

The Beauty of Donna Huanca's Body Art Is More Than Skin Deep

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Amid the cosmopolitan chaos of London this fall, the New York artist Donna Huanca is creating space for meditative contemplation. As Frieze Week sets in, the Zabłudowicz Collection in London will be taken over by Huanca's army of nearly-nude, pastel-painted models, who will be enshrined in a three-floor Perspex structure the artist has built. As they press and rub their bodies against the transparent walls, they'll create a painting, which will evolve over the course of the exhibition with the gradual build up of their imprints.

They'll move "glacially," Huanca tells me, as they move through the structure and drape articles of clothing on sculptures that resemble rocks and minerals. For those who witness Huanca's hypnotic, hybrid works, you can expect to experience something between the aftermath of an acid rave and the spiritual ceremony of an ancient ritual. "I am creating seven points of entry that will deepen as you infiltrate the space—as in the layers of the skin," the artist tells me. As they pass through the exhibition, visitors will be guided by a sound installation that responds to the presence of bodies.



Huanca has been holed up in a studio in Berlin all summer, working on this major new project, as well as a September solo show at Peres Projects in Berlin. The London show will be Huanca's first solo show in the U.K., and the first performance-led work the Zabludowicz Collection has ever commissioned. Whereas in previous productions—like her 2015 “Polystrene Braces” at Riga's kim? Contemporary Art Centre, or “Echo Implant” at the now-defunct Joe Sheftel Gallery in New York—she incorporated live models into the creation of her static paintings and sculptures, in a manner that recalls the “Anthropometries” of Yves Klein, these new exhibitions represent fresh terrain for the American artist, both in terms of duration and execution. For the Zabludowicz show, for example, she's worked closely with the performers who will enliven the exhibition and bring her new “Skin Paintings” to life. She's taught them to paint themselves for the duration of the the exhibition, and although their movements have been choreographed, they have a certain autonomy that represents an evolution in the artist's work.

In her solo show that opened at Peres Projects earlier this month, titled “Surrogate Painteen,” Huanca's models, somewhat cyborg-like with their impassive gazes, confront large-scale paintings and sculptures more directly, sitting and lying on top of them, facing them and touching them—activating them. And although the body is supremely central to both shows, Huanca is less concerned with body politics than with the idea of the body as another surface or material. In the same way she reworks textiles and fabrics that make up her sculptures, or layers of printmaking and acrylics in her paintings, Huanca deconstructs and fragments the body, to dismantle and recycle it into a genderfluid, post-human device that is no longer limited by interpretations of identity.



This approach may also explain the artist's ongoing interest in the synthetic substances she employs in her paintings and sculptures—highly textural and symbolically rich substances like pantyhose, velvet, metal, silicon, and leather. In a number of her exhibitions, Huanca has referenced the lyrics of a song by British punk band X-Ray Spex, *The Day The World Turned Day-Glo*, which alludes to many of the materials Huanca favors—latex, rubber, rayon, nylon, and Perspex, also among them. And yet, color is equally central to Huanca's experiential exhibitions. "The DNA of the earth; gems, minerals, meteorites, desert landscapes; and hallucinatory states have all taught me about color and its effects on mood," Huanca explains. These intense studies have led her to employ a psychotropic palette of purple, blue, pink, and green hues, which she applies across her new paintings, sculptures, and the bodies of performers.

Huanca's works prompt us to reflect on the relationship between visual aesthetics and identity. It's one of the oldest conundrums of the history of art, but it's as relevant as ever nowadays, when identity is duplicitous. Huanca asks the viewer to challenge what Amelia Jones refers to as the "politics of visibility" in her seminal book *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (1998).



Throughout her shows, skin has been an overarching motif for Huanca. The body's largest organ, skin contains a whole biological and cultural history within its layers—in a way, similar to the pigments of paint in an artwork, fibers in clothes, or the architectural makeup of a building. It's apt that the Zabludowicz space inhabits a historic 19th-century building that previously housed a Methodist Church and a drama school. Site is another key element that remains consistent for Huanca. "All my works are sensitive to their environment—perhaps an attempt to take possession of a space. It is impossible for me to ignore the context the works are born in," Huanca explains.

While the effect of the work has so much to do with the impact of the physical experience—the sounds, smells, motion, and color she orchestrates—I wonder how Huanca feels about audiences viewing her exhibitions online? "Documentation is the way most people experience art nowadays, flattened and immediate," she concedes. "I am aware of this and consider the documentation an important part, giving the virtual audience a separate layer of experiencing the work." However, while Huanca offers us the notion of a realm beyond the body, her living, breathing, moving artwork depends on exchange, a communal coming together of physical bodies, objects, and materials. In the words of X-ray Specs, "I live off you/ And you live off me/ And the whole world/Lives off of everybody."

—Charlotte Jansen