

**SPECIAL FEATURE: Donna Huanca**

ART IN CULTURE – Taehyeon Kwon



Artist Donna Huanca is renowned for her multidisciplinary approach, as her art effortlessly blends painting, sculpture, performance, sound, and scent. As a “total artist,” she captivates the international art scene with her monumental scale, historical contextualization, and provocative body language. Huanca recently held her first solo exhibition in Korea, titled *BLISS POOL*, where she showcased over 20 new works, featuring paintings, sculptures, and performances set against the backdrop of a large, curved structure. To heighten the audience’s synesthetic experience, she wove personally sampled sounds and the distinctive scents of Palo Santo wood and burnt hair into her exhibition.

Utilizing improvisational and singular bodily expressions, she delves into the connections between humans and nature, birth and death, and the present and past. At the heart of her work is the “cycle of life.” She repurposes materials from previous pieces, fuses painting and performance, and reinterprets classical art with a contemporary twist. Although Huanca’s work presents a wide range of materials and practices, a shared DNA runs through them all. Huanca emphasizes subjectivity through a performer who effortlessly navigates the stage. Her body painting poetically communicates themes of camouflage, fusion, and self-protection, touching

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on origin, memory, and identity. Donna Huanca is indeed a “body magician.” In celebration of her exhibition, she participated in a conversation with art critic Kwon Tae-hyun, discussing the power of her art as it embraces the “aesthetics of hybridity.”

## BODY MAGICIAN/Donna Huanca X Taehyeon Kwon

**Kwon:** You are currently active in the mainstream Western art world, but at the same time, you seem to be introducing disparate materials and forms within this Western-centric art scene. At first glance, your work appears to follow the conventions of Western art. However, upon closer examination, I believe that the hybrid forms rooted in your Bolivian identity possess the power to critically reflect on colonialism.

**Huanca:** Your observation is intriguing. When I was young, Western art and its institutions felt very distant, as if they were grand places inaccessible to me. I view my work as an attempt to make a mark on the walls and doors of that space, and this process is still ongoing. Even though I am currently active in the Western art world, I don't consider myself an expert in the conventions of Western art. Rather, my work is firmly connected to my own identity.



### *Hybrid Forms, Bolivian Identity*

**Kwon:** Can we discuss the specific elements connected to your identity that you mentioned earlier? Materials like hair are quite unique, and in a past interview, you also referenced the Inca civilization. What does hair represent in your work?

**Huanca:** Hair is a material I frequently use in my work, and it's a truly fascinating medium for me. To me, hair carries symbolic meaning, and I create clothing with it or even paint on it. I use hair as if I'm collecting memories. I consider hair a type of “recording device” that we all carry with us. In fact, our hair contains records of not only the medications we've taken but also every emotionally traumatic event we've experienced. If I were to describe it beautifully, hair is like a “diary” that we write in every day. The longer a person's hair, the more information it holds, and the greater power I believe it possesses.



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I also repurpose hair from past works as materials for new pieces. Braiding hair is a crucial part of my creative process, as it involves gathering various moments of life and tying them together. In this context, I particularly reference the quipu, a knot-based record-keeping device of the ancient Inca civilization. Did you know that instead of using written characters, the ancient Incas left records in the form of knots? They recorded daily events and even performed calculations using knot-based devices.



## THE CYCLE OF LIFE AND THE FLOW OF TIME

**Kwon:** So, the hairstyles of the performers in your work and the braided hair shapes found in your sculptures and installations were indeed inspired by the quipu. One of the most fascinating points from the story you shared is that you don't discard materials used in the past but rather reuse them in subsequent works. Of course, this is an important aspect in terms of temporality, but such an attitude also seems to break away from the notion of attributing an artwork to a single material.

