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Divining the Future of the Past

by [Alicia Eler](#) on October 14, 2013 0

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Documentation of Donna Huanca's "Scrying Threats" performance/installation at Queer Thoughts Gallery, Chicago (image courtesy of the artist and Queer Thoughts)

CHICAGO — [Donna Huanca](#) is from the South Side of Chicago, and she hasn't been back here since she was 15, an adolescent girl. The postcard for her solo exhibition *Scrying Threats* at Queer Thoughts Gallery is an image of Huanca and 14 other girls, all about the same age, adorned in gold chains and sweatshirts, wearing a similar shade of maroon-colored lipstick and posing, not smiling, fierce and proud and sad and beautiful. Huanca ditched class to hang out with these friends, and during that time they took this photograph — a bit out of focus, appearing as a fuzzy memory of adolescence, it serves as a disembodied psychic connection between the past, present, and future of the artist herself, who appears at the opening both in human and ghosted form.

The exhibition consists of a photograph of Huanca and friends, and a compact, fluorescently lit room in the gallery space where a white female performer, nearly nude, alternates from kneeling in front of a mirror to slathering the walls with glow-in-the-dark goo. Fashionably disembodied fabrications of body parts and matching clothing articles — a cast white sneaker with a cylinder of wood shoved in, covered by a red-and-blue mesh sheet of fabric — are situated next to a shoe growing yellow and blue foam. A white pole rests inside that shoe,

and on top of it hangs a sliced-open green goblin mask, its white mouth and red-spray-painted teeth gutted. Velour fabric rests in another corner, as if tossed there; elsewhere a pair of boxing shorts are positioned waist to the ground, and an army coat covered in splotches of white, neon blue, yellow, and red camouflage against the earth tone camouflage print hanging on the wall. The performer wanders around this space, her body covered in henna; she receives subtle instructions from Donna, but mostly just moves around the space in an intuitive manner, wandering, and painting.



Donna Huanca, "Pisces" (2013). Stretched crushed velvet, 10 inches x 8 inches.

Time and transformation are recurring themes in Huanca's work, and are seen through the body, reassembled clothing-turned-sculptural objects, and a photograph of her adolescent girl gang. For this exhibition, which she put together over the course of one-week before the opening while in residency at the space, she used clothing and objects that she found locally. Taking inspiration from the occult practice of [scrying](#), which suggests that the psychic, or perhaps the artist in this case, can see things — spiritual visions or fortunes connected to the future — Huanca presents her work as less of a *thought* and more of a *threat*, but to what is unclear. Were these adolescent girls in the photograph threatening for their ability to ditch class and band together in a serious crew? Or is the messiness of Huanca's work in what is normally a clean-cut art space the threatening act toward the viewer and the art establishment? Or could it just be that the woman recasting the adolescent girl in this context is in and of itself a threatening act?

To not understand the threat inherent in this work, however, is what makes this site-specific installation more intriguing. Huanca's aesthetic divination process unfurled through the arrangement of a hired performer, fashion as disembodied sculptural object, and a photo from adolescence, creating an open-ended narrative that stretched the limits of a chronological and restrictive temporality. As Huanca's friends from the photograph — now all grown-up — streamed in through the front door, a clock did not strike, divining the future and the past into the present. In Huanca's work, space and time are ever-evolving constructs, leaving behind residue in the form of objects without clear use or structure. It is a vision of a post-apocalyptic future, remnants of an adolescent past, and a temporal space that straddles both.



Photograph of Huanca and her crew. Image courtesy of the artist and Queer Thoughts Gallery.



Photograph by the author for Hyperallergic.



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[Scrying Threats](#) at Queer Thoughts Gallery (1640 W 18th Street #3, Chicago) runs through October 27.