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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.

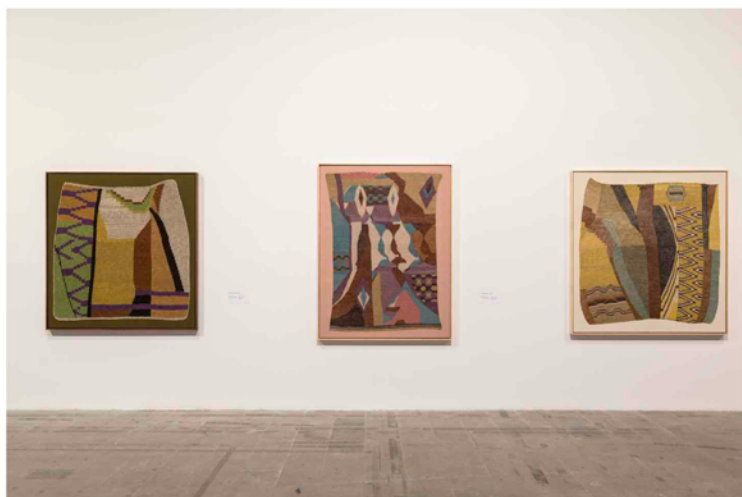
Brilliantly, "Italians Everywhere" has been installed using the beautifully inventive display system created by the Italian Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi in 1968 for the São Paulo Art Museum: plate-glass "easels" supported by big blocks of concrete, which make the paintings appear to float in the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

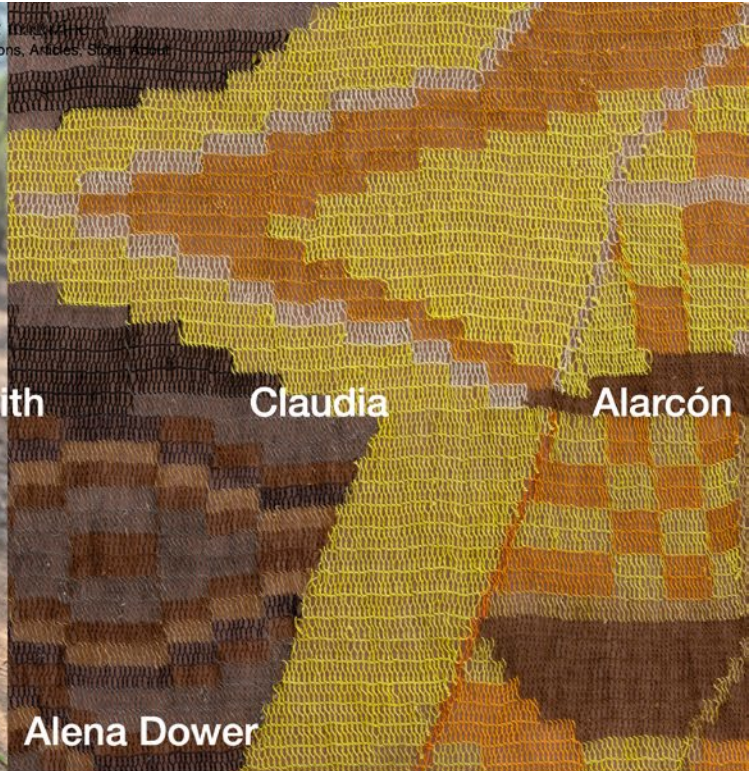
Barry Schwabsky is the art critic of *The Nation*.



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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.

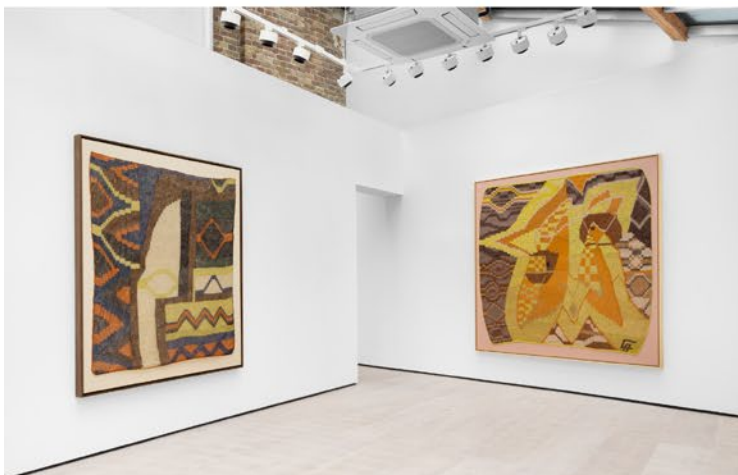
We are proud to take our work, made here with the materials of our native forest, to another place so far away and so important. It excites me to know that we are not alone, that in this exhibition there are so many connections. There are other people and indigenous groups who perhaps have the same problems as us even though they live in territories very different from ours.

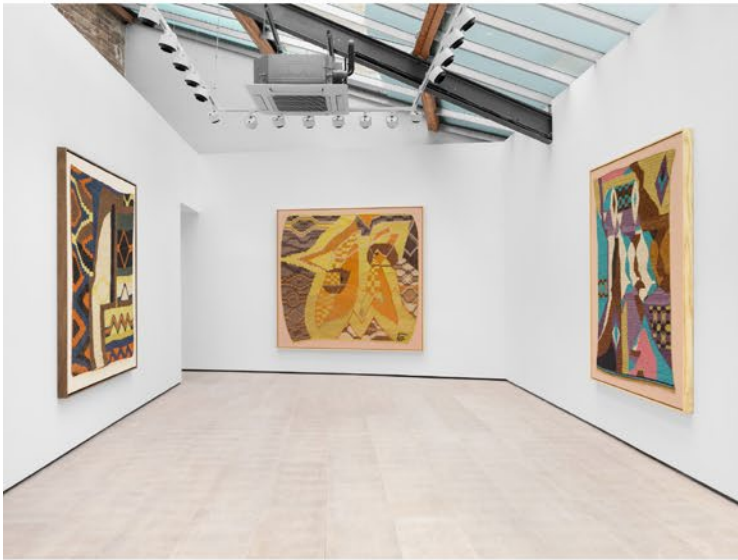
These irregular or organic forms almost appear stretched out. One might assume weaving to take on a straight edge, or to be a solitary or sedentary activity, but the work seems freed from these notions. This makes me want to inquire about your looms specifically and how they inform the process?

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 | Nitsäyphá: Wichi 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?

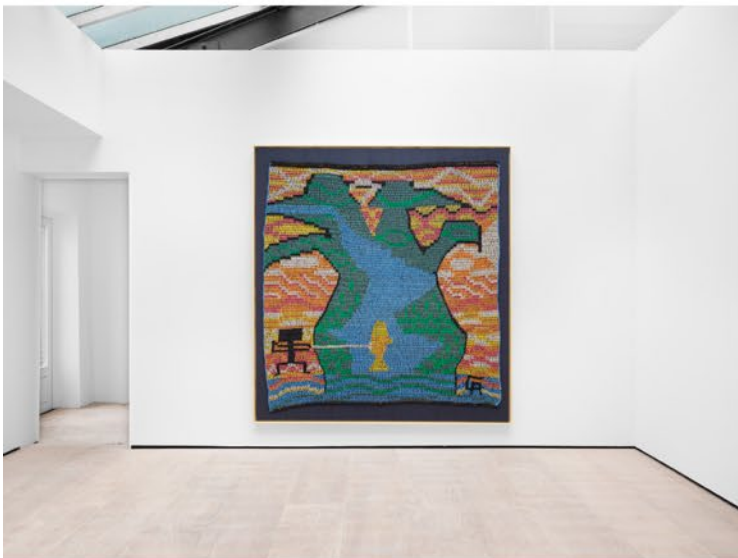
We always weave. In particular, we weave bags, which we call *hilu* in our native language, and when we speak in Spanish we call *yicas*. We weave into the *yicas* the shapes that our mothers and grandmothers taught us. There is great beauty there and we know we cannot lose these traditions. In the past, 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 Wichi 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 & Silat | Nitsäyphá: Wichi 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!

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 [Ei 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 [Ei 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 [Ei 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



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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

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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, Wilfredo 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 Silāt 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."

•REVIEWS

July 11, 2024, 3:19 pm CET

“ Foreigners Everywhere – Foreigners Everywhere ” 60th Venice Biennale of [Anna Castelli](#)



Fiber fabrics of chaguar fabrics with an antique point by the women of the Silát 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 ”¹through 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, indigeneity 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 (Movimentos 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.



① 2 3

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 Isidrez 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 Alarcón 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>.



