

Claudia Alarcón and
Silät

Artist Biography

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

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

The Silät collective emerged from the 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 since 2015, Silät explore the possibilities of artmaking within and beyond these traditions. The collective have evolved established techniques into new forms, producing large-scale images that exploit the textural intricacies and earthy colours of chaguar yarn and natural dyes. In coordinating the production of the Silät collective, and leading experimentations in material and subject matter within their practice, Alarcón supports creativity, independence and self-sustaining practices, and provides a means for women across generations to transmit a contemporary indigenous culture into the webs of international art dialogues, beyond ethnographic readings.

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. In 2024, Claudia Alarcón and Silät will participate in the 60th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, curated by Adriano Pedrosa. Works by Alarcón and Silät are represented in the MALBA Collection in Buenos Aires, Argentina, the Denver Art Museum, Colorado and the Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minnesota.

Selected exhibitions (Claudia Alarcón, Silät & the Thaí/Viene del monte project)

- 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
- 2022 *Las oportunidades*, Centro Cultural Recoleta, Buenos Aires, Argentina
- 2021 *Cardinales, camino a la ternura*, Museo Nacional Terry, Tilcara, Argentina
- 2021 *El momento del Yagrumo*, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, San Juan, Puerto Rico
- 2019 *Thaí*, Usina Cultural de Salta, Salta, Argentina

Selected group exhibitions

- 2024 *Stranieri Ovunque*, 60th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy
- 2024 *Hecho a Mano*, Cecilia Brunson Projects, London, UK
- 2023 *Una Historia que Cura*, Salta Museum of Anthropology, Salta, Argentina
- 2022 *Die Farben des Waldes / Colours of the Woods / Los Colores del Monte*, Olaf Holzapfel in collaboration with Andrea Fernández and Grupo Thaí, Goethe-Institut Munich. Exhibited at Sabine Knust, Munich, Germany
- 2021 *III BIENALSUR*, Universidad Nacional Tres de Febrero, Buenos Aires, Argentina
- 2021 *La escucha y los vientos. Relatos e inscripciones del Gran Chaco (Listening and the wind. Stories and inscriptions from the Gran Chaco)*, Museo de Bellas Artes de Salta, Argentina; Fundación Migliorisi, Asunción, Paraguay
- 2020 *La escucha y los vientos. Relatos e inscripciones del Gran Chaco (Listening and the wind. Stories and inscriptions from the Gran Chaco)*, ifa-Galerie, Berlin, Germany

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

- Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (MALBA), Buenos Aires, Argentina
- Denver Art Museum, Colorado, United States
- Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minnesota, United States
- Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Salta, Argentina

Selected Works



Claudia Alarcón

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

Signed bottom right

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

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

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

Exhibition History:

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



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

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

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



Claudia Alarcón

Kates tsin hay [*Mujeres estrellas / Star women*], 2023

Signed bottom right

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

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

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



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

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

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



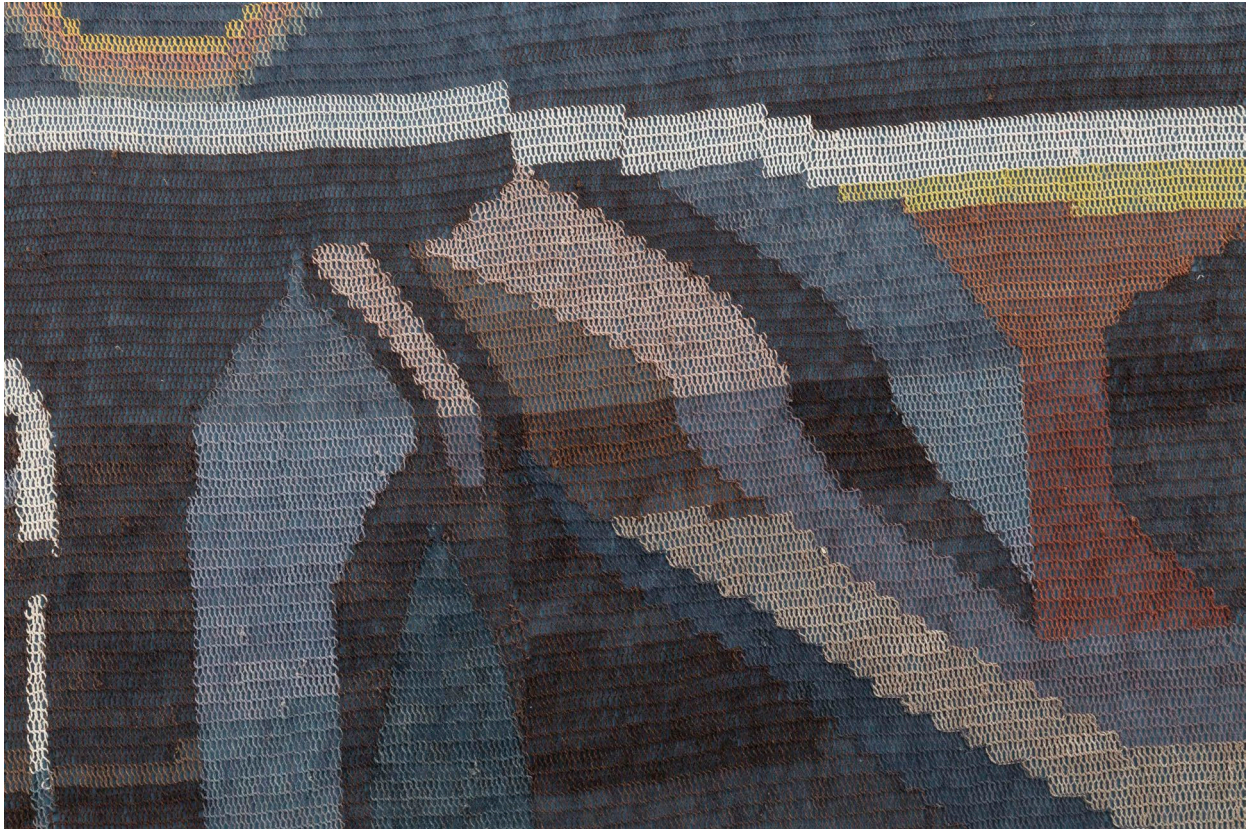
Claudia Alarcón & Silät (woven by Claudia Alarcón, Rosilda Lopez, Mariela Perez, Fermina Perez, Francisca Perez, Ana Lopez, Graciela Lopez, Margarita Lopez. Comunidad La Puntana, Santa Victoria Este, Salta)

