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Donna Huanca & Przemek Pyszcek,
MUSCLE MEMORY (installation view) (2015).
Image courtesy of the artists and
Peres Projects, Berlin. Photo: Trevor Good.

Interview with Donna Huanca

Amidst an alien landscape of white sand and labdanum-scented air, clear plastic crinkles over braided hair caked with clay. Breasts are sheathed beneath armor-like chest molds, and feet track lines through the sand, dragging slowly with trance-like precision. The ambient soundtrack that emanates from behind large swaths of fabric heightens the drama, and locates the scene somewhere moodily futuristic.

On Saturdays at the Marciano Art Foundation, Berlin-based Donna Huanca's largescale installation, *OBSIDIAN LADDER*, is overtaken by her army of performers, each costumed and painted head-to-toe by the artist. Huanca costumes her performers with an uncanny mix of natural and synthetic materials—the gentle egg washes and clay pigments she cakes into her model's hair and uses to ornament their skin contrasts long synthetic braids antiseptically wrapped in clear plastic packaging—creating a fantastical vision. Her models walk amongst and position themselves within or against sculptural works that simultaneously mimic their bodily ornamentation and act as backdrops for their movements. Large paintings hanging on the back wall serve as abstract backdrops to the built environment. Huanca begins her works on canvas with the painted body: she photographs her festooned performers, and uses those images as underpaintings.

Though Huanca's process of styling her models may echo the fashion and beauty industries (still too often defined by damaging beauty standards and non-inclusive marketing campaigns), the artist insists that a progressive politic underlies the work. While utilizing living people as an art medium is perhaps not a new phenomenon (think *tableau vivant*), it's certainly one that introduces a host of logistical concerns—from compensation to bathroom breaks—as well as several conceptual ones. Huanca cultivates relationships with her models, attempting to build a safe autonomous space for their performances to occur. She also donates the proceeds from editioned art objects to local trans and LGBTQ community groups (organizations that she says serve the communities her models belong to).

Though Huanca contends that her work breaks from the tradition of using the female nude to elicit the male gaze, her audience may not always be up to the task. "There's always some idiot man in every city that asks: how much do they cost?" she told *The Guardian* in 2016.[1] I caught up with Huanca in between international flights and post-show travel, and asked her about her dedicated relationship with her performers, the ephemerality of the figure, and how she sees her work in relation to feminism's progression and the ever-present male gaze.

Lindsay Preston Zappas

1. Hettie Judah, "Ayahuasca and anal beads: the hallucinogenic art of Donna Huanca," *The Guardian*, Sept. 28, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/sep/28/ayahuasca-and-anal-beads-the-hallucinogenic-art- of-donna-huanca.

Lindsay Preston Zappas: Your work includes intricately painted and costumed figures, but the paintings on your figures ultimately get washed off in the shower.

Donna Huanca: I am interested in the practice of detachment and letting things go. Since absolutely everything is temporary, I find it freeing that the body paintings are ephemeral.

LPZ: Do you pre-plan your body painting in any way (e.g., sketches or drawings), or is applying the body paint an intuitive process?

DH: The process of creating the body paintings is very intuitive for me, responding to and working with the models. I draw much of my inspiration from the natural world, from geological formations and patterns. I find it much more freeing than standing in front of a canvas, which can feel static and permanent. The inherent ephemerality in working with the models and on bodies feels more true and instinctual to me, which is why in my paintings [on canvas] I do a mixture of both—printing images from the body paintings onto the canvas and then layering over top of that painting and scratching [paint] with my hands.

LPZ: In your body paint and costuming, do you have specific moves that you repeat that act as constants?

DH: I think of my work as self-referential—my process involves a lot of layering and experimentation. Because of this, there are definitely certain things that recur between pieces. For example, I use a lot of hair in my work—braided hair that hangs from the sculptures and is also attached to the models. We hold memory and trauma in every strand of our hair—I am interested in this metaphor.

LPZ: I read that you have your performers write about their experience after each performance. What have those texts revealed to you, and how do you take that on board as you are conceptualizing a new piece?