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.

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“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 Šàngódàre Gbádégesin Àjàlà, 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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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.

REVIEWS

Does this year's Venice Biennale live up to the hype?

Hettie Judah

22 APRIL 2024



Installation view of *Foreigners Everywhere* (2004-) by Claire Fontaine and *Refugee Astronaut VIII* (2024) by Yinka Shonibare at the 2024 Venice Biennale. Photo: Mauro Zorzanello; courtesy La Biennale di Venezia

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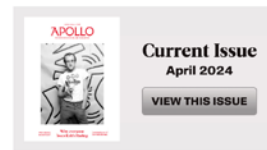
EMAIL

Language is slippery, and for an exhibition of visual art, the 60th Venice Biennale is unusually preoccupied with the stuff. Helmed this year by the Brazilian curator Adriano Pedrosa, the central exhibition borrows its title from a neon text work by Claire Fontaine: *Foreigners Everywhere* (2004-). Of British origin and currently based in Palermo, Claire Fontaine is not a person but a collective named after a brand of stationery. The phrase 'Foreigners Everywhere' was in turn borrowed from Stranieri Ovunque, a Torinese anarchist group. Their translation betrays a choice: 'strangers everywhere' is arguably closer to the Italian, but 'foreigners everywhere' places its weight on national identity, with the potential to be used both as a complaint and a rallying cry. The work itself teases at the slippage of meaning that occurs in translation, with the coloured neon of the installation displaying incarnations of the phrase in a growing number of languages.

That this apparently simple work and the artists behind it invite so much contextualisation is emblematic of the Biennale's central exhibition as a whole. Nothing is here as art qua art - everything is performing for an agenda. No artist is permitted release from the particulars of their identity, for it is here that Pedrosa's interest lies: in the deracinated, the estranged, the colonised, the marginalised and the excluded. The work of Indigenous and folk artists is brought to the fore. Historically belittled media such as textiles dominate. Artists of the Global South are prioritised. The lives of those imperilled or outlawed for their sexual or gender identity are celebrated.

At times the results are transporting. The Arsenale is topped and tailed by two thrillingly atmospheric installations. Woven on site by the Maori collective Mataaho, the spectacular canopy *Takapau* (2022) occupies the entire opening gallery. The structure, which is constructed from nylon cam straps, is precise and geometric. Shrouding the room in dramatic gridded shadows, it recasts the entrance as a space of spiritual transition, inviting visitors from one realm into another.

In a tumbledown outhouse in a garden beyond the last great warehouse of the Arsenale, Anna Maria Maiolino's *Ao Finito* ('To Infinity', 1994/2024) consoles us as we depart this realm with the suggestion that dead matter is no such thing. Maiolino has dressed a great central table and high shelves with repeating clay forms - long snaking cords, pods pocked with fingermarks, cubes, loops, spirals and granules. Unfired, all will eventually meld back into the living earth. The back wall is green with fronds of cedar. It feels crypt-like: a serene place of death. The Italian-born, Brazil-based artist's voice whispers to us in sounds without language, offering a wordless incantation to send us on our way.



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Both Mataaho Collective and Maiolino were recipients of this year's Golden Lion awards – Mataaho as Best Participant, and Maiolino as one of two artists honoured for Lifetime Achievement.



Installation view of *Ao Finito* ('To Infinity', 1994/2004) by Anna Maria Maiolino at the 2024 Venice Biennale. Photo: Marco Zorzanello; courtesy La Biennale di Venezia

There is delight to be had in new discoveries. The dynamic large-scale paintings of father and son Santiago and Rember Yahuarcani draw on the mythology of the Uitoto Nation of Peru. Each has his own distinct style. Santiago's tableaux of trial and torment are painted in natural pigments and acrylic on *llanchama* (barkcloth parchment). In delicately rendered acrylics, Rember creates a glowing night-time world of hybrid entities, in rainforest landscapes populated by ancestral spirits.

Dressed in the bridal finery of Sudan, his mother country, for the video *Talitin* ('The Third', 2023–24), Ahmed Umar performs sinuous wedding dances – coy, flirtatious, at times lavishly suggestive. Coruscating with heavy jewellery, swathed in beaded leather and crimson silk, Umar ornaments himself in a costume he associates with the womanly realm to which he was forbidden access once he reached puberty.

The weavings created by Claudia Alarcón and the collective Silat from the Wichí people of Argentina are painterly in their graphic verve and lush natural colouration. Yet these are extraordinary delicate things, loose and web-like, created with immaculate precision. In an exhibition rich in outstanding fibre art they feel extraordinarily fresh. As so often in this show, I am aware that I do not possess the language or insight to do justice to the work of Umar, Silat or the Yahuarcanis. This, too, is part of Pedrosa's mission – pointing not only to the limits of western European art knowledge, but to the limits of our very ability to understand and interpret.

The choice to prioritise specific histories and the broader curatorial concept does not always serve the exhibition well. Seeded between the Giardini and the Arsenale are three historic displays. The first two make the case for plural modernisms expanding through the Global South with mixed (in all senses) displays of portraiture and abstract painting. As a curatorial concern this already feels well established, threading through exhibitions including 'The World Goes Pop' at Tate Modern in 2015, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 'Surrealism Beyond Borders' in 2021 and the Whitechapel Gallery's 'Action, Gesture, Paint' in 2023.



Installation view of works from 2023 by Claudia Alarcón and Silat at the 2024 Venice Biennale. Photo: Mauro Zorzanello; courtesy La Biennale di Venezia

The third historic section, 'Italians Everywhere', recreates the bold scheme created by Lina Bo Bardi in her Brutalist design for the São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP, of which Pedrosa is artistic director). In Bo Bardi's original design for MASP (recently restored by Pedrosa), paintings are irreverently suspended on sheets of glass moored by concrete blocks. All interpretative text is placed at the back of the work, allowing for an unmediated encounter.

Used as a concept here this is disingenuous, since to make sense of this display interpretative text is necessary. All 40 artists – like Bo Bardi herself – were born in Italy but migrated elsewhere. It is of course a politically laden gesture (Italy's current hard-right government is progressively tightening laws around migration to the country) but it is not an entirely successful piece of exhibition-making. The visual clamour and high ceilings of the Arsenale make the glass easels look scrappy, which in turn does the paintings no favours. (The blow is felt, since many need all the favours they can get.)

Much has been made of Pedrosa's inclusion of historic works, his display of artist families, and the pairings of hot young painters such as Giulia Andreani and Louis Fratino in response to artists of previous generations (Madge Gill and Filippo de Pisis respectively). I felt one of his most radical gestures to have been elsewhere. Bouchra Khalili's outstanding multi-screen video *The Mapping Journey Project* (2008–11) is the spiritual core of 'Foreigners Everywhere'. The premise is simple: each screen is positioned over a map across which a migrant traces their route into Europe with a black marker pen, while delivering a narration of the frustration, labour and hazard involved at each stage. It is both moving and mesmerising.



Installation view of *The Mapping Journey Project* (2008–11) by Bouchra Khalili at the 2024 Venice Biennale. Photo: Marco Zorzanello; courtesy La Biennale di Venezia

What strikes me as radical about the inclusion of *The Mapping Journey Project* is not its quality, but the date of its production. It is by now such common practice for biennials to be dominated by newly commissioned works that it seems never to bear mention. Yet artists are often paid little or no fee for participating in these prestigious exhibitions. It often falls to a commercial gallery to step in and pay for the production of work which they, in turn, will hope to sell to recoup their costs. Even then, it places huge financial stress on the artist. This has an impact on which artists are able to participate in biennials, and the kind of art that gets made for these events. It is also wasteful and unnecessary – there is much existing art that deserves a larger audience. Pedrosa should be congratulated for resisting this unsustainable practice. I hope he sets a precedent.

The 60th edition of the Venice Biennale runs until 24 November.

60th Venice Biennale, “Foreigners Everywhere”

Ben Eastham



View of 60th Venice Biennale, “Foreigners Everywhere,” 2024. Works by Claudia Alarcón & Silät. Courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia. Photo by Marco Zorzanello.