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

Signed bottom left

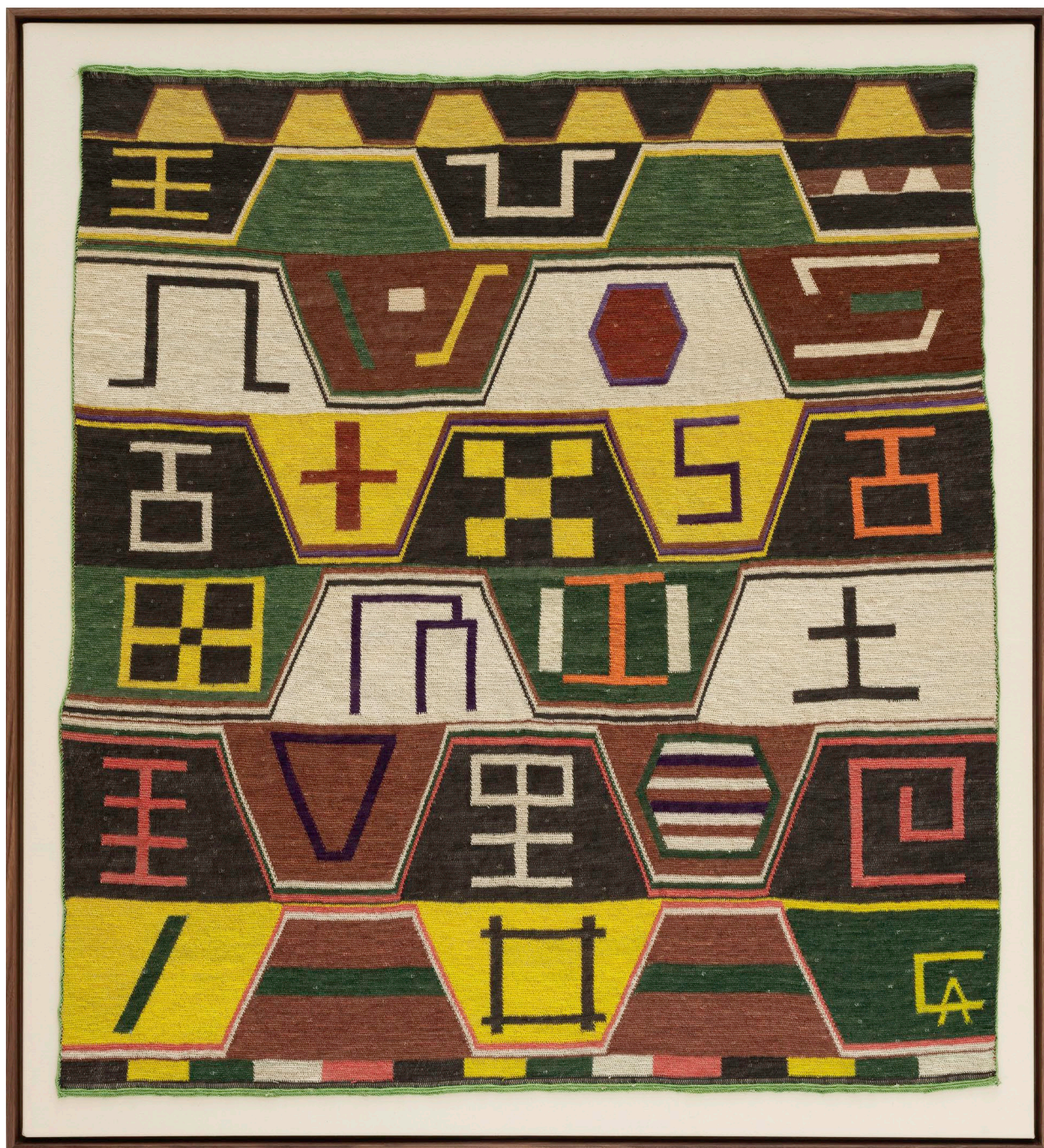
Hand-spun chaguar fibre. Natural dyes from the native forest. Woven fabric, "yica" stitch.

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



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

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



Claudia Alarcón

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

Signed bottom right

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

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

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

Exhibition History:

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



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



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

Inawop [La primavera / Spring], 2023

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

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

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



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

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



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

Yachup [El verano / Summer], 2023

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

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

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



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

Chelhchup [El otoño / Autumn], 2023

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

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

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



Claudia Alarcón

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

Signed bottom right

Crocheted acrylic wool

156 x 127 cm

61 3/8 x 50 in

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

Installation Views



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



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



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



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



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

Silät Archival Images



Gathering chaguar
Image courtesy of curator Andrei Fernández



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





Image courtesy of curator Andrei Fernández



Image courtesy of curator Andrei Fernández



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



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Images courtesy of curator Andrei Fernández and Delfina Foundation



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