

sleek



SLEEK N°51

STUDIO VISIT

Interview ARIELLE BIER
Photography KEVIN MASON

Donna Huanca

Ritual Resurrection

Combining performance, painting and sculpture, DONNA HUANCA is bringing the dead back to life with the help of her audience





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Images of the body are Donna Huanca's core motif. Sheaths of skin-like fabric – painted, torn, burned, creased, crumpled, layered and stretched – permeate every aspect of her output, and even her atelier. Today, her Kreuzberg workshop is a jumble of shiny, metallic, candy-coloured clothes, sheets of industrial plastic sheeting, and pastel toned paintings. Having moved her studio from New York to Berlin three-weeks ago, she's already unleashed her entire battery of resources, filling the converted garage from floor to ceiling with recently exhibited pieces and new works in progress. Few furnishings grace her studio apart from a small stage, placed in the centre of the room, the locus of her creative process.

Currently preparing new work for a series of solo exhibitions opening across Europe this autumn, she seems unfazed by the change in scenery. Growing up in Chicago, she accompanied her Bolivian parents every summer to Fiesta de la Virgen de Urkupiña, a religious festival attracting up to a million visitors. "Being little and dancing all night, the festival chaos is still embedded in my brain," says Huanca. "The colours and sounds... It was ritual debauchery and surreal, totally exceptional to my otherwise normal, daily life. These surreal, psychedelic pockets of time, really fuel what I do now."

In her early works, such as the 2009 video "Dressing the Queen (Pachamama)", she began embedding found textiles into her work. "I started to cut up my clothing, gluing it on canvas," she says, "My intention was immediacy and painting with fabric was the fastest and most visceral way to achieve that."

Today, this approach has expanded into performance, encompassing models in various states of undress, channelling new age spirituality and psychedelic ritualism. In these shows, the body, and more specifically the nude female body, is put on display, reclaiming how women's forms are seen

with a non-sexual agenda. Painted in various brightly coloured shades, they move slowly, conducting partially improvised movements, pausing in angular positions, interacting with surrounding installations. Remnants from each production roll over from one project to the next. For example, imprints of her models' painted forms like those on Plexiglas panels created in "Water Scars" at Valentin in Paris last year, become fodder for paintings such as "smokey eye (cry)", composed of fingerprints made with mascara and oil on wool. "Neither I



nor the viewer can fully grasp or control the models," Huanca says. When shown side-by-side, her static installations and performances emphasise the role of the audience – who act as intermediaries between the two mediums – becoming part of it in the process.

To Huanca, the models are projections of herself, and the Plexiglas panels and fabric sheaths function as shelters. "Being the subject of 'the gaze' is exhausting," she states. "And the materials the models wear start to function similarly to the way we use clothing and make-up as armour in the real world." Although she considers these static compositions to be 'dead' when compared to her 'living' works with models, by placing them in this context she reinvigorates

them using the audience's eye. "To me, this is like looking at the past, like relics at the natural history museum," she says, grabbing one of her woven sculptures. "That's why I want to infuse them during the performance with someone who is living, breathing and changing."

Following her 2015 exhibition "Echo Implant" at Joe Sheftel Gallery in New York, Huanca began photographing the body paintings on her models, making abstractions from details such as ears and crevices. "When the performances are happening, nobody gets close to the models. There were things I thought audiences weren't seeing and at the end of the night, my paintings would wash off of the models. There was a sadness in losing those works that I wanted to capture." She then recreated some of these techniques in the studio, printed the close-up images on canvas and over-painted in layers, using the same materials applied to the models like clown paint, clay and turmeric, incorporating oil stick and sand for added density.

In addition to a solo show opening at Peres Projects in Berlin this September, Huanca will present her largest exhibition to date at the Zabłudowicz Collection in London as part of their annual commissions. The exhibition focuses on the seven layers of the epidermis, guiding audiences through a series of installations in different parts of the former 19th century Methodist Chapel. Featuring altars, totems, a vibrating stage and a three-storey structure made from glass scaffolding, it's her most ambitious project to date, and one that she hopes visitors will appreciate as they become immersed within it. "I want to focus on giving audiences a meditative experience," she says. "When you are there, you're alive."

Donna Huanca, Zabłudowicz Collection
176 Prince of Wales Road, London
20 September – 18 December 2016

SURROGATE PAINTEEN
Peres Projects, Karl Marx Allee 82, 10243 Berlin
2 September – 28 October 2016