April 19, 2024

60th Venice Biennale, Venice

April 20–November 24, 2024

The title “Foreigners Everywhere,” derived from the neon text works by Claire Fontaine that hang over the entrances to both sites of the international exhibition at the Venice Biennale, holds out the promise of a productive confusion. In the Italian expression visible on the reverse of the English, *stranieri ovunque*, the phrase carries a more overt implication of strangeness with the same edge of hostility, so that the visitor might brace themselves for a series of encounters that are—like the experience of foreignness itself—bewildering, unsettling, and fundamentally unsafe.¹

But there is no need to do so. Because while the adoption of a bilingual sign as motto for the Biennale’s centerpiece exhibition suggests that its curator, Adriano Pedrosa, will embrace the miscomprehensions that are commensurate with translation, the reality is that everything will be explained to you. No space will be left for misunderstanding or its correlate, interpretation. The frustration of this exhibition is not that of the exile who, in a strange land, is unable to make sense of their surroundings but rather that of the tourist who is prevented from straying beyond the Potemkin village in which everything has been arranged to illustrate a point.

This is not to say that there are no good works in the exhibition. There are many, and Pedrosa should first be credited for bringing so many artists onto the stage whose names might be unfamiliar to visitors and for the genuine pluralism of his selection. There are early hints of a more expansive version of the idea of “foreignness” than the experience of being outside one’s homeland, and a group of paintings by Emmi Whitehorse at the opening of the Arsenale introduce what promises to be a rewarding theme. These ostensibly abstract compositions are pictorial representations of the artist’s native landscape in the US Southwest, incorporating the inconsistent flow of time and resembling a musical score more than a photographic image.

In a similar vein is Dana Awartani's restorative installation of red and orange hanging silks, each "medicinally dyed" according to Ayurvedic methods (*Come, let me heal your wounds. Let me mend your broken bones*, 2024). For all the soothing effects of the light strained through these screens, closer inspection reveals that each strip is scarred with the patches of rough stitching made to repair rents representing sites in the Arab world destroyed by conflict. These works do not challenge the boundaries between figuration and abstraction—or indeed linear time and three-dimensional space—so much as disregard them as the artificial constructs upon which an entirely different way of seeing depends. Here is "foreignness" as not just physical displacement but as the alternative constitution of perceptual frameworks.

The problem is that the show is itself unwilling to make a comparable jump. It is hamstrung in this respect by a determination to draw attention to the categories it claims to be dismantling, a paradox most apparent in its conventional museological arrangements and neatly encapsulated by the inclusion on every wall text of the artist's birthplace and residence.² The constant reminder that these works are products of cultures foreign to the imagined viewer—and I could not escape the sense that there *was* an imagined viewer—makes it very difficult to move beyond the structures of identity and attribution that one might expect the exhibition to disrupt. Beneath this lurks a latent presumption about what is foreign to whom—or what is canonical and what is extraneous to it—that is revealed by the exhibition's excessive protestations. Take the description of Santiago Yahuarcani's paintings as "neither derivative nor dependent on Western art history." This only begs the question, who said that they were?

The most memorable work in the show is that which succeeds in slipping these binds. Bouchra Khalili's multiscreen installation of maps on which hands trace the lines of their owner's migration (*The Mapping Journey Project*, 2008–11) is affecting precisely because each subject tells their own story. A series of textiles by Claudia Alarcón with the collective Silät are among a number of abstractions to remind visitors that creative practice is not only a means of carrying forward a community's specific cultural heritage but also a mechanism for the generation of aesthetic experiences that can travel beyond the circumstances of their production (a canvas by Etel Adnan supports the point). Evelyn Taocheng Wang's homages to Agnes Martin (notably *Colored Cotton Candies and Imitation of Agnes Martin*, 2023) are possessed of a lightness that makes them pleasingly difficult to pin down. It is to their credit that, while it would be easy to write about these paintings in the buzzy terms of authenticity, contested authorship, or hybridity, it would be insufficient to communicate their effects.

Here is a glimpse of "foreign" as signifying something closer to "uncategorizable" than "other," and I found myself wishing that the curators had resisted the urge to compartmentalize that sees works arranged into groups united by some formal or biographical affiliation. This legislates against the production of those unpredictable effects that come from placing works into unexpected or counterintuitive relations, and feels symptomatic of a desire to keep a leash on the show's meaning. Indeed, for all that the stated intention of the exhibition is to destabilize the idea of both "foreignness" and its flipside of "familiarity," it rarely succeeded in disordering my experience of the world to the point that I felt myself to be a stranger within it. The arrangement of the exhibition places the visitor squarely at the center of a global culture, representatives of which are convened for their appreciation. The otherness of these works is so insistently foregrounded as to constrain their potential to estrange me—the viewer—from myself.

The clearest expression of the decentering potential of art remains Arthur Rimbaud's "I is another," and it might be because poetry is so well adapted to using a shared medium to express feelings exceeding its conventions that I found myself drawn to works operating at the points at which language breaks down. Onto the hunks of marble, granite, and quartzite that comprise her sculpture series "Scrittura" [Scriptures] (2020–23), Greta Schödl has handwritten the words that signify the rocks in Italian—respectively *marmo*, *granito*, and *quartzite*—in repeating lines that fill the flat surface with characters, burnishing the holes at the center of the initial "q" or conclusive "o" with gold leaf to create a visual rhythm. This doesn't read like an Adamic act of naming so much as a recognition of the insufficiency of the word and the concept it circumscribes to fully account for reality. The failure of language here breaks open the world, insisting that the viewer attend to the living strangeness of even the most inert material. It's a little like the experience of repeating a word so many times that it not only loses its conventional meaning but becomes music.

This emptying out of language into music also animates Gabrielle Goliath's exceptional multi-screen video installation *Personal Accounts* (2024), in which the survivors of patriarchal violence relate their experience to camera against a monochrome blue background. Yet their words are withheld and their stories pared down to the moments at which their throats catch or they are forced to take a deep breath, producing a hubbub of inarticulate sounds overlaid by a single melody sung a cappella. It is an extraordinarily moving assertion of the liberatory potential inherent in the creative failure of our conventional forms of articulation, and for the value of artistic expression more generally.

That legibility is not consistent with significance is driven home by Romany Eveleigh's mesmerizing paintings. Consisting of repeated O's scratched into white paint, they call to mind a passage in Anne Boyer's *Garments Against Women* (2019) reflecting on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's justification for the intellectual inferiority of women. Observing a little girl who would "write nothing but O's; she was always making O's, large and small," and who gave up writing once she saw herself in the mirror, Rousseau concludes that linguistic facility was secondary in women to the desire to be beautiful.³ Eveleigh's paintings might be taken as support for Boyer's counterargument that these O's constituted the girl's secret language and infinitely expanded literature, "each O also an opening, a planet, a ring, a word, a query, a grammar. One O could be an eye, another a mouth, another a bruise, another a calculation."

The girl stopped writing when she looked in the mirror not because she admired herself but because her O's were written backwards. She was reading what she had written, the hidden meaning of which must always elude Rousseau, might have been designed to defeat his reason. Eveleigh's paintings also evade control and categorization, might need a mirror or a codebook, carry meanings that cannot be corralled into conveniently representative categories, might like the girl's writing be translated as "I understand the proximate shape of the fountain" or "Apples are smaller than the sun." These are what Boyer calls "revolutionary letters in the code of Os," and in this unbound language can be found a radical freedom that the intellectual architecture of this exhibition too often closes down.

This is the first in a series of responses to the 60th Venice Biennale by e-flux Criticism. Reviews of selected national pavilions, as well as appraisals of its overarching themes, will be published over the coming days and weeks.

Notes

- 1 The iterations of Claire Fontaine's ongoing series exhibited at the Biennale pointedly replace the masculine "i" of *stranieri*, or foreigners, with a backwards "e."
- 2 The exhibition literature also takes great pains to remind viewers how many of the artists in the exhibition have not shown as part of the Biennale before. In itself this fact is laudable, but its inclusion at the bottom of each relevant artist's wall text only serves uncomfortably to suggest that novelty was among the criteria for selection.
- 3 Quotes taken from Anne Boyer, *Garments Against Women* (London: Penguin, 2019), 98–100.

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Katy Hessel's guide to the 2024 Venice Biennale

The author and art historian picks out her favourite things to see and do at the famous exhibition

BY KATY HESSEL PUBLISHED: 22 APRIL 2024

The Venice Biennale is the art world Olympics. It has taken place every other year since 1895, and sees nations compete for the top Golden Lion Prize with artists 'representing' their countries through pavilion-based art installations and exhibitions. Mostly spread out over two sites (the Giardini and Arsenale), there's also a central international exhibition curated by an individual. This year, it's Adriano Pedrosa with *Foreigners Everywhere*.

A phrase derived from the political activist collective, Claire Fontaine – who fight racism and xenophobia – *Foreigners Everywhere* raises questions such as, what constitutes a foreigner? Are we foreigners in our own country; when we travel abroad (pertinent for the tourist city of Venice); or to our governing establishments? This is made all the more poignant as Pedrosa is the first curator (in 60 Venice Biennales) based in the Global South. Unlike previous years, he's brought together lesser-known names of all backgrounds, from Indigenous collectives to self-taught artists guided by spiritual visions.