**Huanca:** I strive not to discard materials I've used in my work. I believe that the DNA of the performers in my work remains not only in the performance itself, but also in the various materials used in the performance. For this reason, I often reuse materials from past works to create new ones. The "cycle of life" and the "flow of time" are the core concepts that shape my work. I intricately weave all of my works together, connecting one piece to another—from performance to painting, from sculpture to installation. By preserving traces of previous works and recycling materials through a self-sustaining process, each work accumulates layers of dimensions, lifetimes, and time, expanding and refracting like sedimentary layers or tree rings. In this way, the unique history engraved in the creative process is conveyed alongside the complex details of the work.

**Kwon:** The interplay and connections between your work and materials bring to mind recent theories about matter, objects, and networks. In your artworks, the flow of materials and substances expands to create connections between different pieces. In your recent exhibitions, various works such as body painting, traditional painting, sculpture, and installation have been prominently integrated. I'm interested in learning more about the process of extending from body painting or traditional painting into other materials and forms.

**Huanca:** In my early artistic career, my works were predominantly not paintings. In fact, I didn't identify as

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a painter until quite recently. Lately, I've found enjoyment in collaborating with performers on body painting projects. Body painting holds significance for me, as it utilizes living human skin as a canvas, resulting in ephemeral, non-permanent art. This impermanence brings a sense of freedom to the process when working with performers. The finished body paintings serve as the overall backdrop for my works exhibited at my solo show at Space K. Images captured during previous body painting sessions form the foundational layer of my large-scale paintings. I create these expansive works by applying additional paint over those photographs. Other pieces in my collection have also been developed through similar processes.

The *BLISS POOL* exhibition is a comprehensive amalgamation of painting, performance, sculpture, and installation, presented in a collage-like manner. My creative process is self-generative, sourcing materials from my past experiences as if constructing my own personal world. The soundscape enveloping the exhibition space has been curated with this same intention. In essence, my work represents a collage of moments spanning from the past to the present.



**Kwon:** The interrelationship between all of your works, transcending time and influencing one another, is indeed significant. Let's delve deeper into your works more specifically. Firstly, the sculpture placed at the entrance of the Space K exhibition has dynamic fingerprints on it, and the giant piercings are noticeable as well. The piercings are also seen in other sculptural works, so what context do they have in your artistic world?

**Huanca:** The sculpture at the entrance of the exhibition captures the dynamic traces of a performance involving kneading clay and kicking it with one's feet, which was then cast in metal. All elements I use in my work are related to the body. The exploration of the body is widespread in the materials, images, and jewelry making that I use. These materials are designed to either enter or protect our bodies. In fact, the materials I work with, such as protective latex found in hospitals, serve to protect or conceal something in everyday life and provide pleasure or pain. I am intrigued by these substances and utilize them in various ways. As mentioned earlier, piercings can also protect the body at times, while simultaneously providing pain and pleasure. All these materials and symbols ultimately prompt us to contemplate the meaning of the human body today. Regardless of region, race, gender, or age, we are all humans living confined within our flesh.

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## AUDIENCE AS WITNESSES AND PARTICIPANTS

**Kwon:** At the heart of the Space K exhibition, sculptures display large-scale mirrors reminiscent of CT scans of body cross-sections, adorned with piercings that seemingly penetrate the skin. The subject of corporeality is presented in a remarkably three-dimensional manner, encompassing both the internal and external aspects of the body and various scales. Another notable element is the mirror's material property itself. It reflects not just the viewer's body but also the entire surrounding space. I'd like to learn more about this specific piece.

**Huanca:** In front of the stainless steel sculpture *BLISS POOL (CIRCLE)* (2023), viewers encounter their own reflections in the mirror, causing them to perceive themselves and other visitors as performers. By looking into the mirror, viewers not only understand the connection between the museum's architecture and the exhibits, but also recognize that they themselves are an integral part of the exhibition.

