nordic Pavilion in Venice as the Sámi Pavilion.

It was only a matter of time before the commercial sector followed suit, particularly in a shaky market in which galleries are seeking new avenues to explore. Cecilia Brunson's Claudia Alarcón & Silät show follows a recent solo exhibition at James Cohan gallery in New York, while other current shows include Kngwarray's solo show at Pace in London — the gallery began working with the artist alongside the Melbourne-founded D'Lan Contemporary last year.

Also in London, JGM Gallery has a show of six contemporary artists in the circle of Kngwarray. From the same Urapuntja (Utopia) community, the painters in the show are described as "kinship" relatives, a system of connection that means they often carry the same "skin name", assigned based on community affiliation, in this case Kngwarray. These include Judy Kngwarray Greenie, Emily's granddaughter by kinship, who in works such as "Atnwelarr" (2025) shows the most similarity to her senior, pressing her brush heavily into the canvas to turn a yam root into an earth-toned abstract.

Galleries are vigorously promoting these relatively new names. On one level, this involves pointing out the clear links with western art. At JGM Gallery, Kudditji Kngwarreye, the only man in the show and Emily's kinship brother, works in large blocks of colour, which "for some critics . . . resembles the numinous colour field paintings of Mark Rothko", a gallery statement says. Cecilia Brunson Projects notes how the 20th-century artist Anni Albers took inspiration from the pre-Colombian weavers in South America and owned textiles by the Wichí people. But works at both shows come at a snip of the price of ones by their 20th-century counterparts — the Utopia paintings peak at £12,000; Alarcón's at £37,000.

At the same time, indigenous art's messages of community and custodianship of the land chime with today's more ecologically aware and mission-driven buyers. "Kinship broadly involves responsibility and applies to the land, the animals, the plants as well as to people," says Antonia Crichton-Brown, a writer and researcher for JGM Gallery.

Overlooked artists, including those who are self-taught and outside of the western canon, are also having their market moment. Not everyone is a fan. Critical debate erupted at the start of this year when, in a Harper's Magazine feature titled "The Painted Protest", the arts writer Dean Kissick took aim at the identity politics of the Venice Biennale and other shows, saying they "exhibited recycled junk, traditional craft, and folk art". In response, the critic and broadcaster Ben Luke wrote in The Art Newspaper that "more equitable and diverse contemporary programming is not only just, but has provided some of the most profound art experiences of my lifetime." He concludes "bad art abounds, some curators overstretch themes, wall texts are often clunky — it was ever thus."

Claudia Alarcón with chaguar plant © Courtesy of Andrei Fernández and Cecilia Brunson Projects

Claudia Alarcón, 'Los pétalos y las espinas de la memoria' ('The petals and thorns of memory') (2025), made from hand-spun chaguar fibre © Courtesy of the artist and Cecilia Brunson Projects. Photo Lucy Dawkins

There are still many sensitivities when it comes to creating a fine art market from indigenous practices. Crichton-Brown identifies an uncomfortable "distance between the context of being seen in a white-walled gallery in London and the lived conditions of artists in remote regions". Equally, a craving for apparent authenticity can conjure up an outdated, limiting and insulting representation of a "primitive" people. In reality, Crichton-Brown says, "everyone now has a mobile phone" — indeed one of the longest-running awards for indigenous art, Australia's National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards, is sponsored by the country's leading telecoms provider, Telstra.

Meanwhile, shared "dreamings", the ancestral forces that underpin the communal and creative processes, are often not verbalised, let alone monetised. A complex system of intermediaries and art centres has been built to protect the concepts of collective memory and custodianship, which do not fit easily into the 21st-century art market system.

Galleries are making efforts to meet the new dynamics. Cecilia Brunson Projects is taking less than the typical primary market gallery percentage for Claudia Alarcón & Silät. "The traditional approach tends to divide acquisition profits equally between gallery and artist, but we've adapted to reflect the collective nature of the work and the realities of the community," Brunson says. For the Emily Kam Kngwarray exhibition, which is a secondary market (resale) show, D'Lan Contemporary and Pace have agreed to gift 10 per cent of their proceeds back to the Urapuntja community. The artist's estate will also get a capped resale right. As a matter of course, D'Lan Contemporary now also commits 30 per cent of its net annual profits to the broader indigenous communities.