At the Giardini – the façade of which is coated in a luminous and joyous mural by MAHKU – my favourites include a spectacular and vast drawing by Madge Gill (1882–1961), featuring flurries of female figures. I also loved seeing the dizzyingly passionate drawings by the Swiss artist Aloïse Corbaz (1886–1964) of herself and a lover enrobed in royal dress. Corbaz, who dreamt of being an opera singer, was diagnosed with schizophrenia and spent much of her life on a psychiatric ward. She was encouraged to turn to art by doctors.

There is a beautiful room of abstract paintings featuring Lebanese-born artists, Huguette Caland and Etel Adnan, alongside some new names for me: Nena Saguil and Ione Saldanha (whose colourful, bamboo-like structures punctuate the room), and hanging textiles by Monika Correa and Olga de Amaral.

While you're in the Giardini, don't miss the national pavilions. My top pick is Kapwani Kiwanga for Canada. Her sublime installation features over 7 million glass beads from Murano – an island off Venice – of all different colours, strung together to tell a multitude of stories, from trade (as the beads were used as currency for gold) to the history of Venice, globalisation to the power of communal making. It showed me how a tiny single object, like a bead, can tell a macro story on a micro level.

Let's head to the Arsenale. Highlights here include vibrant textiles by Claudia Alarcón, from the Wichí La Puntana community in Salta, Argentina, and other members from the Silât community; wondrous and meticulously woven drawings of plant forms by Anna Zemánková; ceramic animals by Julia Isídrez; and dyed cloth-based collages by Nour Jaouda that tell poignant stories of war. I found Jaouda's title *Silent Dust* particularly moving.



GABRIEL BOUYS // GETTY IMAGES

'Bambus' by Brazilian artist Ione Saldanha in the central pavilion

But I was most impressed by the multi-layered – in every sense of the word – installation inspired by Lina Bo Bardi. The great Italian-born architect spent most of her life designing the Brutalist buildings of São Paulo, including the city's modern art museum (MASP), where she configured a new way of hanging pictures: in rows with each work set against its own glass panel, so the backs of works are visible. Pedrosa has recreated this, but has featured exclusively Italian artists who fled elsewhere, such as Tina Modotti and Anna Maria Maiolino.

The Biennale doesn't end there. Off-site, there is an exhibition at Palazzo Grassi by the Ethiopian-born, American painting maestro, Julie Mehretu, whose masterpieces feature heavily-layered, map-like forms. Up-close, you'll see pockets of motifs, symbols, and lines, but stand back and it's as though they disintegrate like dust. Sarah Sze at Victoria Miro Venice is a must with her complex video installation that explores how we consume images today. As is Shahzia Sikander at the Gothic Palazzo Sorano Van Axel; her spiritual sculptures and works play on traditional styles from Pakistan.

A favourite aspect of Venice is that artists also exhibit in splendid churches. Don't miss Berlinde De Bruyckere in the 16th century Abbazia di San Giorgio Maggiore, where her monumental 'Arcangeli' wax sculptures tower above the beautifully historic architecture. The Asian Art Initiative of the Guggenheim Museum has presented an exhibition of Chinese artist, Yu Hong, in the Chiesa della Misericordia, featuring a cycle of Baroque-inspired, gold-based paintings depicting birth, life, and death.

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

BY Maximiliano Durón, Alex Greenberger April 19, 2024 10:31am



Isaac Chong Wai's performance of 'Falling Reversely'.
PHOTO BY ANDREA AVEZZÙ. COURTESY: LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA.

As the professional preview days for the **2024 Venice Biennale** draw to a close, the *ARTnews* team has been taking it all in, from the main exhibition, titled "Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere" and organized by curator Adriano Pedrosa; to the national pavilions, numbering to almost 90 this year; to the dozens of officially sanctioned collateral events and the smattering of unofficial shows all being staged in La Serenissima.

With this in mind, *ARTnews* senior editors Maximiliano Durón and Alex Greenberger started a Google Doc to begin a candid conversation on their initial thoughts about this Biennale. Their thoughts follow below.

Related Articles



Indigenous Artists Take Venice Biennale's Top Prizes as Mataaho Collective, Archie Moore Win Big

In the Venice Biennale's Historical Sections, Overlooked 20th-Century Figures Come into Focus

Alex Greenberger: Many of the artists who've done works for the main show and the national pavilions at this Biennale sound a similar note: can't live with art institutions, can't live without them.

Glicéria Tupinambá, as part of her Hähāwpuá Pavilion (née Brazil Pavilion), is showing her correspondence with several museums in which she seeks the return of cultural objects related to her people that are held abroad. One partly redacted email, purportedly with Brussels's Musée royal d'Art et d'Histoire, seems to have befuddled its recipient, who sassily snipes back, "Reading the project and the letter, it was quite unclear what do you expect." But Glicéria, undaunted, has continued on with her project, contacting other museums with the aim of seeking justice.

Her pavilion, which features fishing nets and more from the communities of Serra do Padeiro, suggests that there is a place for members of her community in Western art spaces. It just doesn't always look like

a traditional white cube. Spain's representative, the Peruvian-born Sandra Gamarra, expresses a related sentiment with a pavilion that's billed as a "Migrant Art Gallery," featuring the words of Indigenous activists. And in the main show, the Puerto Rico-born, Connecticut-based Pablo Delano is showing *The Museum of the Old Colony* (2024), an installation predominantly composed of others' photographs attesting to America's exploitation of the island.

The decolonial subject matter broached by all these projects typically lends itself toward bitterness and anger, and rightly so, yet all these works are quite hopeful. Admittedly, I'm dubious anyone can decolonize museums without undoing them entirely, but I'm struck by the artists' optimism about imagining other possibilities for institutions and, by extension, biennials. So, my question to you is: How successful do you think this is as a decolonial biennial? Have the artists in it persuasively proposed alternative forms for institutions?

Maximiliano Durón: I think it's important to broaden that a little. What even is a museum? And what are the histories of those institutions? As many in Venice this week know, museums are part of Western colonial projects. It's a tradition that goes all the way back to the *wunderkammern*, or cabinets of curiosities, amassed by European aristocracy beginning in the 16th century. A *wunderkammer* boasted how much its owner had traveled beyond his homeland—and how much he had plundered. Museums in many ways grew out of that. And I'll add to this lineage the world fairs and international expos that displayed the day's latest technologies and architectural innovations, while also putting humans, often African and Indigenous people, on display.

This is all to say that encyclopedic museums, for all that they have purported to show off the diversity of world cultures, do not show off diversity as we understand it today. Typically, they have had the effect of othering people from the Global South.

The other, the foreigner, the stranger (l'étranger, el extranjero): those are the words that recur at this Biennale's main exhibition, titled "Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere," which takes its name from an ongoing series by artist duo Claire Fontaine, in which those words are translated into the local languages of the places where the work is displayed as neon sculptures. Here, more than 50 of them hang over the shipyards at the Arsenale. The main exhibition is in many ways a deviation from that history, but I don't think it's necessarily aiming to decolonize the Biennale, which is itself rooted in histories of colonialism and nationalism. Showcasing the work of dozens of Indigenous artists and artists from the Global South itself is not necessarily a decolonial practice—the Biennale isn't divesting itself from the current biennial model, even if some of the artists seek to do so. Rather, I think it's an effort to expand the canon and the purview of all who attend. That in itself is a cause that shouldn't be taken for granted or dismissed.

But I want to go back to Delano's *The Museum of the Old Colony*. I think that work really stands apart from the rest. Adriano Pedrosa, the main exhibition's curator, has said in multiple interviews that he sees his Biennale as a provocation. I'll take it a step further. It's a condemnation of much of our current situation. How can you not read the Delano installation as a denunciation of the US and its exploitation of Puerto Rico, often called the world's oldest colony? It's a work that requires you to spend time with it, to see how all that has been collected here speaks to what the US has used to its benefit.

I think that's especially potent right now as discussions around self-determination and settler colonialism are being applied to Israel and Palestine. It's worth noting that Puerto Rico has held six referendums on whether or not its populace would like to see the island become the US's 51st state or a fully independent nation. All of these have been non-binding votes, as the ultimate decision on Puerto Rico's future is held by Congress.