In my work, mirrors serve as symbols of "camouflage" and "projection." After the COVID-19 pandemic began, I was unable to directly present my performance work at the exhibition site. As a result, I employed mirrors to engage the audience in the performance. As viewers navigate the exhibition space, they come across their reflections and develop their own thoughts and perspectives. Standing before this piece, the audience simultaneously becomes both witnesses and participants, as well as outsiders and insiders. Throughout the exhibition, as visitors move towards the center of the space, they are met with an increasing number of mirrored surfaces, providing a visually captivating experience distinct from the surrounding paintings. Consequently, the exhibition's form continuously evolves and transforms through various angles of reflection and perspectives. In my art, there isn't a fixed angle designated for viewing or documenting the piece. I enjoy using mirrors as a medium to provide individuals with their own unique identities. Mirrors present diverse perspectives to each person, allowing them to see their reflection in multiple ways depending on how they move around the artwork. Consequently, these reflections become distinct, authentic representations of themselves.

**Kwon:** It's fascinating how you use mirrors to prevent the audience from being mere passive observers. The scale of the paintings that surround the space must significantly contribute to expanding the perspectives of both the exhibition and the artwork. What was your intention in creating nearly 3-meter-tall, architectural-scale paintings?

**Huanca:** In this exhibition, I installed four and twelve paintings side by side on two large curved walls that face each other. My goal was to create a new terrain and landscape that isn't immediately discernible and completely overwhelms the viewer in terms of size. I believe in the importance of crafting an all-encompassing space, so I frequently produce artworks that are much larger than the human body. On the other hand, I also preserve the actual size of the body by leaving traces of the model's form on the white walls of the exhibition space using a rubbing technique.

**Kwon:** I'd like to briefly touch on the interchangeable use of the terms "performer" and "model." The way collaborators in performance art are referred to can impact the perception of the artwork. Nowadays, more artists are coming up with new terms like "mediator." What are your thoughts on these terms?

**Huanca:** Although I prefer not to confine myself to specific words, I inevitably use the terms "model" or "performer" when I need to describe something. However, neither term precisely aligns with their conventional meanings. In my work, the term "model" isn't tied to fashion, and "performer" isn't associated with theater.

**Kwon:** Going back to our earlier discussion, I found the mention of scale differences in the exhibition space quite fascinating. The sensory experience created by the combination of artworks that capture the body's traces and those that far exceed the body's scale play a crucial role. In particular, the practice of leaving blue traces of



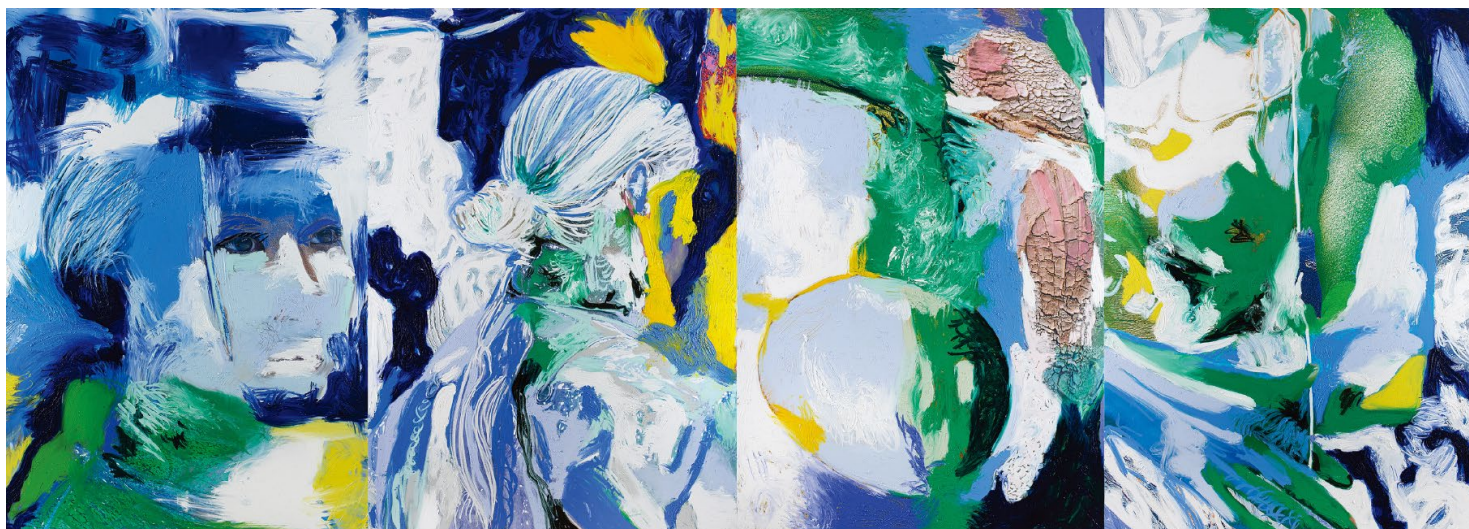
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the body on the pristine white walls of the museum seems to hold significant meaning.

