



Donna Huanca: Desert Deities

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Mount Ruapehu, the largest active volcano in New Zealand, last erupted in 2007, sending a lahar of mud, rock, and water from the mountain's crater sweeping down the mountain. In multimedia artist Donna Huanca's current exhibition at Ballroom Marfa, "ESPEJO QUEMADA," the painting Ruapehus Scar translates that sense of mutating energy to the canvas. One of an assembled quintet of paintings made with oil stick and sand on a digital print, its gestural, frenetic swirls in navy blues and icy whites create a tangle of passageways, through which it appears we're witnessing a state change: solids melting into liquids, which begin flowing.

Ruapehus Scar is the first canvas in the grouping, and its turbid blues give way, from left to right, to a swirl of cool and warm tones (Magma Pheomelanin Lick), then succumb entirely to white-hot reds and oranges in the final panels. If Ruapehus is an eruption near the surface that nevertheless remains submerged, betraying only the symptoms of heat, Cotopaxi Sweat—the title references the Cotopaxi stratovolcano just south of Quito, Ecuador—and Espejo Pheomelanita (the last two panels) represent the full-force explosion, the realization of the rumblings in the previous paintings. A seismic event leaves a mark. The nature of the transformation is ambiguous—a violent surprise or a long-awaited shift? But an important relationship is established, which the titles key into: body and landscape merge in a unified process of change.

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Huanca—who was born in Chicago to Bolivian parents and now resides in Berlin—drew on memories from a 2005 visit to Marfa for the show, impressed by the extremes of heat and light in the West Texas desert. (Though she planned to return to further organize it, travel restrictions prevented it.) In the installation, the galleries have been adjusted to mimic its visual contrasts. One gallery was brightened with special lighting, and the other carpeted and the ceiling dropped, making it womb-like, according to curator Daisy Nam. These are certainly metaphysical states, but they are also physiological—dramatizing the sensations of the body. In and around Marfa, the physical experience is demanding, possibly dangerous, but also potentially revelatory—a magnetic combination for artists since Donald Judd first moved there in 1972.



Sound and scent add additional layers. Throughout the exhibition, a looped soundtrack pipes in abstracted voices and animal sounds, its origin unclear. “It almost sounds like you’re underwater,” says Nam. Huanca also deconstructs scents for her installations—previously she worked with palo santo, for example—and here introduces another concoction. These diffuse effects, playing with the dials on our senses, perform a gentle transference.

Here, abstraction is a tool to feel with the body without necessarily looking at it (in a traditional sense). This is a departure from the work for which she is best known, where in immersive installations, female performers—whom she refers to as models—are often painted to mirror the colors and textures of the surrounding walls and sculptures, and in durational performances, move un-choreographed about the space. They are variously adorned with braids or ponytails of synthetic hair (Huanca at first used real horse hair, but later felt it was too charged a material), textiles, and thick, clear plastic. GUERRERA PROTECTORA (pacha) and SCRYING CON DIOS(A), two new sculptures shipped from Berlin and paired inside and outside in the museum’s courtyard, in part take on the responsibilities of those performers, while also building on the idioms of prior works. Nam mentions that while previous sculptures reminded her of shelters, in which the performers could take refuge or rest, these sculptures are stand-alone presences.

Twin circular planes of stainless steel with symmetrical cutouts, they are (celestial) bodies, portals, mirrors, faces. Whereas previous works in steel were layered with oil stick, SCRYING CON DIOS(A) has been machine-polished to mirror-like reflectivity and positioned atop an adobe slab, surrounded by a stone geoglyph reminiscent of a labyrinth or Nazca lines, the monumental pre-Columbian earth drawings on the Peruvian plains. GUERRERA PROTECTORA (pacha), decked with the ponytails the models wore—but also hooks, clasps, rings,

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beads, and sex toys—emerges from a mound of white sand in the gallery, immutable and gnostic. Like the models, pacha is feminized and adorned conspicuously, performatively. The ponytails and rings viscerally alter an otherwise smooth surface, but beyond anthropomorphizing the work, they act as an armor—transformative and protective—in the face of objectification.



We are all enamored with mirrors, but Huanca is particularly interested in what it is they reveal, not simply show. SCRYING CON DIOS(A)—the “a” adding a little mischief—works particularly well outside because it can reflect the figures of visitors in their environment, as well as passing clouds (themselves also a possible scrying medium). The reflections and self-portraits that ripple through the history of Western art meet other veins of tradition. The title of Huanca’s show at Peres Projects earlier this fall, “Obsidian Mirror,” perhaps references the early use of those objects in Postclassic Mesoamerican culture, where they were employed ritually to communicate with the Aztec underworld. (The deity Tezcatlipoca is often translated from Nahuatl as “Smoking Mirror.”) Before that, still bowls of water were often used for divination. The sand, as a constitutive element of modern mirrors incorporated throughout the presentation, is also a subtle deconstruction of them.

Language is another kind of imperfect mirror. “Espejo Quemada” translates to “burnt mirror,” but the adjective “burnt” is deliberately feminized. Huanca, in playful, yet forceful titles, reveals the elasticity of language, seeking to cleave openings in seemingly rigid grammatical binaries. In a more literal demonstration of the materiality of language, pacha’s two ponytails, segmented evenly by a series of plastic zip ties, also recall khipu, a notational system of knotted cords employed by Andean cultures as a means to keep records and share information. It’s an evocative reference to the richness and depth of human systems of communication, as well as their mysteries.