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In Conversation with Claudia Alarcón

Words by



Alena Dower

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

We were overjoyed by the incredible possibility that my artworks and those by the 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.

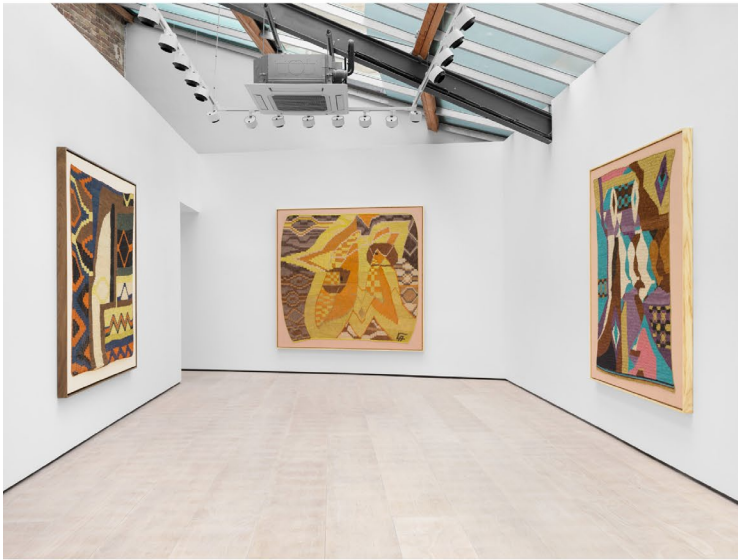
These irregular or organic forms almost appear stretched out. One might assume weaving to take on a straight edge, or to be a solitary or sedentary activity, but the work seems freed from these notions. This makes me want to inquire about your looms specifically and how they inform the process?

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 do not cut your hands. The women usually use a machete and make a kind of spear from a tree branch. After peeling the leaves to get the fibres, you have to beat them to loosen them before they can be spun against our bodies. The fibres are spun on the surface of your thigh, with hands covered in ashes; the ashes of different woods vary the colour and texture of the thread. The threads are dyed with roots, bark, leaves or seeds – the colours of the forest – as well as with aniline dyes to achieve brighter colours such as fuchsia.

One thread is held in tension between two supports, such as rods or sticks planted in the ground. There, we begin to weave in the space in between, using a needle or a thorn. Larger pieces are woven between two or three women, or if it is a small piece, one woman alone can weave it on the back of a chair. The largest piece made by the 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 & Silat / 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.

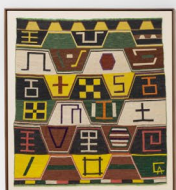
The work ties into a wider history of geometric abstraction in Latin America. Is there a certain essence of the Wichí visual culture you are trying to reveal or maintain? Could you describe this?

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.



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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!

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



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