

Donna Huanca's Pond

In dialogue with Donna Huanca as she ushers visitors into the realm of the free-spirited pond

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Picture a pond that lies nestled within your memories. In its depths, boundless possibilities can reside. Donna Huanca's exhibition takes the viewer on a journey into this captivating pond of freedom.

Through her art, Donna Huanca captures the cycle of birth, destruction, and regeneration rooted in ancient cultures. On entering her first Seoul exhibition, BLISS POOL, visitors encounter a fragrance. As they venture further in, the aroma envelops their bodies. Huanca skillfully collages scents together, using them as memory markers. In the midst of the dispersed scents of Palo Santo and burned hair, the viewer finds a stage. Situated on an oval structure about a foot in height, it appears as a pond. On the stage stands a metal sculpture that resembles a CT brain scan with piercings adorning each corner. Before long, women covered in vibrant body paint appear and begin moving through the space. The audience is immersed in a cool, metallic silver as they exist between the shifting colors. Performers leave traces as they brush past the pristine white walls. A vast, curved wall backdrops this breathtaking scene and showcases a painting that Huanca created by layering sand mixed with oil paint over photographs of past performances. The unpredictability of BLISS POOL seamlessly develops into an enigmatic piece of art.

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Q. You came to Seoul for the exhibition. How has your time been in the city?

A. While my time for exploration was limited as I was working on the performance, I found Seoul to be a remarkably clean city with a harmonious blend of modernity and tradition. Having worked in Mexico City, New York, and Berlin, and traveled to various other cities, I was particularly struck by the level of curiosity and active engagement with my work in Seoul. I also had the chance to try kimchi.

Q. Previously, you held the Obsidian Ladder exhibition at the Marciano Art Foundation, a contemporary art museum that repurposed the Scottish Rite Masonic Temple. The venue has a unique atmosphere as it was previously a temple for the Freemasons society. You often incorporate the architecture of your exhibition spaces into the exhibitions themselves. How do you plan to integrate the space in this exhibition?

A. I use collage throughout my work, and this approach extends to language as well. It involves layering meaning and sound on top of imagery to elicit some kind of response. The title BLISS POOL for this exhibition was inspired by the soft structure that surrounds the space that I created. I designed the soft, tactile surfaces and colors to form walls that encircle the space, giving the impression that the entire exhibition embraces its audience.



Q. The performers leaving traces of body paint on the walls of your exhibition seem to allude to a certain sense of subjectivity and independence. What are your thoughts on this?

A. I don't want to objectify or instrumentalize the performers. The imprints left on the walls from bodies rubbing against them play a significant role in my work, while also serving as paintings that grant my collaborators a stake in the creative process. Additionally, they provide a human scale that contrasts with the typically large paintings and sculptures found in exhibition spaces.

Q. What emotions do you experience while working on the human body? It must be different from painting on a canvas.

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A. My relationship with the performers guides the painting process. I believe that painting on the human body can be seen as the starting point for all my work. I've never sketched or planned for a work in advance; it has always been spontaneous and very intuitive. I enjoy working on the human body and the ephemerality it affords. While body painting, I engage in conversations with the performers, and the interactions that arise during that time lead the direction of the painting. I always prefer working with materials that carry a history. In this case, I'm collaborating with people who bring their own personal histories and add additional layers to the artwork.

Q. How much do you, as the artist, intervene in the performers' movements and journeys through the space?

A. Creating an environment where the performers feel safe and free is extremely important. As a result, meticulous attention to detail and protection are necessary during the preparation process. With these precautions in place, I believe that the performers can take control and present unique performances without any predetermined choreography.



Q. During the pandemic, as the opportunities for live performances decreased, you started using reflective surfaces to incorporate the audience into your exhibitions.

A. The mirrors used in the exhibition tilt and distort, refracting the surrounding installations. This provides a variety of perspectives by showing different views depending on where people stand in the exhibition space. The most important thing is that I wanted to create a unique image for each visitor. The mirrors are camouflaged in the space, hiding, or being washed away by the surrounding paintings.

Q. You use photographs documenting previous performances to create large-scale artworks, often layering these ephemeral moments like strata, and incorporating them into future more permanent works.

A. Some refer to this as my unique language across different mediums. I rarely discard anything related to an exhibition. Performance costumes are archived, and the artwork becomes part of subsequent pieces. I've heard

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that in Korea, when someone dies, their clothes are burned because the person's energy is infused in them. Similarly, I believe there's energy in the performance costumes, which I then repurpose and use sculptures and other artworks.

Q. At times, the scent in the space captures the memory of a moment. What do you hope the viewer takes away from the exhibition through their layered sensory experience of the space?

A. Instead of explaining everything, I'd rather let the viewers immerse themselves in their own experiences. My primary intention is to create works that evoke people's memories. I utilize methods that engage the senses, such as sight, hearing, and smell, to offer an experience beyond a fleeting moment captured on a smartphone. My hope is that the viewers take away a lasting, multi-sensory memory of the exhibition.

Q. BLISS POOL is an all-encompassing experience that showcases art in various mediums such as sculpture, installation, and performance. You've mentioned that you resist being labeled as an abstract artist. What description do you feel best represent you?

A. I'm not entirely opposed to being called an abstract artist. However, I think it's essential for an artist to retain an aura of nuance and mystery. More important than a specific title, is providing the audience with an opportunity to engage with the work and form their own interpretations from the experience.

Q. I noticed a young female visitor at the exhibition carrying a bag with drumsticks protruding from it. You have a background as a drummer in an underground band. What did this prior experience teach you that you now apply to your current art practice?

A. It taught me the value and significance of silence.

Q. How has Bolivian culture, living in the United States, and now being settled in Berlin impacted your work?

A. Each of these places has played a significant role in shaping my work, as they are all integral parts of my life. During my childhood, I was exposed to traditional festivals in Bolivia. While living in New York, my studio space was relatively limited. In contrast, Berlin is a welcoming city for artists, boasting stunning natural landscapes and a high quality of life. I've been able to secure a spacious studio at an affordable price and have settled in Berlin for the time being, surrounded by a supportive community.

Q. Since your 2017 Art Basel performance, you've gained a strong presence in the art world. What do you hope to achieve going forward?

A. I aim to keep creating glitches that can perplex AI systems.