

Interview by James Ambrose

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Donna Huanca

Born 1980



Being born in Chicago, USA, and of Bolivian descent. I know that you spent time between both locations growing up, I wanted to ask, did art play a big part in your upbringing? And what role did both of these locations have on your childhood?

Classical art and especially art institutions were not a big part of my experience growing up, it wasn't something that felt accessible to my family and me. Reacting to and against these institutions is a theme that I'm constantly dealing with in my practice, all my exhibitions consider the architecture of these spaces and try to draw in viewers that might not feel invited. The body rubbings are also a manifestation of this, a way of interacting with the environment that isn't allowed, visual proof of a transgressive act that then becomes part of the building. That being said, music

for example, was always a big part of my life, and I had other aesthetic and sensorial experiences that really moved me and still inspire my practice.

How has the move to Berlin affected your practice? What promoted the move originally?

I first came to Berlin in 2007 to live for the summer and met so many amazing artists. I immediately felt that there was a kind of freedom here and the space to experiment. I knew I wanted to return but at the time I was living nomadically, moving from place to place. I returned to Berlin again after I studied at the Stedelschule in Frankfurt. Since I've been here, I've felt more grounded, I've been able to build community and my practice has grown in ways I couldn't have expected.

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Do you feel settled here in Berlin?

Being part of a diaspora, I don't know if I will ever feel settled, but I do get inspiration and energy from being here. Pre-pandemic it came from nightclubs and post-pandemic, it's coming from the isolation. I love both aspects of Berlin life.



Do you make use of a wide range of source material? Is there a process for the compilation of this material and the filtering of what you use and integrate?

At its core, my work is rooted in a practice of collage. I collect materials, images, colours, and textures and assemble them in paintings, sculptures, installations, as well as sound and scent works. I use a lot of materials from my travels, and have been collecting textures and textiles for years that become shells for the performers' bodies. I am inspired by palettes from the natural world and am interested in textures and surfaces that are inspired by geology and botany. The colours are also inspired by my immediate environment. I also use a lot of hair in my works, I think of it as a record of our environments, a map of our lives and movement.

Your process appears to be an intense and physical experience due to its nature. Are there any constants or certain routines that you always follow in the studio?

My practice is quite intense and physical, which is why

it's important for me to keep my studio a serene space full of plant life. I try to maintain a meditative space, that's at the core of my works, even if they are intense or tumultuous.

What first drew you to the cool blue & white palette for what your most recent work is so well known, and what ultimately leads you to the colour choices you make in the work?

I am inspired by the natural world, that's also where my palette comes from. My aesthetic choices are often times instinctual, I like to paint with my hands, so depending on the composition I play with colour to balance or create disharmony on the canvas.



Your paintings start life with photographs of your performers' decorated bodies, blown up and transposed onto canvas. Is this process specifically designed to link the performative Elements of your practice to the painting?

Yes, my work is very cyclical, my paintings and sculptures and performances recur in new works. The old is collaged and reused, extending its life cycle. In terms of performance and the body, in my new work I have been experimenting with mirrored surfaces, I want to draw the viewers into the work, for them to become performers and participants as well.

I read that for each exhibition, you create a new scent to fit its concept. Is that correct?

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What's involved in this process?

Yes that's correct, I want to create total experiences that engage all the senses. I want to create experiences that are immersive. Scent is so connected to memory, it can instantly take you back to specific times or tether you to people, I draw from my own memories of certain experiences or landscapes when putting together the smell of each exhibition. Like all my works, the process involves a lot of experimentation.



light connected to cycles of regeneration and decay. I've been integrating more mirrored surfaces into the works as a way to draw the viewer further into the installations. These are goals that I've always been grappling with, but these exhibitions are iterations of themes that bring the viewers in a different direction. I'm working towards solo exhibitions at Travesia Cuatro, Arnolfini in Bristol, and Henry Art Gallery curated by Shamim M. Momin at the University of Washington, Seattle.



What do you feel makes a work of art successful?

That's a hard question! I guess that depends on how you think about success. Everyone has their own experience with aesthetic works, how it circulates in the world is beyond the intention of the artist. I think my art is successful if it can be an interruption in the day to day, which ultimately helps us to appreciate the world around us.

What is it about being an artist and the act of creating art that you love?

I think to be an artist makes you sensitive to the world, you can't be shut away or taken out of reality, you have to expose yourself in order to respond and process what it means to be alive in this moment.

Finally, what you working towards and how do you see your work progressing?

Currently, I am working on themes of darkness and