

# GARAGE

## Donna Huanca's Body Work

The artist makes Instagram-worthy installations. But you have to be there to see them. Photographed by Roman Goebel

The multidisciplinary artist Donna Huanca was born in Chicago, the daughter of Bolivian immigrants. She studied painting in school, but soon rejected its conventions in order to experiment with collaged textiles and more importantly, body painting. In her current practice, she brings together a variety of mediums—including dance, painting, performance, and video—all in service of her main medium, the female body. Her works often feature nude models streaked with paint, interacting within a spatial environment—fuse object and performative body into vivid tableaux.

In 2018, Huanca staged a show in the baroque chambers of the Belvedere, Vienna's 18th-century palace turned museum, in which live models—wearing long, coated hair extensions, with limbs spray-painted and wrapped in vinyl and molded plastic, their shoulders dusted with turmeric—walked around steel sculptures painted with colors and patterns that matched the ones on their bodies. Her installation at last year's Frieze London included white "sand dunes" on the floor, and the scent of palo santo wafting throughout. Working with bodies, means working with people—her collaborators are not "models" in their traditional sense, passively standing around, but active participants. In a way the transformation of the environment serves not for the spectator, but to create a heightened mood for her participants. They're the ones setting the energy for the space. After a work is finished, Huanca asks performers to meditate on their experience, and write down their feelings. A total experience.

- PAIGE KATHERINE BRADLEY



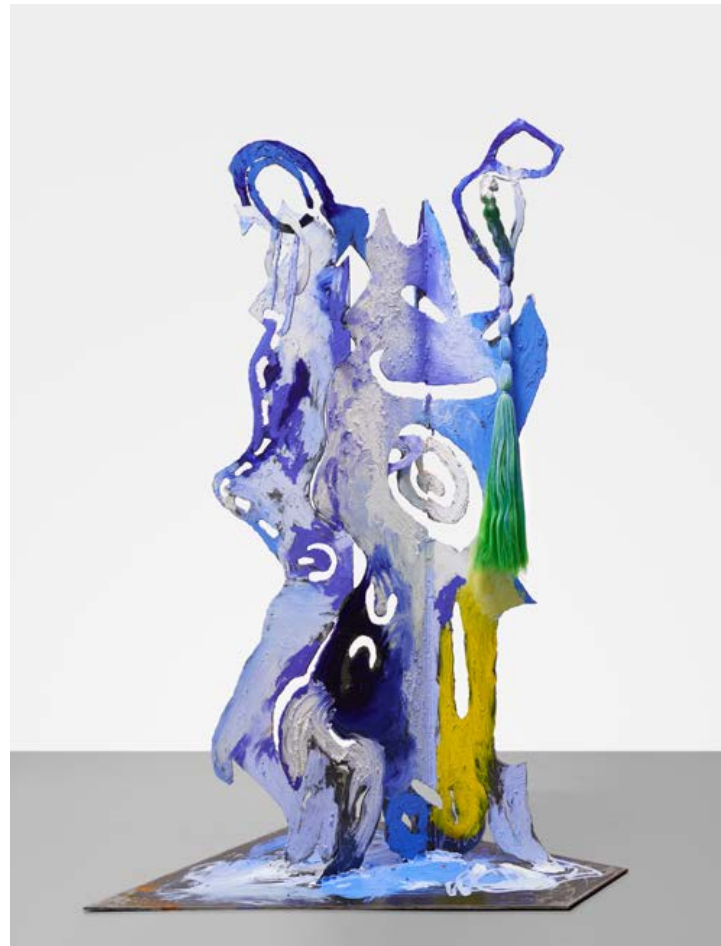
Donna Huanca is "interested in the ways we treat objects as the vessels for our desires—we pour emotion into them and give them power".

**The way you engage with painting would, at first, seem to come out of a tradition of gestural abstraction, but there could be other historical and cultural references at play in your work. For example, you've talked about how you've been inspired by a traditional Bolivian carnival— Alasitas, no?—which you went to when you were a child. What particular aspects of that kind of ritual have informed your own process?**

I'm actually talking about the Festival de Urkupiña—growing up, I spent summers with my family in Bolivia, and I consider this festival to be my first encounter with a total artwork, a surreal fusion of traditional Catholic and Andean cultures, full of sound, dance, couture that still inspires me today.

**You've also spoken about your interest in the Ekeko figurines from the Andes. What about those figurines inspires you in your own process?**

# PERES PROJECTS



The Ekeko is an altar piece that grants wishes by decorating it with the objects you wish to acquire. I am interested in the ways we treat objects as the vessels for our desires—we pour emotion into them and give them power.

**When you were developing as an artist, did you feel limited by the tradition in painting, perhaps fostered by Western art education, of seeking the single, perfect image? How did you find the confidence to move away from that pressure?**

Growing up, I was not exposed to traditional forms of Eurocentric art, so in retrospect, this allowed me to see and create art as limitless. I've never felt connected to formal traditional painting and all the tropes that surround it, so for a long time I painted with nontraditional mediums such as makeup, food, fabric, sound, clay, etc.

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**elements like scent, in what you do, do you think someone can understand what you're doing without seeing it in person?**

Absolutely, my work is very layered and coded—and can definitely be experienced in different ways, both digitally and physically. The physical experience is special because unlike other ways of experiencing art, you are not seeing a finished product, but rather you are participating in the creation by how your own presence affects the performance. There is no distinction between the audience and the performer. You both share the awkwardness of proximity, particularly because you can't hide behind your phone.

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The daughter of Bolivian immigrants, Huanca often looks for inspiration within the mix of Andean and Catholic cultures.  
Donna wears dress by **VERSACE**, boots by **PUCCI**



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**In your performances and installations, you request that no photography be taken. Are you pushing back against the digital distribution of art, or is it more about creating a situation where people are discouraged from turning the female models into a thing a spectator then owns as digital files?**

Both. It's important to me to create a total experience in the performances. I incorporate sound, scent, body movement, painting, and sculpture into my work, and the performances provide a meditative experience for the audience. However, at this point, it's almost second nature or instinctual for someone to want to photograph such a multisensorial experience, although the phone acts as a disrupter to this experience, not just for yourself, but also for the collective audience. I want to encourage the actual presence of the audience and not allow them to hide behind their phones.

**My understanding is that when you were developing as an artist and didn't have a permanent residence, you would often use your own clothes as materials for art-making. What aspects of contemporary fashion or other practices of costume and ornament do you want to evoke in your work?**

I'm interested in the idea of self-decoration and aesthetic as a primal urge that we all have for communicating, signaling, and community building. I am interested in adornment, as it is coded with meaning and history—or that are evocative of some kind of fantasy. I am a collector of objects and clothing that evoke a spiritual meaning for me. But the fashion world includes violences that I am repelled by: the fetishization of the body, the male gaze, the massive waste that comes with the incredibly fast, trend-based consumerism and the elitism. The fashion industry is also so essential to social media, which I feel my work provides an antidote for. I hope that people enter my exhibitions and feel a sense of presence and groundedness that is so often stolen away by our phones.

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