"It has been game-changing," says gallery founder D'Lan Davidson. "Before it was a one-way street in the market, now the practices have some sustainability." The industry around indigenous art has a delicate balance to strike, but, Crichton-Brown says, "when it works, it enables communities to perpetuate their belief system while allowing them to make a living and to thrive."

Hyperallergic, by Gregory Volk, June 2025

Art Review

Weaving That Opens to the World and Heavens

Claudia Alarcón and the Wichí women weavers who compose the collective Silät create artworks that seem to channel land and celestial bodies.

Gregory Volk May 5, 2025

Installation view of *Claudia Alarcón & Silät* at James Cohan Gallery (photo Izzy Leung)

The first time that I and many others encountered the wonderful, semi-abstract, vividly colored textile artworks by Claudia Alarcón and the art collective she helped form, Silät, was at the 60th International Art Exhibition at the 2024 Venice Biennale. A multigenerational collective of 100 Indigenous Wichí women weavers from northern Salta, Argentina, Silät came together in 2023 when a previous group disbanded. Its name, I've learned, means "message," although elsewhere I have also read "notice" and "alert."

Communal weaving by women using the fibers of the forest plant chaguar, colored by natural dyes, has long been fundamental in matrilocal Wichí society: In their mythology, women lived in the heavens as stars and descended to earth on chaguar ropes. This has commonly involved *yicas*, handwoven bags with intricate geometric patterns that are used for carrying food and convey memories and narratives. "Un coro de yicas" (A chorus of yicas) (2024–25), a towering wall installation of 100 *yicas*, each made by a member of the collective and with a unique design, encapsulates the impressive range and variety of these artworks.

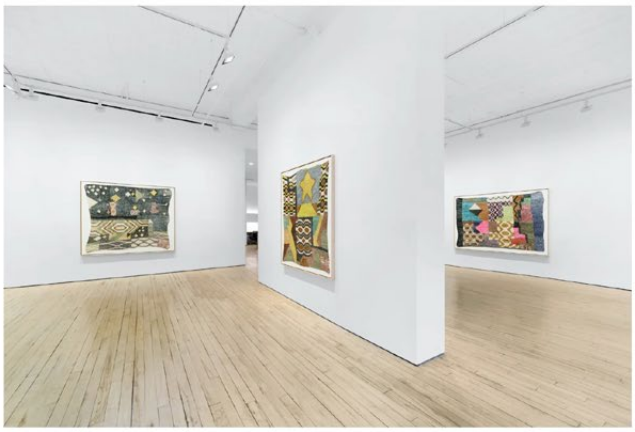
Argentine curator Andrei Fernández, as well as María Carri and Alarcón, have been instrumental in propelling Wichí weaving into innovative new forms, especially via large-scale works and contemporary art contexts. The greatly enhanced visibility and economic potential that have resulted are very good things given the dire threats Wichís face from cattle-farming settlers, deforestation, poverty, racism, and governmental abuse.

Large, communally made textile works (up to around six by six-and-a-half feet), displayed on the walls like paintings, employ the traditional *yica* stitch that Wichí women have been using for centuries. They result in web-like structures that one both looks at and through. Like eyes, they are open to the world and the heavens, channeling land, celestial bodies, and human and nonhuman animals. Two pieces by Alarcón herself in the viewing room employ the more tightly woven antique stitch. I advise seeking them out; they are great.

With its irregular geometric shapes and zigzagging bands in multiple colors, "Los caminos de la presencia wichí" (The paths of the Wichí presence) (2024) feels like a voyage, or perhaps several ones, not a static artwork. It's good to look from afar, up close, and from the sides at its fluctuating shapes and color gradations. This work feels very generous and soulful, as do the others.

"Nosotras, hijas de las estrellas" (We, daughters of the stars) (2025) connects the present to the mythological Wichí origin story. Yellow shapes that resemble stars glow near the top. Below them is what might be the merest hint of a human figure, while gray sections woven into a whole are like the night assembled in pieces. Russet and off-white zigzags are pure, coursing energy and seem to oscillate and pulsate. This is one of several celestial-themed pieces in the show.

Geometric abstraction in these works intersects with different styles of South American and Modernist abstraction. I'm struck, though, by Alarcón's assessment: "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 [...]." A profound connection with the environment that the Wichís have inhabited for millennia is palpable in these ambitious, deeply moving textiles. The whole exhibition asserts the importance of Wichí aesthetics, cosmology, and society at this very precarious time.