**Huanca:** The act of rubbing one's body adds another dimension of meaning to the installation's scale. The rubbing works vary depending on the model's emotional state, so even I cannot predict their final appearance. That's why it's one of my most enjoyable types of work. The act of rubbing the walls connects to my primary interests in "body" and "time." The rubbed traces are reminiscent of seismographs or electrocardiograms, capturing the performer's movement against the wall, as well as the direction and persistence of that movement.

**Kwon:** You're often compared to Yves Klein, particularly regarding your use of blue pigment and the direct capturing of the body's traces. What do you think of such comparisons?

**Huanca:** Yves Klein utilized female models almost like his brushes, making it difficult to recognize their individual agency within his work. In contrast, my work allows performers much more freedom, with minimal formal constraints compared to Klein's models. This approach is evident not only in the rubbing works but also in the performances. I don't dictate every minor movement for the performers; instead, they are free to walk, sit, lie down, and rest as they wish, without being subject to specific instructions or control.



**Kwon:** On the other hand, the issues of the body and time derived from traces are also connected to the temporality of body painting and the format of performance art.

**Huanca:** Performance art often exists only briefly, presented to the audience in a specific moment. In this regard, I am reminded of my days as a musician [Editor's note: The artist first gained recognition in the underground music scene, playing drums in several bands after graduating from college]. I mainly performed improvisational music, and silence turned out to be a crucial ingredient in creating the best harmony. During moments of silence, I could endure the empty time, become more aware of my body and time, and recognize other entities playing around me in the environment. It allowed me to think about the extent to which things overlap in a single time and space. Moments like these, where various elements resonate with each other like in improvisational music, have a significant influence on my work. My working methodology, in a sense, involves collaging various elements in a multidimensional manner.

**Kwon:** Listening to you discuss it, the sound filling the space emerges as a crucial component, and it seems your background as a drummer has influenced your work. It's captivating how you actively incorporate not just visual aspects, but auditory and even olfactory elements into your work as well. What is the motivation behind incorporating various senses in your art?

**Huanca:** In this exhibition, I infused the space with the aroma of Palo Santo and the scent of burnt hair. Scents, for me, serve as markers of memory. By incorporating olfactory elements, my goal was to create a more

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profound and three-dimensional sensory experience compared to a traditional flat exhibition, which could etch curves and markings into memory. I strive to make the physical encounter with my work an intense and lasting memory. Sound and scent are intangible materials that can't be captured as fixed images, and as you know, we predominantly experience artwork through static images in our era. I employ scents with the intention of leaving an impression on one's memory. Naturally, scent is the most challenging sense to convey in words. The scents that have lingered in my memory for a long time include burning feathers, burnt hair, leather, wood, and the smell of water. These scents are akin to poetry. The process of creating scents is truly beautiful and is also an integral part of my work.



## TRACES OF THE BODY LEFT IN SPACE

**Kwon:** The metaphor between scent and poetry is striking. It's been said that poetic expression, which challenges conventional language, concepts, and symbols, is also important in your work.

