

Interview

Donna Huanca and Richie Shazam on Sisterhood, City Girls, and Scar Tissue

By Richie Shazam – October 24, 2023



“I never wanted to paint on a canvas,” says the artist Donna Huanca. *SCAR TISSUE (BLURRED EARTH)*, her just-opened show at Farschou New York in Greenpoint, is a testament to her defiance of convention. The Chicago-born, Berlin-based artist’s work transcends categorization; towering paintings, mirrored sculptures, and scent and sound works create a dreamscape only punctured by a series of performances by Huanca’s NYC family, including former roomie Richie Shazam, who called Huanca up before she flew in for the show. As Shazam speaks of her like a protective older sister, the two get into reminiscing on Berlin summer nights and breaking art-world glass ceilings.

RICHIE SHAZAM: Wait, Donna, what time is it right now in Berlin?

DONNA HUANCA: Like 6:00, I’m not sure.

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SHAZAM: What's in store for the rest of your evening?

HUANCA: I'm going to work on some writing and put my baby to sleep. And maybe go back to the studio, which is only a 15-minute drive from here.

SHAZAM: Fab. My sister Donna and I are always working. We're always in the locomotion of our projects. Tell us about your forthcoming show in New York.

HUANCA: I'm so happy to be homecoming with you here. Our friendship began many years ago at an art show and our initial conversation was that we were going to make a writing piece together. We just had an automatic kinship, and I feel like it's a full-circle moment for us to be talking and for you to be in the show as a performer. You've been such a big inspiration since my days in New York. This show is an accumulation of many years of practice and zooming in on these body distortions and trying to trigger your senses. It's always hard to talk about my work.

SHAZAM: I think our chance encounter almost 10 years ago was a sisterhood fulfillment. You've always been such a legend because you were splitting your time between New York and Berlin and going wherever the work was, really leading by intuition. You inspired me on so many levels and it was very revelatory when I met you. I felt an allowance to be safe in my skin around you. You were always very adamant about being comfortable in who you are, and I think that's also a big part of your work. An idea that you propose so beautifully in your work is time. Normally we see constraint with time, but there's a beauty in how we're constantly growing and transforming. Your work transmits so many ideas at once. That's why it's sensory overload, but in the most epic way because I always feel so engulfed. I find myself floating in the space and going into another orbit. But I could do it for hours, because your work is an escape and I forget about time.

HUANCA: Yeah, I love the idea of elongating time and setting up everything in service of the performers so that you can lose yourself within that. And because it's not an endurance piece and there's no choreography, it's really about your autonomy and agency as a performer. And just forgetting anything and going into a meditative state, which is something that we just don't get nowadays. Everything is so rushed and planned and there's a lot of things that we're consuming, so it's a special moment to enter your own consciousness. As a teen, the way that I would bond with people was by taking hallucinatory drugs together and we would just lose ourselves. Now I'm creating a situation that can also be like that, but in a totally sober way. It's been a journey to continue to work with the same people. We're like members of a band and we just know what to do. Everybody plays their part and there aren't any goals. You helped me so much in London when you helped me cast that show. And this was after a whole summer of us partying in Berlin.

SHAZAM: Oh my god. We've traveled the world and lived together and I've gotten to see the world through your lens, and it's given me a lot of confidence and awareness of my body. You gave me so much autonomy. That summer in Berlin was so legendary because you were working literally nonstop. And then in the evenings we would link up, eat our halloumi kebab wraps, and go out.

HUANCA: You were dragging me out and I was so grateful.

SHAZAM: It was the reprieve that we needed.

HUANCA: We needed that because I was doing my whole mental spiral and you are always so good at pushing people. You're just so vibrant.

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SHAZAM: Back to the point of bringing the band back together, you have a power in bringing together so many incredible femme figures into a room. Being able to participate in your work is so incredible because the art world is highly gendered, and to see femme forces banding together and breaking down walls is so important. The end goal is always tearing down the patriarchy, as cliché as it is, and your work allows us to do it so epically and fearlessly. Your work allows us to meet incredible people and create lifelong bonds. We create safety nets and that is really special because these hoes out here are not loyal. Girls are really not about each other, so it's important to have family that holds you down. New York needs that right now. I'm so excited for you to come home and smear the walls of the city with your work.



HUANCA: That part is so important. I've never felt safe in art spaces and museums or galleries. Those spaces were never for us. So I like to give everybody a second skin and allow them to have their moment. It's not necessarily a performance in a way that we typically think about it, but it's focused around that person's freedom and being seen. It's more about that process of building a community versus the results. It's a kind of internal dialogue, because all the works in the show are of deconstructed mirrors and eyeballs looking back at you. It's almost trying to refract what you think you're seeing, and blending into something that you can't really photograph or decipher. Since the pandemic, I've been making mirrors and dissolving images and making things that shape-shift.

SHAZAM: Things got so personal. Zoom calls still give me anxiety. But I feel like that's when true sisterhood really started puncturing my soul, like the people I could really depend on. And I sought a lot of support from the work.

