

### A Post-Pandemic Statement: Donna Huanca's Espejo Quemada at Ballroom Marfa



By Anthony Dexter Giannelli

Ballroom Marfa sits in a contemporary art oasis in the middle of the West Texas Desert. A unique exhibition space, it has had the pleasure of ushering in rising and established artists as coveted pitstop on their rise to world-renowned careers. Solo showings are given to art world darlings who boast a long list of continued institutional exhibitions. Among these, have been installation favourites from a range of diverse voices including Elmgreen and Dragsted, Rashid Johnson, and now the Bolivian-American Donna Huanca. Huanca's current exhibition *Espejo Quemada* premieres as the first post-pandemic major exhibition work in Marfa, and her show is being closely watched to determine how the over year-long forced hiatus has shifted perceptions in the art world

Opening this past June 26 and running to November 22, 2021, *Espejo Quemada* spans canvases and sculptures in controlled white cube(ish) gallery space to site-specific outdoor installation works which will morph with the changing climate of their environment. This is not the first major institutional show from Berlin-based Huanca in recent years: she has enjoyed solo exhibitions at unique spaces across Europe and North America, including a massive theatre space in a former Masonic temple in Los Angeles. Combining her expression across mediums, her immersive environments incorporate oil paint, acrylic resins, synthetic hair, sand, scents of indigenous Andean woods, soundscapes, and live performers to bring to life an ever-changing, breathing terrain. Blurring the geological with the corporeal, all is in signature bio-reminiscent hues of blue, green, sienna and white.

#### Glancing through *Espejo Quemada*

In *Espejo Quemada*, all the key pieces of Huanca's past immersive installations are present: the towering canvases, artificial yet biological sculpture work, sound, and scent. However, one expected staple in Huanca's work, the presence of

# PERES PROJECTS

breathing human bodies, is missing. Yet still, without the performers' physical presence, each element of the show – from the curves and texture of paintings and sculptures – bring us back to a more expansive and even introspective view of the body (human or other). In the artificially created and controlled environment of the gallery space, it's easy to relate the fabricated landscape around us to what we know; cues like the presence of synthetic hair will draw our thoughts to the feminine and the human form, and condition our understanding of the space. Moving outward, materials such as sand and metal prepare viewers for the presence of geological bodies in site-specific sculpture that communes with the changing and uncontrolled desert landscape, thus opening as a stage to the celestial bodies that first inspired her work.

*Espejo Quemada* translates from Spanish as 'burnt mirror,' but the adjective 'burnt' has been intentionally feminized. In a time when much of western culture is still suffering from a dogmatic and shame-controlled approach to the human body and femininity, from her burnt mirror, Huanca presents a growing narrative that embraces the nomadic and calls for change.

Building upon threads of cultural exchange and dialogue, Huanca incorporates her personal journey within the context of her surroundings. Along with the direct use of sounds and scents that hold personal meaning, Huanca often cites memories of the Bolivian festival of Urkupiña as an inspiration in her practice, the all-sensory experience creates deeply personal and unique sensations for each who witnesses it. As an artist, Huanca shares a story that only she can tell, her experiences and memories; but to viewers this story morphs based on individual understanding and the works' surroundings, growing from the west Texas landscape and building strength from each separate interpretation.



## A Post-Pandemic Statement

Artists, galleries, and institutions – essential elements of an industry rooted in the physical – have been all, in some way, affected by the pandemic; delayed shows and contracts made way for a long period of adaptation and looking inward. For Huanca and Marfa this was certainly the case: the show was planned pre-pandemic and then subject to seemingly endless delays and promises hinged upon local, national, and international re-openings. Today, the show, its audience, and its interpretation are inherently different from what would have occurred pre-March 2020.

# PERES PROJECTS

Furthermore, waves of social and political events in 2020 and early 2021 have changed the contextual landscape in the United States from that which we had have experienced Huanca's Espejo Quemada in its original form. We expect to see institutions held accountable and address an even greater pressure on decolonization, a critical view on the West's attitude towards culture and race, and vital environmental issues. Ballroom Marfa, besides the debut of Huanca's work, also presents an ongoing series of programming on indigenous voices, *Knowledge of Wounds 2021-22*, as well as environmentally focused works like Birdscapes Radio.

Now that we are entering the post-pandemic period, many are looking to the first wave of installation-based exhibitions as a check-up on the art world's vital signs. Are we picking up where we left off, or can we start to see some signs that things may have changed for good? Some are looking for a sign of how artists known for their use of performance-based works have adapted after the pandemic, and what it could mean for their future. Although performance and immersive-based works don't seem to be going anywhere, and their presence was deeply missed during the hiatus, this time away from the performance sphere did ultimately make many artists reconsider their work and take broader perspectives. Take for example Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmussen, an artist currently featured at Copenhagen Contemporary – a space formerly inhabited by one of Huanca's performance-based environments, Lengua Llorona. Rasmussen arranged smaller scale performative works throughout the pandemic in public space and now opened her first post-pandemic institutional show with an ambitious performance schedule, possibly even grander than her pre-pandemic work.

In this light, contextualizing Huanca as an exclusively performance-based practice would be belittling. In fact, her use of performance garnered attention for its innovative use, but even more outstanding is her creation of a living, breathing environment regardless of medium. Whether or not living body performers are present within these landscapes, the viewer's interpretation is what brings life to the space; and though the sounds of the forest may be coming from a speaker bouncing off white walls and artificial sand, the viewer is transported to a world that is just as alive as their own mind makes it.

Though the exhibition was initially planned for months before the pandemic, Huanca's process actually began 15 years prior with a visit to the site. These memories are honoured and live on through the exhibition. We are thus reminded of our experiences during the pandemic with a greater awareness of our surroundings, and Huanca's mirrors ultimately become a metaphorical means to reflect on our past and present.