**Huanca:** Language is another tool for me in my work. I collect words that evoke various actions and visual dimensions. I especially enjoy playing with these words to create collages that give rise to new meanings, which could be called poetic. In these word collages, there's no need for them to grammatically match, and I don't have to adhere to the gender expressions that many Western languages have. I'm still collecting words as another material to use in my work, and the process is like sculpting a work of art out of words.

**Kwon:** You often create a unique collage of different senses and actions in spaces that are unfamiliar and vastly different from one another. It's impressive how your works adapt to the context while still maintaining their own unique form. How do you consider the context of a space when creating an exhibition?

**Huanca:** To provide a unique experience for the audience, it's important to understand the history and location of the space. I create exhibitions that suit the unique characteristics of each institution and invite the audience to experience something truly unique. The immersive and multi-sensory experiences that I create cannot be recorded through video or experienced indirectly. To truly feel them, you need to approach them with an open mind to all the beings around you, fully aware of the present moment while accepting the fact that everything is impermanent.

**Kwon:** What specific elements were considered in the working process for *BLISS POOL* at Space K?

**Huanca:** The *BLISS POOL* exhibition at Space K reflects the curved architecture of the building. The circular shape of the exhibition space's floor and walls symbolizes the origin of life, evoking the image of a mother's womb as a space of protection and growth. The shimmering surface of the floor is inspired by Bolivia's Uyuni salt flat. Additionally, the large sculpture at the entrance of the exhibition incorporates Onyang stone from Korea, which was used to transform the context of the space materially.

**Kwon:** In your solo exhibition at the Belvedere Museum in 2018, the models confidently stood on pedestals, presenting their bodies like sculptures and creating a sense of intersection. It was a unique format that wasn't



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seen in your previous works. Did you choose this format in response to the context of the museum, which already had classical sculptures on pedestals?

**Huanca:** You're absolutely right. I'm glad you noticed. I actively incorporate the context of the existing space as part of my work. One of the reasons I used pedestals in the Belvedere Museum exhibition was to create a sense of elevation and to convey a feeling of upliftment.

## FROM THE NATURAL MATERIALS TO THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT



**Kwon:** To summarize our conversation so far, it seems that your work imbues a new context and power into familiar materials and forms, diverging from the traditional modes of operation in Western art. There are elements derived from your Bolivian heritage, like accommodating

ancient Inca civilization, and a broader device across the art world that reflects on Western colonialism.

**Huanca:** I participated in the Christen Sveaas Art Foundation exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in 2022, where artists were tasked with reinterpreting Norwegian collector Christen Sveaas' personal collection. Among his collection, I was drawn to silver. I felt that silver symbolizes art history, economy and finance, and colonialism. The Bolivian silver mines were the heart of colonial exploitation, where European colonizers accumulated tremendous wealth. With this context in mind, I brought a silver ore from the collection to the exhibition space and placed it alongside my work, intending to imbue the traditional material with a new, anti-colonial context.

**Kwon:** Working with the dimension of materials and substances as an integral element of your practice seems to be an important methodology of yours. You utilize not only natural materials, but also artificial ones, such as plastic and vinyl. I'm curious to hear how you merge the issues of natural and artificial materials in terms of their dimensions.

**Huanca:** I use various materials in different ways. I particularly enjoy using plastic as a material because it can serve as a barrier. Many of the materials I use can be categorized as either permeable or impermeable, and depending on the characteristics of the material, certain elements of the work can be revealed or hidden. Above all, my work is deeply connected to the foundation of human and nature. Natural materials are autonomous and self-generated, and they evoke memory, sensation, and emotion. These issues are closely linked to the social and historical environment as well.

**Kwon:** It's interesting how you connect the material dimension to its historical and political contexts through your work. Thank you for explaining everything in detail from the overarching narrative surrounding your practice to the smaller stories.

**Huanca:** It was a pleasure to have this conversation. Thank you for taking the time to examine my work.