AG: It's interesting Pedrosa views his main show as a provocation, because to me, it didn't seem so shocking. Much of what's in it is really elegant and quite beautiful—the art doesn't seem designed to trigger. I'm thinking in particular of the historical sections, the thematic parts of the show that assemble older works, many of them by dead artists from the Global South who have yet to be canonized in the West.

Take the portraiture galleries in the Central Pavilion. Here, you can find Lim Mu Hwee's incredible *Self-Expression* (1957–63), featuring the Singaporean painter wearing half a pair of glasses, an abstract painting reflected in its sole lens, not far from a singular work by the Mozambican artist Malangatana Valente Ngwenya, *To the Clandestine Maternity Home* (1961), with its array of colorful women meant as a testament to female oppression under colonialism. The only thing that shocked me was that both of these artists, along with most of the others here, had never before appeared in the Biennale. Hats off to Pedrosa for fixing that.

One thing is abundantly clear from these sections: Pedrosa has great taste for art-historical deep cuts. But more than simply flaunting his research abilities, he's also continuing his project of rewriting the canon, breaking down geographical and stylistic hierarchies, and even eliding a chronological structure.

To further that project, he sprinkles dead artists throughout the main show. In the Central Pavilion, he places recent paintings by the young American Louis Fratino, who envisions nude men fornicating and dancing together, alongside canvases from several decades ago by Indian painter Bhupen Khakhar, who made no attempts to hide his work's homosexual content. Even if Fratino didn't know Khakhar's art when he started out, Pedrosa suggests the former is working within a lineage seeded by the latter. That's compelling.

I also wonder how successful it really is. The historical sections seem to suggest that all the artists held within are similar, which I don't think is fair because it strips away a lot of nuance. In the abstraction section, for example, there's a great canvas by the Palestinian painter Samia Halaby called *Black Is Beautiful* (1969). It features a dark cross that emerges from a void just barely tinted pink. The wall text mentions that the painting plays with depth and color, but it doesn't state that the title is an allusion to a slogan voiced widely by Black Americans. Pedrosa mainly seems interested in pointing out how formal innovations took place outside the West. I just wish he paid more mind to the actual cultures from which those innovations were born.

MD: I agree to an extent. There is a certain amount of nuance that has been sanded down here, though I don't know how that could be avoided with the sheer amount of work on view. But there is something beautiful about being able to take in all the abstract works for their formal innovations all at once. I found the three sections devoted exclusively to 20th-century artworks to be overwhelming. Each artist is represented by one work with a wall of text, and by my estimate there must be at least 150 works in those sections in total. Pedrosa has called this portion of the Biennale, which tells the story of global modernism with a focus on the Global South, "an essay, a draft, a speculative curatorial exercise that seeks to question the boundaries and definitions of modernism."

The abstraction section is overloaded with paintings, which is actually pretty interesting because it flattens geography and time. Modernism, as defined by MoMA and its first director, Alfred H. Barr, was a relatively linear progression of movements. Pedrosa is suggesting that we can't think about modernism linearly—which also reflects the ways many of the Native and First Nations artists here think about time. To me, he's rendering the European avant-gardes and manifestos that define the first half of the 20th century as inconsequential.

It's also worth noting that abstraction wasn't invented at the turn of the last century. It has a long history throughout the course of humanity, particularly in the Global South and among Indigenous peoples. In many ways, we are being asked to look at the work of artists who are under-recognized internationally on their own terms. To understand what is going on here, you have to broaden your point of view, to think in ways you likely haven't thought before. That's a fascinating challenge, and in my mind what a great exhibition of art should do.

AG: Forgive me for invoking one biennial to discuss another here, but I wonder if the best way to describe this Biennale is by using the terminology provided by Meg Onli and Chrissie Iles for their current Whitney Biennial, which they called a "dissonant chorus." That, to me, is how this Biennale reads as well. It's a mixture of unlike individuals working in unlike styles, and if it all comes off a bit inharmonious, that may be intentional. I can't say it totally works for me, but I admire the ambition.

MD: Oh, for sure. This edition is nothing if not ambitious. First, there's the sheer number of artists selected: 331, to be exact. That's over 100 more artists than the 2022 edition, and nearly four times as many as the 2019 edition. More than half are dead. Even in a moment in the art world that is exceedingly pushing to correct and expand the canon through "rediscoveries" of art historical import, this show is a tough sell.

There's a precedent for all this: the 2015 and 2022 Biennales, by Okwui Enwezor and Cecilia Alemani, respectively, both contained a lot of artists who were neither white nor male, and also a lot who weren't straight. But here, queer artists, Indigenous artists, artists from the Global South, and artists who have migrated, whether voluntarily or by force, account for almost the entire artist list.

AG: Before anyone had even seen the show, critic Dean Kissick called it "exceedingly stupid" that the Biennale classed queer people as foreigners. That's a reactionary take I can't abide. I like Pedrosa's logic that queer people sometimes feel like aliens in their own land. Perhaps that's too expansive a conception of the term "foreigners," but I thought he made a solid case for it.

MD: I couldn't agree more. Kissick's logic is that Pedrosa is othering queer people, but Western society has othered queer people for centuries. Being queer myself, there are moments still where I feel like a foreigner in certain spaces (read: straight spaces). And in his essay, Pedrosa says he himself "feel[s] implicated in many of the themes, concepts, motifs and framework of the exhibition," as someone who has not only lived abroad but someone who is also the first openly queer curator of the Biennale. And there's definitely some latent homoeroticism running through a number of works, like in the pairings of Fratino and Khakhar, or even Dean Sameshima and Miguel Ángel Rojas.

AG: For me, one of the big discoveries at this Biennale was Erica Rutherford, an Edinburgh-born painter who died in Canada in 2008. She painted spare images of faceless women as a reflection on her own transition. Without any features, these women are totally distanced from us, just as Rutherford was distanced from a world that sometimes would not accept her.



Erica Rutherford's *Rubber Maids* (1970), *Self Portrait with Red Boots* (1974), *The Coat (the mirror)* (1970), and *Yellow Stockings* (1970).
COURTESY: LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA AND THE ESTATE OF ERICA RUTHERFORD

Other artists go in a different direction, evoking sci-fi and horror to disturb gender binaries. In a Biennale that's unfortunately light on notable video art, Joshua Serafin's *VOID* (2022) stands out. In this video, this Philippines-born, Belgium-based artist dances around in a pool of oil, covering themselves in the stuff as they writhe around amid two blue neon lights. Dripping with black liquid, Serafin appears creaturely, totally unbound from the rules that have traditionally guided human bodies. It feels eerie, off-kilter, and, well, a bit foreign.

MD: A standout for me was a sculpture by Agnes Questionmark of a pregnant, not-quite-human figure receiving some kind of medical procedure—perhaps gender-affirming surgery. As we look at the figure's innards on two screens, an eye stares back at us in a third.

Key to understanding “Foreigners Everywhere” is the political situation it’s working against: the right-wing governments around the world that seek to strip women, queer people, and immigrants of their rights. Regarding the latter, that’s particularly the case in Italy, one of the many European countries directly impacted by the refugee crisis across the Mediterranean. Given the political leanings of the Biennale foundation’s new president, I’m not sure we’ll get another Biennale quite like this anytime soon. Pedrosa has added his own response to this crisis with the historical section “Italians Everywhere,” showing how countless Italian artists have fled their country and settled elsewhere, ultimately becoming famous in their local scenes.

AG: I wasn’t a fan of the “Italians Everywhere” section—it felt overly indulgent, to me, and kind of out of place, compared to the two other historical sections, which are more about artistic genres—but I see your point. It’s nicely installed, for sure, with works mounted on structures by the late Italian-born, Brazil-based architect Lina Bo Bardi, taking a cue from how she conceived of displaying the permanent collection of the Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Pedrosa’s home institution. These glass elements enable works to hang in the center of the room, instead of on the walls, and through them, you can see a bunch of other pieces all around. They essentially turn the works into prisms for each other, suggesting that all of these Italian migrants are bound to each other.

There’s an emphasis on collectivity running throughout that’s important to note. Take that gallery devoted to the Disobedience Archive, a project begun by curator Marco Scotini that here marshals videos by nearly 50 artists, from Seba Calzafino to Hito Steyerl. It is almost impossible to watch any one of these videos, since they’re crowded together into a circular gallery shaped like a zoetrope, and even if you wanted to try, there’s no information provided for individual works. The point, it would seem, is to view them together, delighting in the cacophony of sounds they emit.



An installation shot of Disobedience Archive, a project by curator Marco Scotini. PHOTO: MARCO ZORZANELLO. COURTESY: LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA

MD: Exactly. As I wrote in **my highlights** about the living artists in the main exhibition, I was prepared to hate the Disobedience Archive. Something about how it was presented on the official artist list as one entry, with no biographical details for each participant, irked me. But it really does work. Archives are both imposing and incomplete. Some things come to the fore more easily than others. That’s exactly what happens here, and it’s exceptional.

