

GALLERY GUIDE

DONNA HUANCA: CUEVA DE COPAL

The installation CUEVA DE COPAL (translated as Copal Cave) continues Bolivian American artist Donna Huanca's interplay between light and darkness, evoking cycles found in nature. Audiences are invited to explore the space and take a reflective journey through this immersive, multisensory, environment.

Huanca's multidisciplinary practice encompasses performance, painting, video, sound, and sculpture, collaging together these different elements. Her work is woven with references to ritual, materiality, and memory, suggested through sensory interventions. Textures, like CUEVA's futuristic white sand, are used alongside colours drawn from natural pigments (blue is often used for its mood-altering quality). These are paired with Huanca's self-made scent (a variation of Palo Santo, meaning holy wood) and sounds drawn from nature.

Drawing on her personal history, Huanca's work also explores notions of identity, gender, and belonging. The performance element that lies at the heart of her practice is layered with memories of time spent in Bolivia and references to ceremonial practice. This includes the use of copal (in the installation's title), a resin known as the 'blood of trees', and a sacred scent used for spiritual cleansing in ancient rituals performed in cultures native to Central and South America.

In previous installations physical performances have taken place within the gallery. In CUEVA DE COPAL, these performances – in which 'models' are painted with a mixture of materials including raw pigment, clay, oil, coffee, turmeric and body paint, creating a new 'skin' – have taken place behind the studio's closed doors.

Remnants of these performances remain in the photographs which lie beneath Huanca's mixed media paintings. Layered amidst sand and oil applied by the smooth palm of Huanca's hand, these performative traces are then scratched and clawed away creating a new surface. Likewise, in the scarred 'skin' and bodily forms of each sculpture, which

Huanca describes as 'stand-ins' for the human form.

Reflected from multiple perspectives, these surfaces, or 'skins', hint at absent bodies – movements that have occurred in another time and space – encouraging audiences to pause within CUEVA's cocoon and reflect upon our own relationship to time, space, and the world around us.

IN CONVERSATION WITH DONNA HUANCA

Arnolfini (A): Your installations often respond to a particular site or space, creating multisensory environments, what was the inspiration behind CUEVA DE COPAL?

Donna Huanca (DH): An ongoing focus of my practice is the interplay of light and darkness, and through that thinking about balance or disharmony and cycles of regeneration and decay. CUEVA DE COPAL focuses on the darkness – the installation is designed as almost cocoon like. The darkness for me has a very elemental, almost vegetal character. Through this darkness the experience of the viewer is allowed to be more meditative, it becomes a space for reflection and privacy. Performance and embodiment are at the core of my work even if it is not on view for an audience. I'm interested in exploring the absence of the body as a performance as well.

A: This installation (and the presentation of your work over the last two years) feels like it has moved towards a greater sense of permanence – what has led to this movement away from impermanence and 'liveness', or do you consider it still present in the work?

DH: I still consider impermanence to be very present in my work. Themes that I am constantly grappling with are the cycles of life and death, everything eventually breaks down, sometimes it's reused and given another life, sometimes it returns to the earth. I think that these works are also iterations of some of the same themes that I've always been grappling with, of darkness and light, cyclical as opposed to linear formats, and our relationship with the earth.

A: With previous work you have talked about the idea of participants ('models') actively helping to make the work beyond the studio – do you feel this is a role now played by the audience primarily?

DH: Yes, the audience has always played a critical role of course, but that is one that is shifting and becoming more active and involved in this exhibition.

A: Has your painting technique changed as you move away from performances within an exhibition space?

DH: These new paintings do incorporate past performances. The technique at the centre of my practice – collaging – hasn't changed, and even if the performances shift – perhaps they happen less frequently, or the body paintings happen in private in the studio – for now the process of incorporating these ephemeral body paintings into the canvas is ongoing.

A: It has been suggested (by curator Daisy Nam) that your sculptures have subsequently taken on a more performative role, acting as substitutes for physical bodies within an exhibition space. Could you respond to this idea?

DH: I think that the sculptures have always acted as stand-ins for the body – in the past I've used hair and steel to pierce the structures. They are hybrid shapes, having these anthropomorphic qualities as well as acting both as camouflage and shelter for performers and audience members.

A: Your exhibition ESPEJO QUEMEDA at Ballroom Marfa responded to the pandemic in that it recognised the distance between bodies and touch that has become part of our everyday experience of the world. How do you think the pandemic continues to inform your relationship to the body and use of performance in your work?

DH: More and more I am interested in the way we share our spaces, and the effects we have on our landscapes and ecosystems. I was always working through these questions but I think it has become increasingly prescient to all of us since the start of the pandemic, as gathering spaces and human touch become more dangerous and we learn to re-negotiate proximity through increasingly virtual means.

A: How do you see CUEVA DE COPAL working through these questions?

DH: I hope that the audience is invited into a meditative [space], which allows them to focus on their inner world and personal, embodied experience of the exhibition. The exhibition's triangular structure – it begins narrow and then expands – helps to think of our movement through the exhibition as a journey; the shape helps me to guide the viewers through this kind of solitary, intimate, meditative trip.

ABOUT DONNA HUANCA

Huanca graduated in Fine Art at the University of Houston, 2004, followed by Skowhegan School of Painting, ME, in 2006, and Städelschule, Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Frankfurt, Germany. She has exhibited widely, including solo exhibitions at Ballroom Marfa, Texas, USA; Marciano Art Foundation, Los Angeles, CA, USA; Copenhagen Contemporary, Denmark; Belvedere Museum, Vienna, Austria; Yuz Museum, Shanghai, China; Travesia Curatro, Madrid, Spain; Zabłudowicz Collection; London, UK; and MOMA PS1, New York, USA.

She is a recipient of the Hirshhorn Artist Award, 2016; Fulbright Scholarship, 2012; DAAD Artist Grant, 2009/10 and the Francis Greenberg Award, 2008, amongst others. Her work is held by a number of international public collections including Belvedere Collection, Vienna, Austria; Sifang Art Museum, Nanjing, China; Espacio 1414/ Berezdivin Collection, Santurce; Zublowdowicz Collection, London, UK, Marciano Art Foundation, Los Angeles, CA, USA, and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Collection, New York, USA.

FIND OUT MORE

You can listen to an audio description about the installation by using the QR code below, or find out more about Donna Huanca by exploring a selection of books available in the Arnolfini Bookshop.

Visit our website at www.arnolfini.org.uk to find out more about associated events and workshops and join the conversation at @arnolfiniarts @ruamix @peresprojects #ArnolfiniArts #DonnaHuanca #CuevaDeCopal #PeresProjects

