

Ayahwasca and anal beads: the hallucinogenic art of Donna Huanca

Nomadic Bolivian-American artist Donna Huanca arrives in London with a troupe of models, ready to cover themselves in paint and turmeric. She explains what it's like to be watched, and why trans women will destroy the patriarchy

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Models in bodypaint, anal beads, and smells associated with ritual hallucination: these are just some of the parts of a multisensory artwork by American artist Donna Huanca, arriving in London later this month.

Huanca will unveil [Scar Cymbals](#), an ambitious project stretching across the former chapel building at Zabłudowicz Collection. There's a vibrating pedestal, a low labyrinth for walking-based meditation, and a multi-storey acrylic structure built into the apse. Body-stocking-clad performers patterned with paint, turmeric and clay will interact with the various structures during the three-month show: two of them each day, and 10 for special events.

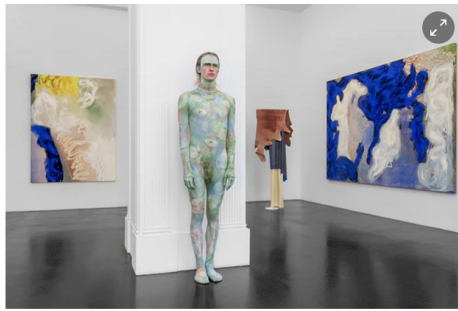


Born to Bolivian parents but raised in Chicago, Huanca's early life was full of the disjunction and ritual that she has later drawn on in her work. "My parents were immigrants, they were always telling us that we'd move back, and we weren't allowed to speak English at home," she recalls. In summers the family would return to Bolivia and attend the Urkupiña festival, which fused Catholic and Andean traditions in music, dance and richly coloured costume. "It was complete chaos," she enthuses. "None of it really made sense, but I enjoyed it, I was into the fantasy." For Huanca, Urkupiña's flurry of sounds, colours and performance came to represent a kind of ultimate artwork.

Moving between the two cultures became a wrench: "It was like I had two brains - I'd go through the festival and then return to a 'normal' life in Chicago." Now 35 and living between Berlin and New York, Huanca still feels nomadic. "I've been thinking about mental spaces and where you feel comfortable: these are the places I try to make in my work."

Huanca uses the term "models" as one might in a life-drawing class: "It's not like a [Vanessa Beecroft](#) work where they're off duty fashion models." Instead she recruits collaborators among her friends and peers. The bond they feel as a group is something she cherishes, and she asks the models to write about their experience after each performance. "They have to go into a trancelike state. It's difficult to be in any other state when you're being gazed at

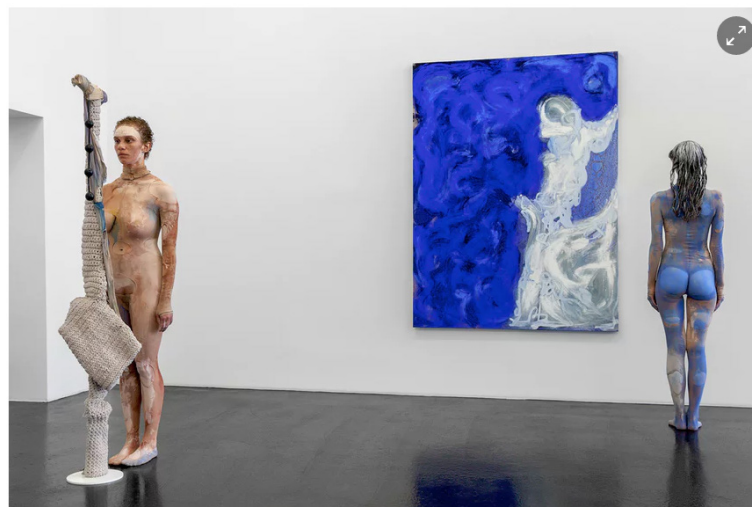
that long. And you want to talk about it afterwards - it's like going on a trip with someone."



Subtle references to this state come from the aromas permeating the space, derived from Texas cedar and Palo Santo (a tree that grows in the Mexican desert), which are traditionally mixed with hallucinogenic ayahuasca and peyote, and burned as ceremonial incense. Desert rocks, meanwhile, inspire the tones and textures of the materials that Huanca uses to decorate her models' bodies: close-up photos she's made of them during performances resemble topographic studies.

These photos will surround a motion-sensitive sound installation that will be activated by visitors as they thread their way between sheets of painted acrylic and sculptural forms dressed with leather and debris. Among these are used bodystockings, which look like reptile skin casts, and a string of black spheres the size of ping-pong balls. "Those are giant anal beads," says Huanca, awestruck. "I feel like I learned so much going to fetish stores in Berlin. Those beads are huge - it's like a form of torture."

That counterpoint between pleasure and pain recalls her first-person experience of going through a long-duration performance, where "a torture element is transcended and rewarded in the end". In 2013 Huanca engaged in [Raw Material](#), a six-week long residency inside a studio walled with two-way mirrors in Malmö's Konsthalle. Under the gaze of visitors she couldn't see, she went about her day-to-day life - art-making and all other activities - in full view during museum hours. Members of the public were invited in to collaborate with her, but only if they committed to stay for longer than 10 minutes. "It was about not knowing when someone is looking at you or what is expected of you," she says. "Could I stand to be watched? What does it do to you?"



When she first started recruiting other performers, Huanca was drawn to more direct "avatars": young women of around her height with long dark hair. But she doesn't specify age or body type. A mid-transition model will appear in the work in London. "The trans woman's movement has becoming a subject on everyone's mind - I'm so interested in their vulnerabilities," she explains. "They're allies in helping us break down the patriarchal system because they know what it's like on both sides."

Withstanding the gaze of onlookers is by no means easy: in the past Huanca has had to remove a performer from a work when she realised that they weren't coping. And the balance of power between models and onlookers shifts subtly country to country. The one constant? "There's always some idiot man in every city that asks: how much do they cost?"

Scar Cymbals is at Zabłudowicz Collection, London, 29 September - 18 December.
Surrogate Painteen is at Peres Projects, Berlin, to 28 October.