

ARTFORUM

Donna Huanca

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Berlin-based Bolivian-American artist Donna Huanca, through a dimly lit indigo tunnel. It led to a wall illuminated by the projected hues of DOS, PIEDRA QUEMADA (CLAY), PARRAJO (Two, Burnt Stone [Clay], Vine), 2021, a silent video of moving colors painted on the skin of what looked like a human belly crunching, stretching. At one point, mischievous squirts of copper paint come at the earth-and-sky colors on the belly: blue, green, yellow, bits of white clouds and black birds. Promptly, a hand appears to smear the metallic paint, its sheen taking over everything, penetrating skin folds, oozing under fabric, spreading everywhere.

The effect is soothing, even sexy, which made it hard to move on from this comforting blue cavern. Luckily, the show offered immaterial enticements, its scent (minty, woody palo santo) and sounds (the soothing crackling of embers) helping the viewer transition into a space that was completely different: bright white, lofty, reflective. Huanca's big, luxuriant paintings alluded to the constant human–screen interactions that structure our lives. Coupled with the huge mirrored walls everywhere, they also emphasized the ubiquity of these surfaces: how speculative architecture today loves its shiny chrome, glass, and marble; how high-end refrigerators, doorbells, and alarm clocks are also screens now.

Huanca's process is as follows: She paints on bodies, closely photographs them, blows the photos up on

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canvas, and then adds thick layers of oil paint mashed with sand. The paintings in the second room, ESPINA AZUL (Blue Thorn) and VERDE PUSSAX (Green Pussax), both 2021, were predominantly kelly and mint green, sky and deep blue, with whirlpools of white. With time, recognizably human features began to peek out from the swirls of crusty, shiny paint: a hand, a ponytail, a chin. The third gallery contained BLISS STARTE/ GOLDEN HOUR, 2021, a striking concoction of Pepto-Bismol pink with greens, blues, and whites under which the textures of dry, cracked clay and coarse skin could be deciphered. Here, too, was another highlight, the sculpture MŪ_LĀ__DHĀ_RA PROTECTOR REDUX, 2022, a massive stainless-steel disk carved in a symmetrical Rorschach-like form and adorned on one side with locks and chrome butt plugs and on the other with a long, lacelike curtain of blond and pink hair extensions. From its crown, in an assertive bisection, hung a majestic red ponytail of synthetic hair divided into little buns. This object demanded recognition; in another time and place it could have been an object of worship. A similarly imposing statue was CASITA QUINCUNX (Quincunx House), 2022, a vaguely religious figure formed out of a pile of steel wire and soft PVC fabric. The colors were Huanca's go-to blues, greens, and orange with sensitive touches of black. The plastic looked as if it had melted to embrace the steel's silhouette while simultaneously holding its insides in place: a shirt, a flower, a belt, more hair extensions. It felt like a humanoid version of Tracey Emin's My Bed, 1998.

Huanca's practice is ostensibly about decolonization and history, but it struck me that it is actually mainly about skin; her main strength is surfaces. Huanca is a master of textures and of the possible combinations of clay, fabric, paint, plastic, metal, mirrors. The digital and the corporeal are all more than happy to party together. Her penchant for mural-size paintings of ocean blue delightfully swirling with white, her skill for matching that already winning combo with other similarly enticing colors: That's what let the artist's gorgeous creations land on the skin of lusted-after Louis Vuitton bags last fall. Huanca's works are beautiful, even ravishingly seductive, whether they are emancipatory or anticolonial—well, that feels like a superficial question to ask of them.

— Gaby Cepeda