AG: There’s also a lot of collaboration on display. Isaac Chong Wai, in one of my favorite works on view, has a performance in which a group of dancers, all from the Asian diaspora, pretend to protect each other when they fall. When one collapses, the others join in to ensure that the fallen dancer does not get hurt. Solidarity is thus a protective mechanism.

Meanwhile, Claudia Alarcón, a young Wichí artist from the La Putana community in Salta, Argentina, produced some of the most impressive works in this show: a series of fiber pieces done with the 13-person Silät collective. Executed in traditional Wichí techniques, these pieces look more like modernist abstractions. They deliberately hang loose, offering a full view of all the disparate threads that combine to create these pictures, and seem like a metaphor for what the show is all about.

MD: The threads that connect us is certainly an apt metaphor for this show and for the times we live in. A good chunk of the work on view at the Arsenale is fiber- or textile-based. I can’t stop thinking about Dana Awartani’s *Come, Let Me Heal Your Wounds. Let Me Mend Your Broken Bones* (2024), composed of several lengths of silk dyed in hues of red, yellow, and orange via herbs and spices that have medicinal properties.

AG: Likewise, Awartani’s work is one of several in this show that refers to the current war in Gaza, where more than 34,000 people have been killed since October 7. But this artist, who was born in Saudi Arabia and is of Palestinian descent, has chosen not to represent all that carnage and cultural destruction, instead depicting it metaphorically, via hanging silk sheets that she has torn, then darned back together. Though not visible from a distance, these darned parts look like scars—welts, even—up close. It’s striking that the work, with its rows of yellow and orange fabric, is so beautiful, despite its horrifying subject matter.

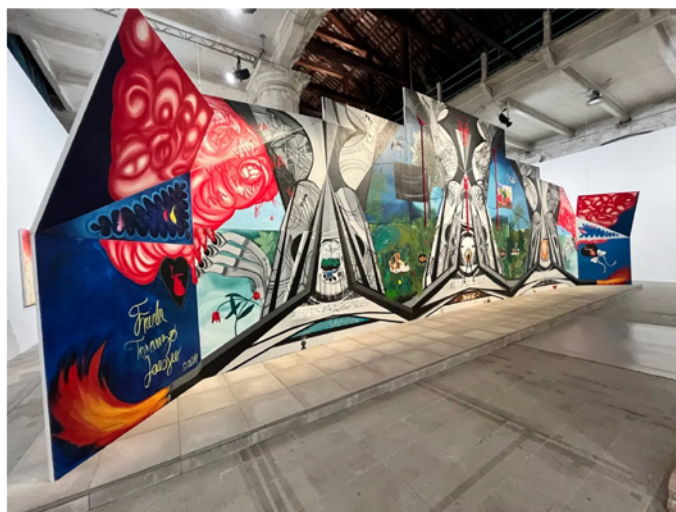
MD: That approach to handling violence—alluding to it without replicating it—also recurs in some of the national pavilions. In Australia’s, Archie Moore (Kamilaroi/Bigambul) has created **an extremely elegant installation in two parts**. The walls of the building have been painted a chalkboard black onto which Moore has scrawled his family tree, going back 65,000 years, 2,400 generations, and encompassing an extensive notion of kinship. There are elisions here, represented by rubbed-out voids. The names may be lost to time but their lives and their importance to their people are not forgotten. Moore gets at violence more directly, but rather obliquely, in a display of dozens of stacks of paper related to First Nations people who have died in police custody. The names are redacted out of respect but the amount here illustrates just how endemic this is to Australian society, a constant threat faced by First Nations peoples.

A similar formal approach occurs in a video and sound installation by Onyeka Igwe that’s in the Nigerian Pavilion, the country’s second one ever at the Biennale. If you hit it at the right time, you might at first you think the projector isn’t running, since all you get is sound from a film without an image. The work, titled *No Archive Can Restore This Chorus of (Diasporic) Shame*, reinterprets films that were censored in Nigeria by British colonial rule via Igwe’s own archive of personal sounds. The destruction of an archive is the destruction of a people’s history—itsself a violent act. What happens when people try to fill in those gaps, recovering and reimagining those histories anew? Contrast that with a more explicit installation, also in the Nigerian Pavilion, by Ndid Dike featuring 736 black wooden police batons that have been used by the state to beat Black bodies.

AG: Yes, it’s not as though the artists are retreating from the harsh realities of the past and the present—they just want to supply alternate visions of it that aren’t as harmful. In the main show, Marlene Gilson, a Watharung/Wadawurrung Elder based in Gordon, Australia, is showing paintings that contend with British colonialism, minus any representations of the violence that accompany it. In one called *Culture Learning* (2023), Aboriginal people mill about on a beach while a ship with a British flag looms nearby. It’s easy to miss that vessel because the focus is the placid existence of Gilson’s community, not the invaders who approached it by force.

But I wonder, Max, if you think the main show feels a bit polite? It occurred to me quite often that the exhibition seemed calculated not to offend, which I found pretty odd, considering its politics.

It’s not like 2022’s Documenta 15, the last big European art festival devoted to the Global South, to which this Biennale feels like a response. The former show featured works that were explicit in addressing the Israel-Palestine conflict and its impact on countries as far-flung as Algeria and Indonesia. No surprise it got the artists—and the showrunners—in **a good deal of trouble**.



Frieda Toranzo Jaeger, *Rage Is a Machine in Times of Senseless, 2024*. PHOTO MAXIMILIANO DURÓN/ARTNEWS

But I don’t think anyone is going to protest one of the biggest Palestine-related works in this show, a vast Frieda Toranzo Jaeger mural that has the phrase “VIVA PALESTINE” scrawled on it. Generally, the painting, which depicts a vast machine emitting toxic red smoke, deals more with utopian visions of the future than it does our ugly current moment. To be clear, I’m not saying Toranzo Jaeger’s work is bad—it’s one of the best pieces on view, actually, in my opinion—but it seems to me that there are too many objects here that function similarly.

MD: To answer your question, I find the situation to be a catch-22 for artists: damned if you do, damned if you don’t. I wouldn’t call it polite. I’d call it sly. It’s a form of subversion of putting the politics in their subtly. You see that happen in a lot of art scenes under repressive governments, particularly in Latin America, where artists have historically had to obliquely insert their politics to avoid government censorship or worse. Sure, you have to read between the lines here, but that can be the fun of it—you need to spend time with the work to figure out what exactly is going on.

Perhaps what we’re seeing here is artists responding to a different kind of repressive ruling class: the international art world and the market. Of course, the Biennale is not a market-oriented event; the wall labels are **essentially forbidden** from listing the names of artists’ galleries in their credit lines. But the market has a chokehold on the art world right now, and it’s affecting what we’re seeing throughout the world. For artists to live on their work, it has to sell. Who’s buying it? The ultra-rich, whose politics might not align with the artist’s. So, if a very wealthy collector somehow does manage to later purchase a work that was on view here, they may be getting more than they bargained for. So, who gets the last laugh? I can’t wait to find out.

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 Silät.

¿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 **60ª 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 el 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.



Las mujeres del Monte bajaron del cielo en hilos de chaguar; es decir, desde antes de vivir en la tierra, ellas tejen. 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.



"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 mullita, 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.



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



NUEVOS PARADIGMAS

CLAUDIA ALARCÓN: “SOMOS PARTE DEL MONTE”

La reconocida artista wichí Claudia Alarcón, comparte en esta entrevista la cosmovisión que sostiene su obra, la de la agrupación de mujeres Silät a la que pertenece y sobre todo, la de sus ancestros. Afirmando la belleza y el derecho a la vida en un mismo acto estético y político, los tejidos de Alarcón son poesía entramada en hilos de chaguar, obra que pasando de la pequeña a la gran escala ocupa un lugar histórico en los escenarios del mundo del arte contemporáneo.

