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Donna Huanca's immersive 'MAGMA SLIT' invites you to lose yourself at Henry Art Gallery

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A&E Pick of the Week

Watching the installation of “Donna Huanca: MAGMA SLIT,” a commissioned exhibition from the Bolivian American artist set to open at the Henry Art Gallery April 2, what’s immediately evident is the magnitude. For Huanca’s exhibition, the floors of the gallery are as white as the walls and at the center is a large platform shaped like a cell just beginning to divide. On that platform, explained Shamim M. Momin, the Henry’s director of curatorial affairs, will be 15 tons of white sand.

“We’ve done very different things in this gallery over time, in this total immersive space,” said Momin, who organized the exhibit, working with the Germany-based Huanca. “It’s something very particular about what she’s interested in — that it encompasses all of how you move through it. [How] it engages the architecture, the multiple senses, all of that is uniquely immersive.”

The dimensions of the space seem to shift as you move through. The stark whiteness of everything in the room can give a feeling of the walls continuously expanding upward when you’re in the space and then making those in the space look surprisingly small if you stand at the top of the Henry’s cascading staircase.

“I wanted to respond to that scale by anchoring the room with a center stage that distracts you from the explosion of color and drama of the paintings behind you,” said Huanca.

Yet to be installed during a mid-March walk-through of the exhibition — the first commissioned exhibition at the Henry

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supported by the Richard E. and Jane Lang Davis New Works Fund — were a series of sculptures laser-cut from reflective stainless steel that will sit upon the central platform and four mural-sized paintings that will hang on each of the gallery's walls. The surfaces of the sculptures will alternate reflective and matte so they flicker as you walk by. The paintings, named after the seasons, will be rotated periodically by the Henry staff, tracking the passage of time and standing in for the cycle of birth, death, decay and renewal. To similarly give a sense of the passage of time, the Henry will only periodically clean footprints off of the white floors, leaving the impressions from those who have come before.

The exhibition will also feature smaller, more organic sculptures and cast aluminum painted pieces, as well as some aural aspects. The overall effect of the exhibition is meant to be one of walking through a kaleidoscopic tunnel, inviting attendees to lose themselves in both space and time.

The origins for this exhibition date back to 2019, with Huanca exploring themes around the natural cycles of death and life in the world. Huanca was originally scheduled to visit the Henry in March 2020, but Momin said they wound up canceling the day before. Even leading up to this April's exhibit, there was uncertainty around whether Huanca was going to be able to make it to the Henry for a site visit, an aspect of the creative process that is important for an artist like Huanca, whose works are created for, and integrated with, specific architectural spaces.

Luckily, Momin said, Huanca had an exhibition opening in June 2021 at Ballroom Marfa in Texas. Not only was Huanca able to work on similar concepts there that would appear in the upcoming Henry exhibition, like working with reflective metal surfaces, but she was also able to stop by Seattle after working on the Ballroom Marfa installation to see the Henry space. Then, a digital model of the space was precisely rendered so Huanca, as much as possible, was able to feel like she could experience the dimensions of the actual space while working from her home base of Berlin, Germany.

"When I did studio visits with her on the phone, that studio was just in chaos," Momin said. "It was glorious. It's a very physical process with that scale and with those sculptures, which — they're cast in aluminum eventually, but they're done by hand. You can see the imprint of the hand and how they're moved about."

Huanca and Momin worked on the concept for the exhibition for about six months after that visit. At one point, Momin recalled, they were considering a sort of labyrinth, drawing from those tilt maze games with a metal ball, potentially representing a journey of discovery. In the end, it felt like that could be too limiting in a COVID-19 environment since that might have necessitated sending participants through one at a time.

Eventually they landed on the interlocking ovoid forms that take center stage of Huanca's "MAGMA SLIT," a title that "refers to a hairline crack, a stretch mark, a glimpse inside the Earth's magmatic core," Huanca explained.

In addition to the installed exhibition, the Henry is working on organizing live performances of various genres to perform in dialogue with the exhibition's themes and add to the multidimensional experience of Huanca's work. Momin said the first they are anticipating will be a performance from composer, performance artist and Huanca collaborator Lyra Pramuk. Huanca will also guide a live dancer in a nonpublic performance that will have the performer painted and performing against one of the gallery's walls, creating a wall rubbing that will leave a trace of a body in motion. Only one performance, that will likely take place this fall, is scheduled to take place on the landscaped sand itself.

"The purpose of my work is to facilitate a glitch in everyday life to allow the viewer to take a breath," said Huanca. "My hope is that the impact this has on an audience is something that on the one hand they hopefully won't forget and on the other stimulates their own memory."

"Donna Huanca: MAGMA SLIT"