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**DONNA HUANCA | THAT TOGETHERNESS, THAT RIOTOUS
SENSUALITY**

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If there's a lingering lesson to be learned from the exhausting isolation of the last couple of years—with its online viewing rooms and virtual gallery openings, adherence to social distancing measures and appointment-only gallery slots—it's the fundamental difference between experiencing art in solitude versus with other people. It's the yawning gap between contemplative isolation as opposed to collective (if usually silent) reflection. Notwithstanding overcrowded blockbuster museum shows or jammed previews, looking at art in the presence of our fellow humans brings it to life in a way that's just not possible when we attend solo. Someone else might be obviously laser-focused on a particular piece, compelling you to do the same, or you may simply enjoy the less palpable feeling that another visitor's mental cogs are whirring at the same time as yours. At their heart, museums, and galleries are designed to facilitate the very social experiences that have been so sorely lacking since spring 2020.

MAGMA SLIT, Bolivian-American artist Donna Huanca's immersive installation at the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle, provides bold evidence of the importance of the shared, live artistic encounter, in all its nuance

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and emotional heft. Deeply inspired by the rituals of her Andean heritage, as well as broader notions of transcendence, meditation, and human connection, the artist has created an utterly absorbing, multifaceted space that beckons each viewer to play an integral role in their own exhibition experience. Huanca's established involvement with the Berlin music and performance scene, in which collaboration and live connection have long provided such vital lifeblood, also makes its presence felt.



Stepping into the Henry's vast main space is, quite literally, dazzling. Huanca has installed the starkest of white vinyl flooring, as well as taking full control of the room's light levels by asking that the usually shuttered skylights be completely opened up, allowing natural light that's customarily carefully filtered to flood the gallery—the intensity of the brightness leaves you blinking for a few moments as your pupils constrict in response. In fact, the Seattle area's particular light levels— which will change enormously during the exhibition's year-long run, from long summer days that stretch late into the evening, to short winter ones when dusk begins in the mid-afternoon—were crucial to Huanca's initial connection with a space of this scale. “My exhibitions always respond to the specific limitations and atmospheres of each space, and so a large space doesn't feel daunting to me,” she says. “The first time I visited was last year on a very hot summer's day. I imagined my installation transforming the space and leading you out of the architecture and towards a new landing—a hybrid space that embraces the existing structure as much as possible, but that also transforms it. For example: the white shiny floor acts as a mirror that reflects the sky and the audience alike.”

These ancient notions of the passage of time, the rhythm of the changing seasons, and the movement of the sun; decay, followed by regeneration and rebirth have long been central to Huanca's practice. Here, they are explored not only through their manipulation of the gallery space that allows the sun and seasons to play a starring, if imperceptibly slow-moving, role, but also (on a more immediate level) through the works that inhabit it. Four frieze-scale paintings confidently occupy each of the four walls, while a huge mirrored sculpture, flanked by several smaller resin pieces, are installed on a stage in the center, and a singular curved corner is covered in a more understated, ghostly wall rubbing—evidence of one of Huanca's performances. Another of these wall rubbing performances was staged in the space's distinctive 'turret', leaving traces of the artist's proxy performer's painted body that feel somewhere between grubby and sensuous in a deep, regal purple. The decision to only use the very bottom of this towering room to depict a real human body, on human scale, is a brave and ultimately successful one—the ghostly marks bring an immediacy and intimacy to the space while

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also complimenting its remarkable height. Here too, we encounter sound and olfactory works that only add to the sensorial barrage.

Also centered in the turret, the sound piece, “MAGMA SLIT EAR,” described by the artist as a ‘sonic collage,’ features found and novel recorded sounds of human voices and noises from Huanca’s daily life, oscillating between intense vocalizations and gentle reverberations. The smell of the olfactory work, “MAGMA SLIT SCENT,” which is strongest in the turret, but inevitably seeps through into the main space, is satisfyingly earthy, leathery, with a hint of smoke or burnt wood—it serves to snaps us even further into the present moment, into Huanca’s all-encompassing riot of sensuality.