HUANCA: But I'm really excited to have all the girls there that we've been working with for so many years. New York can be pretty spiky and hard. I love Berlin because it's so laid back and less transactional and it's easy to be experimental here, but New York is a vortex of action. I mean, you're born and bred, so you're of a different breed. But as a girl that was born in Chicago and lived in Houston, New York, and Mexico, I feel like New York has always been a place for me to return to my sisters, but not to necessarily inhabit it for long periods of time.

SHAZAM: It's the city girls uniting. We're all coming wherever we're coming from, but we have our grit, our

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energy, we have explosiveness within us. That's what really bonds us. And we're glam, we're emotional, we got a lot going on, but we demand respect. We always think about amplifying each other. I'm so inspired by your career because in the past 5 or 10 years, you've broken down so many walls. We've entered so many spaces as a result of your work where people like us have never been. I enter a lot of rooms where people like myself have never been. But they should be coming back to us. They should be seeing us.

HUANCA: Exactly. This is the soar.

SHAZAM: Because we're doing a lot of big work here, okay?

HUANCA: Yeah. These spaces are so revered and massive. I've been given really challenging spaces like a Masonic temple, an old castle, and all these big spaces that are meant to be elitist and not allow in any person of our background. But because I didn't respect that going into it, I'm not afraid to fuck it up, because what do I have to lose?

SHAZAM: Nothing.



HUANCA: For me, I'm busy in the background. I'm making these things that are so much bigger than me that I want to be behind the work. To be in front of it is a little bit... I'm working on that, but I'm super happy to let all of these experiments represent me. And you're one of the only people who have photographed me. I'm so shy when it comes to being in front of that camera. It's just so iconic to see what you can do and the ceilings that you keep breaking.

SHAZAM: Well, I feel like you've given me a lot of courage and strength. When we lived together in Berlin and we were literally living in your bed, working in the studio, turning it out.

HUANCA: I think it was a 30-square meter room. We were on top of each other.

SHAZAM: It was like *Dave*, it was so iconic. But that also speaks of our sisterhood. Whatever we have, we're

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going to give it to each other. You've given me a lot of courage to explore the way in which I tell stories. I don't do this singularly. I have people like you that guide me. This past summer when I came to visit you in Berlin, I was just like, wow, my sis is always turning it out. You're so busy. You have your baby, you have your partner, and you really dedicate 2000% in your studio. We started the conversation talking about how we're working in our sleep, we're working with our hands always, because it's how we give to the world.

HUANCA: It's a love language.

SHAZAM: But I was so inspired by the scale of your babies. They're growing in size and they're so monumental. I feel like when people get to experience them IRL, you puncturing New York with the scale and depth of your work is going to be spellbinding. I also think that we're always casting spells, and the spell that you're about to cast is going to be so beyond. It's our history and I think that people should be so lucky that they get to experience it.

HUANCA: Yeah, it's crazy. I hope people come out to Greenpoint, which they will. The scale of this show is massive. I think the ceilings are 25 feet and the paintings are 3 by 4 meters. Now I'm thinking in meters, but I think that's like 10 by 13 feet. It will be a huge anchor to throw, and hopefully we can bring people some peace in the chaos of the city.



SHAZAM: Absolutely. There's so much going on at all times, but your work allows that moment of meditative release. It is a drug. Your work is like literally someone ingesting a hallucinogenic drug and being transformed into another space, into another time. And personally, I'm yearning for that escapism. I'm yearning to be seen and viewed in a different way. That's why your work has always allowed me to inhabit different characters within myself.

HUANCA: I love that. Everything starts with the performer's body and the painting that I'm making on them, because I never wanted to paint on a canvas. You remember when we first met, I was doing all kinds of crazy shit, like painting on walls, making all these sculptures to pretend they were flat objects. I was trying to think about a three-dimensional room as a flat object and it being something that you walk through.

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SHAZAM: I always felt like you are always quite an anarchist and a rule breaker. I just remember those moments in your studio seeing you reinvent and break down traditions.

HUANCA: Yeah, I think with my hands. I think with textures and feeling and putting things together. I can't ever not have my hand in it. And in this show, a lot of the sculptures were made from drawings that were cut out of metal and mirror, and bolted and bejeweled back together. There's all of these super wild drawings within that, so it becomes a three-dimensional shape that you can't really read. And when I see it all come together in the room, it's like a completely different experience than what I'm doing in my studio. I'm actually having another show open at the Sean Kelly Gallery three weeks after this show that will be a recreation of my studio in Berlin, so it'll kind of be these two opposite sides of the same process.

SHAZAM: That's going to be so exciting. When you're coming into my neck of the woods, I'm very protective. It's always a family affair, and that, to me, is where I want to be. I want to be where my people are at. Honestly, we're always working with some weird-ass people. Shit just be so funky, and we got to do what we got to do.

HUANCA: It's a rare moment. It's definitely surreal. I can't believe how fast time has gone. I have the scars to prove it. It's like giving birth every time. I'm just so excited to share it with everyone.

SHAZAM: Love you, Donna.