Installation view of *Claudia Alarcón & Silät* at James Cohan Gallery (photo Izzy Leung)

Claudia Alarcón & Silät *continues at James Cohan Gallery (52 Walker Street, Tribeca, Manhattan) through May 10. The exhibition was curated by Andrei Fernández.*

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

SHARE

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.

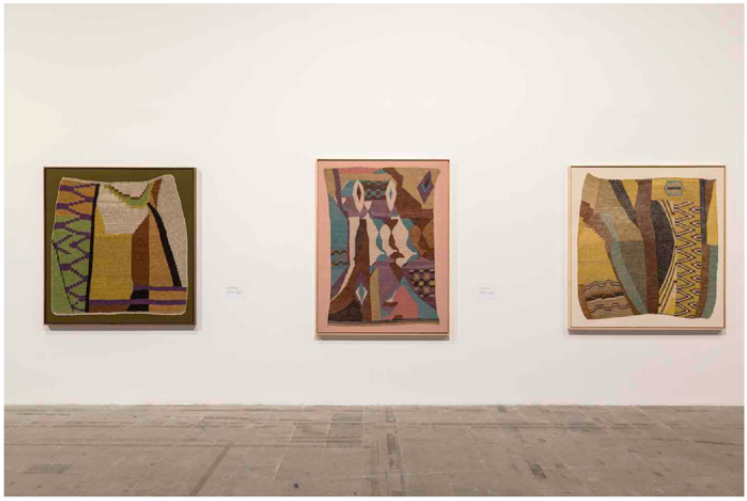
Brilliantly, "Italians Everywhere" has been installed using the beautifully inventive display system created by the Italian Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi in 1968 for the São Paulo Art Museum: plate-glass "easels" supported by big blocks of concrete, which make the paintings appear to float in the 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 montaged. 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 Silät, 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 (Congolese 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 camo gear. 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*.

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 Silät 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.

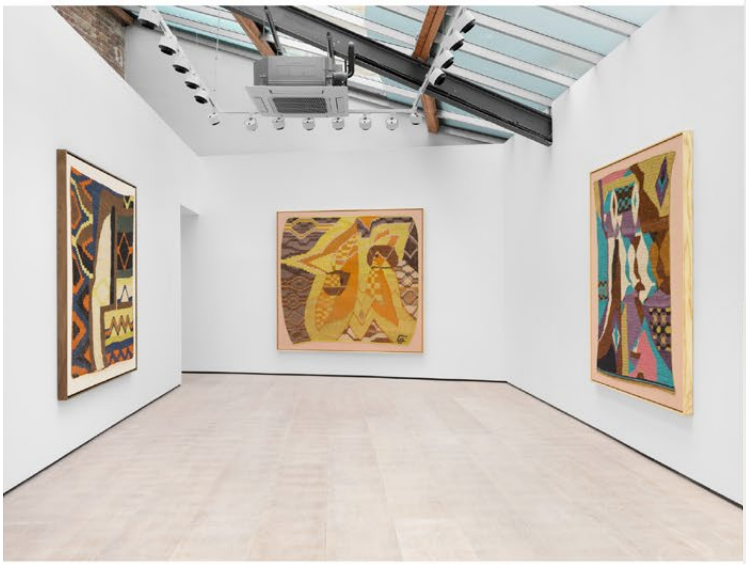
We are proud to take our work, made here with the materials of our native forest, to another place so far away and so important. It excites me to know that we are not alone, that in this exhibition there are so many connections. There are other people and indigenous groups who perhaps have the same problems 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 to 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 a small piece, one woman alone can weave it on the back of a chair. The largest piece made by the Silät 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, 'Chelhchup [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, 'Fwuyetil [El Invierno / Winter]', woven by Marta Pacheco, 2023. Courtesy of the artists and Cecilia Brunson Projects. Photography by Eva Herzog (6) Claudia Alarcón & Silät, 'Inewop [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
Comment

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

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 Silät 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 Ṣàngódáre Gbádégẹṣin 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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THE ANTI-AESTHETIC AT 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.

Flash Art

• 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 Silät 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, indigenity 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.Indigenousness 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 (Movementos 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 Victor 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].

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Claudia Alarcón & Silät. 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 Isídrez 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 Alercón and Silät 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.

Clarín, February 2024

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 consagratorio.

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 **60° 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 caraguatá, de donde se obtienen las fibras.

Junto con ella, también participará Silät, 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 Victoria Este, en Salta.

"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 Lionti y Celina Eceiza. Moderan: Guillermina Baiguera y Verónica Rossi