

THE INTRICATE COSMOLOGY OF DONNA HUANCA

WORDS BY FEDERICO SARGENTONE



Through large-format paintings, sculptures, installations, and performances, Bolivian-American artist Donna Huanca has established a language that moves beyond the canonical “fine-art” system to bridge and incorporate a diverse range of creative practices, stretching the lineage between movement and tension. She engages with a multitude of performers in her work, who sometimes act more as muses, and she experiments with formats and media to create environments that approximate entire worlds. Traces of these characters can be found as breathing bodies in a gallery setting, impressed onto a canvas, or simply hanging around Huanca’s Berlin studio — “my own ritual place,” as she calls it — for a posing session.

In the site-specific installation *Obsidian Ladder*, conceived for the former Masonic temple of the Marciano Art Foundation in Los Angeles, for example, a massive eight-panel painting acts as the background for a set of performers covered in paint and styled in garments produced by the artist herself. In *Scar Cymbals* – her 2015 breakthrough presentation at the Zabłudowicz Collection in London – a site-responsive architectural and sculptural installation activates the former church, creating an ecosystem that challenges viewers by exposing

PERES PROJECTS

the naked body and concealing it under layers of paint, cosmetics, and latex. Two upcoming solo exhibitions, at the Arnolfini Centre for Contemporary Arts in Bristol and the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle, will further elaborate on themes adjacent to her poetics through large-scale immersive installations combining movement, sound, paintings, and environments. “It’s a bit of a crazy time,” she tells me while Zooming from her studio.

Every aspect of Huanca’s practice revolves around the celebration and contextualization of the human form, intended as the primary vehicle for her artistic practice. “Everything always goes back to the body,” she says. “And that’s such an important part for me to start, because I feel like everything I do is collage work. It’s based on taking something and combining things that don’t necessarily belong together. The paintings wouldn’t exist without the live body.”



This transition from the live element to the staged composition is particularly explicit in Huanca’s work, as if her practice would allow certain mundane, living motifs to become art, and vice versa. An ensemble of performers – or “girls,” as Donna likes to say – embody the physical manifestation of a piece that wouldn’t exist without the presence of its cast in a specific space, and time. “It’s always been really exciting to have my work come alive in front of me,” she explains. “I just create the set and stage to let the performers do their own thing. And that’s a really exciting dynamic that I have with them.”

In a white-cube, institutional art space, these works cease to be art and become objects – as in, art-objects. This process of transformation is triggered by mediation: the institutional setting that constitutes the ultimate context for the artwork’s fruition simultaneously influences the work itself. “People who are looking at art don’t necessarily have that type of understanding,” she comments. “They’re just shocked to see a person standing there. And a lot of the times, in certain shows I’ve had, there are audience members that have never even been to a museum.” By nature, Donna’s work is far from being set into stone, her choreographed installations allow themselves to change over time. This fluidity is better exemplified when the work comes to its reception: the audience is present. And, in the moment the audience steps into the timeless dimension of the gallery space, they become part of the work, they share the space with the bodies, the paintings, the sculptures, and the installation that contains them.

Sometimes, the participatory nature of the performative work has put Donna into questioning the terms and conditions by which her work is assimilated and digested. Her work challenges traditional canons of beauty,

PERES PROJECTS

although it is often shown in public museums and institutions like the “tourist-packed Belvedere Museum in Vienna,” where she presented the exhibition *Piedra Quemada* in 2018. “In the most pop settings – like settings that aren’t very niche art spaces – you get the craziest reactions. People start to cry, or they’ll have this very uncomfortable attitude towards the models. They sort of don’t know how to behave, because they don’t expect to see a live person in the space. They don’t know how to relate with them, or to discuss the work in proximity.” There’s a boundary that is crossed.



PERES PROJECTS

In every iteration of Donna Huanca's work, her performers are subjected to the gaze of the viewer. No physical or dialogical interaction is ever created as the work maintains critical distance, but the potential objectification of the body is an inevitable part of what is presented on stage. Her models are prepared to face challenges and to be put front and center. "I'm really careful," she explains, "I talk to them about their comfort and I have security guards for each of them. I care about their safety on stage." Cast among artists, fashion creatives, performers, musicians, and friends of friends of the global creative scene, the performers slowly became the foundation of Huanca's work, which she nurtures and protects by all means. When speaking about her cast, the artist gets instinctively emotional and grateful for the work they put into making her art come alive. These people have worked with her for years, as she tends to build long-lasting relationships that continue after the performances cease to exist, and she is extremely caring of this universe she has created throughout the years.



"Can you handle this experience and are you going to be cool with everyone else? Do we all trust each other? Are we all willing to have each other's back?" Those are the preliminary questions the artist asks her models before committing to the almost-excruciating, unpredictable journey of performing every day for more than one month in a gallery setting in front of an audience. "I can't really describe how it will be for them," Huanca says. "And that's why I like working with people and having these exchanges with all the models that I work with: they're always coming from different worlds. They're artists themselves, and just different types of people who I cast based on how comfortable we are together."

"I'm glad you saw [my work] in person because I think a lot of people never did," jokes Huanca. Online, this practice can only be identified as the sum of its elements — sculptures, performance, paintings, sound, scent — while in person, it can be experienced in its intended totality. The formal aspect of the work leaves space for meditation, as the rhythm paces slowly while flourishing in a dramatic catharsis. "How can we find a moment of contemplation or solace?" Huanca questions of her work. "I think that has always been my intention, but I don't think it was ever really understood."

"I feel like the paintings can be very loud and give you something in contrast to what you're seeing in the rest of the work, which is silence or slowness," she continues. "I think that's how to make a painting. You're pressing pause on a video. It's something that's continuous, but you're just getting a tiny fragment of something much bigger."

PERES PROJECTS

Always moving across disciplines, Huanca works horizontally: stretching the possibilities of her medium to the fullest. Her work finds its rhythm when it's shared with her peers, her extended family of more-than-just-bodies. Her cosmology is being written at the same time it is performed, activated, gazed at, disseminated. Her universe is in constant flux and open to change, and so is her work.