The unabashedly colorful paintings draw you in first. Conceived as responses to each of the four seasons and installed so that they face one of the four cardinal directions, over the course of the exhibition they will be rotated so they each spend a chunk of time installed on one of the Henry’s north, south, east, and west facing walls. Huanca builds her vibrant canvases from blown-up photographs of her performer’s painted bodies, as well as images of her own artwork and scenes from her studio. She then adds a mixture of painted and fabric layers to these digital collages—some thick, gloppy, and highly textured that have cracked and peeled like dried mud (or skin), others pale and translucent. Vestiges of the artist’s labor are all over these mural-sized images too: fingers dragged through and nails scratched into swathes of paint. It all feels frantic, exultant, with Huanca’s references to Andean ritual and joyous celebration of powerful female forms shouting from the canvases.



Walking alongside the long-mirrored form, entitled “PUERTA DE TRENZAS (Gate of Braids)” transforms our experience of the paintings from contemplative to kaleidoscopic. The piece is punctuated with what, at first glance, appear to be organic forms, but are actually precise, laser cut silhouettes of Huanca’s drawings depicting her friends in groups—a decision which feels like a meditation on our stark inability to congregate, to hug and connect with other humans, which has so marked the last couple of years. Synthetic braids of various hues hint at talismans and ancient ritual. It’s also at this point that descriptions of MAGMA SLIT as ‘viewer activated’ start to really make sense—you can control and play with your own viewing experience by moving quickly or slowly along the length of the sculpture. Walk slowly, and you encounter the slanted reflections of yourself and the paintings behind you meditatively, even psychedelically. Go fast, and the flashes of color, form, and your own reflection provide a vertiginous experience that I imagine is akin to running through a kaleidoscope. Person-sized resin sculptures each called “MOONSTONE FRAGMENT” and numbered, share the mirrored piece’s stage. Cast from clay and colored glossy white and silver, these have as much, if not more, evidence of the artist’s own passionate physicality and labor as the paintings behind them, marked as they are with fist marks and footprints, as well as piercing-esque objects that feel fetishistic in origin.

As a viewer, the inevitable response to all this sensory input is visceral and bodily, creating a deeply emotional

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connection to the work and bringing you to the edge of overwhelm, a response that's most certainly intentional, according to Huanca. "My practice is grounded in sensorial experience—it's both a subject of my work and the aim for the experience of the viewer," she says. "And I do a lot of work that focuses on the body, thinking about skin and sinew and hair and all the organs, and how we move and how we grow. I think there's a lot of trust in my work, what is implicit in instinct, in the incredible capacities of the body to self-regulate or not, on this cellular level."

This deep interest in the power of change and transformation on the 'cellular level' is reflected in the sculptures' stage too—vast, ovoid forms cut into huge steel sheets and covered with fine grains of aluminum oxide that look like some kind of beach straight out of a science fiction-inspired dreamscape. It feels like yet another reminder of the inevitability of earthly change, of the continuous transformation on micro and macro levels that was so profoundly recognized and celebrated by the artist's Andean ancestors, but can very easily slip out of our contemporary consciousnesses thanks to our preoccupation with technology.

A series of event-based activations are planned over the course of the exhibition's run, as well. The first, with Huanca's long-time collaborator, vocalist and electronic musician Lyra Pramuk, featuring Pramuk performing her songs on a specially-designed auxiliary stage, body painted according to Huanca's instruction, and clad in a specially-designed costume. Pramuk's futuristic folk music and transcendent experiments with the human voice add a distinctive and deeply spiritual, meditative take on Huanca's immersive world.

The fact that Huanca's work is so vast in scale and ambition, both physically and conceptually, means it is exceptionally well-suited to a space as enormous as the Henry. As a woman, particularly as a new mother, her work feels as if it's subverting the art world's entrenched maleness in so many ways—her bold depictions of the female form in her 'skin paintings' that feel as if they reclaim action painting, the way they tackle the very male monumentality of the Henry's architecture, or her performances that feel like contemporary ripostes to the male-dominated Viennese Actionists. Huanca works in such a broad range of media—sound, painting, performance, light, viewer's reflections, sculpture, and smell—that an exhibition of this scale could easily have become a confounding jumble. Instead, the feeling that builds as you walk around is orchestral rather than cacophonous. It conjures a sense of togetherness, collectivity, the importance of real life, human to human encounter over the virtual realm. "The goal of the work is to embrace the audience through all senses," says Huanca. "I'm always trying to balance and think about the different ways that the exhibition is going to be experienced—through digital and in-person interaction, especially because I was producing so much of the work myself from a distance. This exhibition in particular gives the viewer a real life experience that cannot be translated online."