Por Paula Jiménez España

10.07.2024



La tierra salteña la vio nacer en 1989 a orillas del Pilcomayo, el río altiplánico que cruza las fronteras de Argentina, Bolivia y Paraguay. Allí, junto a las mujeres de su comunidad, Claudia Alarcón creció tejiendo, representando entre la naturaleza y las formas geométricas, el universo cercano. Pero en wichí, el verbo tejer es algo más que la producción de piezas textiles y/o artísticas, porque simboliza la acción continua de cicatrizar y construir. Desde este propósito de reparación y de sostenimiento de una cultura amenazada, los hilos de chaguar que se utilizan para hacer obra, traman en las manos tejedoras un acto político. La palabra Silät, nombre de la agrupación artística a la que Claudia pertenece, puede traducirse como anuncio. ¿Pero anuncio de qué? De que estamos vivas, dice. El ejemplo es contundente: aún premiada por el Salón Nacional en 2022 e incorporada a la colección Ama Amoedo en Miami, aún habiendo sido la primera mujer originaria cuya obra fuera adquirida por el Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Salta, la Bienal de Venecia no pudo contar este año con su presencia debido a un cuadro de dengue que puso en riesgo su vida y del que tardó en recuperarse por falta de atención médica. Entonces sí, la afirmación precisa para una comunidad desguarnecida que resiste es *estamos vivas*. Un logro que las artistas de Silät eligen decir en femenino.



El chaguar guarda relación con la cuestión de género, el mito dice que las mujeres bajaban del cielo en hilos de esa planta. ¿Cómo te fue transmitida a vos la relación con el chaguar? ¿Cómo llegaste a él?

El primer recuerdo que tengo del chaguar es el ver a mi abuela machucándolo. Estaba recién traído del monte. Veía a mis tías pelar las hojas largas, sacarles las espinas para descubrir la fibra con la que después hacían hilo. Desde que soy niña me decían las mujeres de mi familia que yo debía aprender a trabajar el chaguar, para que cuando sea grande le transmita a mis hijas y a mis nietos, cómo son las mayores... que siempre están hablando del futuro. Mi relación con el chaguar es el asombro. Siempre me sentí atraída por él. Desde niña jugaba con los restos de las hojas, y su fragancia siempre me transmitió mensajes, trataba de imaginar cómo aprendió mi abuela, me sumergía en esos movimientos que hacían con las fibras, eso siempre llamó mi atención. Siempre escuché hablar de que las mujeres vinimos del cielo unidas al chaguar. Pero lo entendí al pasar el tiempo. Esto de que las mujeres antes fuimos estrellas. Hoy intento revivir desde el tejido esa historia. Me encuentro tejiendo con ese resplandor que nos quitaron. El chaguar siempre ha sido muy importante para las mujeres Wichí que tejemos. Nosotras convivimos con el chaguar, es parte del monte como nosotras. Ahí lo buscamos, entre los árboles. Desde que sacamos la planta y la trabajamos, sentimos su fragancia hermosa que nos hace felices. El aroma del chaguar no se pierde, al teñirlo, tejerlo, sigue presente, es el olor del monte. El chaguar nunca deja de sorprendernos, todo lo que puede, las formas que toma.



Der: Proceso de trabajo Nitsäyphã/Pronunciar la fuerza propia, Claudia Alarcón y el grupo Silät (2023). Foto: Andrei Fernández - Izq: Claudia Alarcón & Silät (Ana López, Graciela López, Margarita López, Anabel Luna, Comunidad El Bordo, Santa Victoria Este, Salta), Chelhchup (El otoño / Autumn), 2023. Foto: Eva Herzog. Gentileza Claudia Alarcón y Cecilia Brunson Projects.

¿Necesariamente tienen que ser a gran escala las obras que se producen con sus hilos?

Nosotras siempre tejimos. Especialmente tejemos bolsas, que en nuestro idioma llamamos *hilu* y cuando hablamos en español les decimos *yicas*. En las *yicas* siempre hemos tejido las formas que nos enseñaron nuestras madres y abuelas, siempre vimos allí una gran belleza y supimos que eso no puede desaparecer. Sucedió que los otros, las personas que no son de nuestro pueblo, no veían todo eso que nosotras sabemos que está en nuestros tejidos. Hemos sufrido mucho el mal trato y el mal pago de nuestro trabajo como tejedoras. Un día comenzamos a hacer los tejidos más grandes, fue por invitación de una mujer que comenzó a trabajar con nosotras, una mujer que al principio en nuestro idioma llamamos *Suluj* (blanca), Andrei Fernández, después comenzamos a nombrar como *Chisuk*, mujer rebelde, porque ella nos alentó a hacer cosas que nosotras nunca antes habíamos hecho ni pensado en hacer, pero que esas cosas nos permitieron que hoy nuestro trabajo comience a ser valorado y se vea en muchos lugares con respeto. Decidimos hacer algunos tejidos que eran como banderas, para nosotras fue como decir gritando algo que siempre dijimos como un susurro. Hicimos tejidos grandes para que ustedes, los otros, puedan ver esa belleza, para compartirla pero también para que se sepa de nuestra presencia. Nuestro primer mensaje al mostrar nuestro trabajo es: estamos vivas.

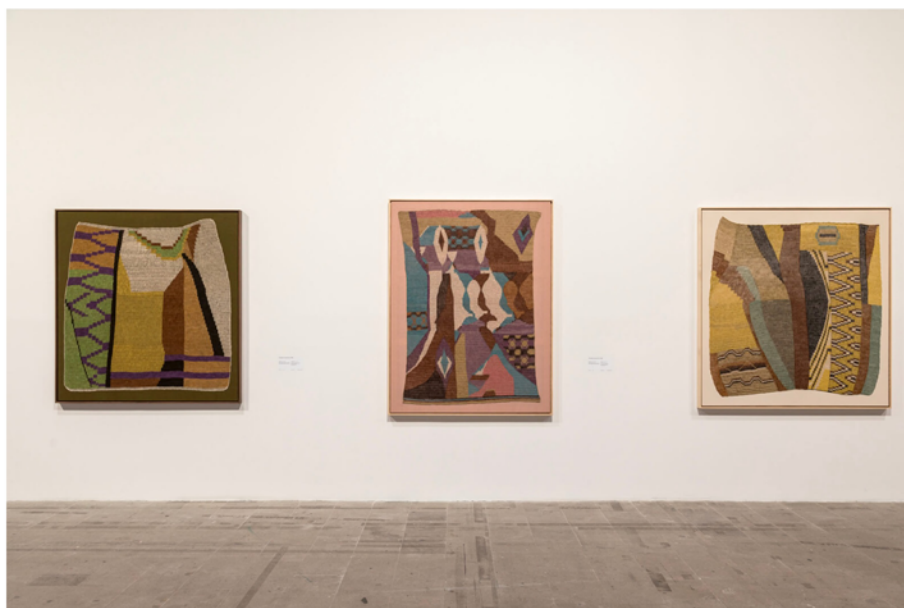
¿Qué buscás, o mejor dicho, qué buscan simbolizar con las imágenes geométricas?

Las formas que dibujamos con el tejido tienen un significado, son mensaje. Cuando aprendí a tejer me enseñaron a hacer el dibujo del caparazón de la tortuga y las garras del carancho. Se puede ver en esos tejidos cuadrados y rombos escalonados con diferentes colores, pero nosotras vemos formas que son parte de un lenguaje, un idioma de formas que cuentan sobre los seres vivos con los que convivimos en el monte. Siempre también para que se sepa de nuestra presencia. Nuestro primer mensaje al mostrar nuestro trabajo es: estamos vivas.

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muestra colectiva que se expuso primero en Berlín y después en el Museo de Bellas Artes de Salta en el 2021. Junto a Guido empecé a probar otras formas de componer y pensar el tejido, él me convidó algunos pensamientos de su propia práctica como artista, y para mí fue una gran experiencia de aprendizaje. Después trabajé en el 2022 con un artista alemán, Olaf Holzapfel, quien nos propuso tejer sus composiciones pictóricas y así crear obras juntos. Esa experiencia también fue una escuela para mí, que me permitió descubrir qué puedo hacer desde el tejido y cómo puedo hacer aparecer otras formas que pueden provocar asombro al estar junto a los diseños ancestrales.



Vista de la 60th Bienal de Venecia, "Foreigners Everywhere," 2024. Obras de Claudia Alarcón & Silät. Foto: Marco Zorzanello. Gentileza Biennale di Venezia.

La obra pensada como un producto colectivo, expresión de la memoria, de la sabiduría del tejido a través de las generaciones, se distancia de la idea individualista de autoría. ¿Pero qué hay de lo subjetivo o lo particular que aportás vos como artista y que no aportan otras personas?

Desde el 2022 empecé a presentarme como artista, de la mano de Remota Galería, que fundó Guido Yannitto en Salta. Desde entonces trabajo obras nuevas en las que mezclo diferentes elementos, aparecen en mis tejidos flores de las prendas que usamos cotidianamente, las figuras del monte, formas abstractas y otras figurativas, fantasías y juegos de formas en los que aparecen fosforescencias, colores brillantes, pero también colores que preparamos con otras mujeres con raíces, semillas, frutos y cortezas de nuestro territorio. También tejo historias de nuestro pueblo, el pueblo Wichí, que son mensajes para el futuro, que intentan resguardar la memoria colectiva pero que también creo que presenta una imaginación nueva, porque yo como parte del colectivo Silät soy parte de un nuevo movimiento, que abre un camino nuevo para encontrarse con todos los tiempos. Siempre digo que es lo ancestral que empuja hacia adelante. En mis obras creo que hay un nuevo diálogo entre el pasado y el futuro que cambia al presente. Esto que estoy realizando lo hago con todo mi corazón, con todo mi amor, en cada obra terminada siento una gran satisfacción. Esa obra que yo había realizado con el motivo *fvokats'aj ch'otey* "orejas de mulita" bajo el título de "Resplandor del sol" *ifwala lhalh* porque fue cuando nos juntamos por primera vez para este trabajo que veía a muchas mujeres abandonar la idea de seguir haciéndolo por diferentes motivos, entre los cuales estaba principalmente la falta de una salida o venta segura y en ese sentido lo hice pensando en que se puede recuperar el valor y la importancia. Ese tejido fue como una puerta que se abrió para todo lo demás que se fue dando después. Tras el primero hice varios trabajos más porque es algo, como dije, que me apasiona.

¿Cuál fue tu experiencia como invitada a la 60ª Bienal de Venecia? ¿Es la primera vez que una persona wichí es invitada a participar, podría pensarse que se esperó demasiado, verdad?

Para mí fue una mezcla de emociones estar invitada a la Bienal de Venecia. Trabajamos mucho con mis compañeras por años para llegar a esos lugares tan lejanos, a los que parecía que nunca íbamos a llegar, porque no eran para gente como nosotras. Trabajamos intentando muchas formas de mostrar lo que hacemos, de compartir lo que son nuestras vidas, nuestro pensamiento. El arte llegó en un momento como un camino posible, para que sucedan cosas que no encontramos de otro modo. Para nosotras, las mujeres wichí, en realidad el arte no es nada nuevo, es una actividad muy antigua, y sabemos bien el valor que poseen nuestros trabajos, llevamos muchísimos años haciéndolo y comprendemos el valor que representa. Tal vez no sea el valor en dinero, sino el valor que tiene por el solo hecho de haber pertenecido a nuestros mayores esos conocimientos. Hoy surge esta denominación: arte, como una palabra que nosotras no sabemos bien cómo utilizar porque por mucho tiempo llamamos a nuestro trabajo artesanías, porque así decían los otros que se llamaba. Estamos habituadas a ese nombre: artesanías. Pero en nuestro idioma no existen las palabras arte y artesanía, nosotras decimos *tayhin* que se puede traducir como tejiendo, es una acción continua, que nunca dejamos de hacer. *Tayhin* también es construir y cicatrizar. Ahora que nos dicen que nuestros tejidos se denominan arte, lo dicen personas que vienen de lugares muy distantes y con otras lenguas, eso hace que nuestro trabajo despierte otro interés y nos genere otras ganancias.



Vista de la 60th Bienal de Venecia, "Foreigners Everywhere," 2024. Obras de Claudia Alarcón & Silät. Foto: Marco Zorzanello. Gentileza Biennale di Venezia.

Pero para ustedes no es ninguna sorpresa que su trabajo es valioso...

No, no lo es. Creo que es muy gratificante encontrar a personas que consideren a nuestros trabajos con la importancia que se merecen, nos sentimos valoradas y es parte de esto la invitación a la Bienal, donde no nuestro solo mi obra sino que mostramos también las obras de mis compañeras de Silät. Estar en este grupo es muy lindo porque no soy solamente yo sino que todas las demás mujeres que tienen saberes acerca del tejido. Es verdad que yo en mi condición abro posibilidades a las demás mujeres, pero para mí es más satisfactorio que estén todas las mujeres, porque todas queremos tener trabajo, todas necesitamos y es cierto que toda persona interesada en realizar esta tarea que hacemos tiene su lugar puede ser partícipe de esto que se llama arte. Sobre mi experiencia en la Bienal, resultó que tenía todo organizado para asistir a la inauguración pero no pude viajar porque me enfermé de dengue los días previos a la fecha del viaje. En mi comunidad no hay médicos, el hospital está lejos, los caminos son de tierra y se cortan con las lluvias, no tenemos vehículos propios y no hay transporte público, todo eso hizo que yo tarde mucho en poder llegar a un médico y recibir atención, y mi vida corrió peligro, como sucede con muchas otras personas. La verdad es que si bien nuestro trabajo hoy se valora, las condiciones en las que vivimos las comunidades indígenas, no solo de mi pueblo, son muy duras, nos faltan las cosas básicas, y eso hace que no podamos disfrutar del todo de estos nuevos logros que conseguimos. Tenemos que seguir trabajando y exigiendo que se cumplan nuestros derechos.

Lengua y tejido, decís en una entrevista, son los pilares que sostienen a tu comunidad, es decir que tejer es entonces un acto político...

Para nosotras es fundamental seguir hablando nuestra lengua. Es lo que nos identifica, muchas cosas pueden cambiar en nosotras y en la forma en la que vivimos, pero la lengua es lo que nos hace wichi, que es nuestro idioma significa gente. Como mujeres aprendemos a tejer desde pequeñas, empezamos a tejer cuando comenzamos a menstruar. Yo lo hago desde los doce años, empecé haciendo el hilo y luego fui aprendiendo lo demás, sino que se trata de utilizar la sabiduría del tejido que sabemos hacer las mujeres wichi. Esa es nuestra forma de vivir, tejiendo. El tejido y el idioma es nuestra resistencia, ante todo lo que nos han quitado y negado, nuestras palabras y nuestras imágenes siguen presentes, nunca las perdimos, es lo que defendemos junto a nuestro territorio, al monte, del que somos parte.



Claudia Alarcón, *Kates tsinhay [Mujeres estrellas / Star women]*, 2023 Foto: Eva Herzog. Gentileza Claudia Alarcón y Cecilia Brunson Projects

¿Qué quiere decir Silät y porqué se llama así el grupo al que pertenecés?

Hace ya algún tiempo, elegimos el nombre de Silät porque es nuestra voz, de nuestro idioma y desde el monte. Hemos creado una organización en la que nos reunimos las tejedoras para trabajar en hacer los tejidos, juntándonos por nuestra iniciativa. Hemos puesto de nombre a nuestro grupo SILÄT, porque para nosotros eso significa anuncio y es para que todos sepan que vivimos aquí, aún existimos los wichí. Por eso nuestro grupo se llama así. Y en este grupo nosotras trabajamos, hacemos obras de arte y no solo eso, también dentro del grupo hay mujeres que se dedican a hacer artesanías, piezas utilitarias, donde gestionamos y realizamos la venta hacia otros lugares, a otros países, conseguimos pedidos, y las mujeres los realizan. En un principio, desde 2017, estuvimos en el grupo *Thañí* y luego nos separamos, hace ya un poco más de un año que somos Silät; si bien cambiamos el nombre el objetivo es el mismo, buscamos fortalecer la venta de las obras, los trabajos que se hacen colectivamente, nosotras de la comunidad La Puntana seguimos trabajando asociadas con mujeres de la comunidad Alto La Sierra que coordina Melania Pereyra.

¿Dejarías el monte para vivir en la ciudad o te sentís definitivamente radicada en tu tierra?

Yo me siento radicada en mi territorio, hemos luchado mucho, los mayores especialmente han luchado mucho, para defender este lugar, han tenido que hacer muchas cosas, ir lejos, hacer juicios, denuncias, todo para que nos respeten que siempre fuimos parte de este lugar, que vivimos con el río y los seres del monte, que allí hay presencias, misterios y frutos que no queremos perder. Somos parte del monte. Me gusta tener la oportunidad de viajar, conocer otros lugares y personas, aprendo y me da nuevas ideas y sueños, pero siempre elijo volver a mi hogar, en el monte. Estamos construyendo con Silät una casa, *Silätwuké*, que queremos sea un centro cultural en el monte, donde podamos hacer talleres, reuniones, exposiciones, recibir visitas, siempre pensamos en trabajar para poder vivir mejor y tener un mejor futuro pero en nuestro territorio.

Foto de portada: Detalle de Claudia Alarcón, Kates tsinhay [Mujeres estrellas / Star women], 2023 Foto: Eva Herzog. Gentileza Claudia Alarcón y Cecilia Brunson Projects.