DH: I value my relationships with the models extremely highly, and want to honor the different forms of expression and temporality that communication can take. I think of the texts as an extension of the experience of the performances, which is itself very meditative and self-reflexive. A lot of the models I collaborate with are artists in their own right, and the responses are often moving and are very important to me. It gives me the opportunity to encounter my work through their experience of it.

LPZ: I attended one of your shows in the past, and I saw you whispering to a performer who you ultimately led out of the gallery (maybe she wasn't feeling well or had to use the restroom?), and I remember thinking about how humane that interaction felt.

DH: All my models have complete agency when performing—they are free to move when they choose and leave the stage as they feel. For my work, what is absolutely crucial is the creation of a space that is safe for the models to have a meditative, transcendent experience.

LPZ: How does that safety translate to live performance, where the audience is involved in looking?

DH: I'm trying to distort and refract the gaze. Not just in the live performances, but for me what is crucial to this destabilization of the male gaze is in the relationship of care and trust that I cultivate with the models. I give them very little instruction, and they are completely agential in creating their own experiences.

LPZ: Are you imagining a futuristic landscape?

DH: [I think a lot] about art history, but I actually think that the future (and the near future) is the important horizon

to keep in our vision. In my work, I try to project a future, to experiment with visions of what a feminized future would look like, what it would value. For me, that looks like care, trust, community, the natural world, and the interconnectedness and dependence of bodies with the natural world.

LPZ: In your vision of a feminized future, are men precluded? Or do you envision a shift in power dynamics towards women?

DH: I'm not interested in exclusion. What I'm more interested in is new constellations of being and of relating to each other that supplant our current understandings of the masculine and the feminine. The feminine is powerful. I am trying to demonstrate that power as it already exists.

LPZ: How do you see your work fitting within the lineage of feminist art?

DH: The canon of feminist work has often excluded certain identities and bodies. I see myself as elongating (and certainly being indebted to) but also breaking with that history.

LPZ: You mentioned the gaze earlier. There are aspects of your work that mimic artists that had questionable body politics (the body prints of Yves Klein, performances of Vanessa Beecroft).

DH: My work has nothing to do with these mentioned artists.

LPZ: Your work diverges conceptually, but for instance, your show involves body prints (which Klein did with nude female models) and uses a particular Yves Klein blue.

DH: You could make that aesthetic connection, but that would be up to you



Donna Huanca, *OBSIDIAN LADDER* (installation view) (2019). Image courtesy of the artist, Marciano Art Foundation, Los Angeles, and Peres Projects, Berlin. Photo: Joshua White.

to do the intellectual work of connecting my performances with the work of Yves Klein and making some sort of explanation or meaning from that. You could also compare my work to Ana Mendieta's performances or to Carolee Schneemann's films, or GWAR, or any other artist who uses the color blue. But for me, all I can say is that I have never made work consciously thinking about or reacting to Yves Klein.

LPZ: Is fashion a source of inspiration for you, or something that you are pushing up against?

DH: Self-decoration and aesthetic is a primal urge that we all have for communicating and signaling and community building, and I am interested in that aspect of "fashion." But the fashion world includes violences that I am repelled by: the fetishization of the body, the massive waste that comes with the incredibly fast, trend-based consumerism.

LPZ: Can you discuss how your work avoids fetishization of the body?

DH: Sure. I think first of all, I want to make clear that fetishization is often conflated with nakedness, and this is reductive and not true. Fetishization in fashion advertisements and other such media is the cutting up of bodies and evacuation of subjectivity or agency from those bodies, which is necessary to feed the erotics of the male gaze. My work is in direct conflict with this; it is all about the agency of the models, and the whole performance is set up to accommodate not only their safety but also to facilitate a meditative experience for them.

The fashion industry is also so [dependent on] social media which I feel my work provides an antidote for. I hope that people enter my exhibitions and feel a sense of presence and groundedness that is so often stolen away by our phones.

LPZ: What do you mean by that? How is your work providing an antidote to social media?

DH: By allowing the audience to have presence in the space and to enter a space where time is elongated.

LPZ: As tech becomes more integrated into our lives, do you think it is something we need to resist or rethink our relationship to?

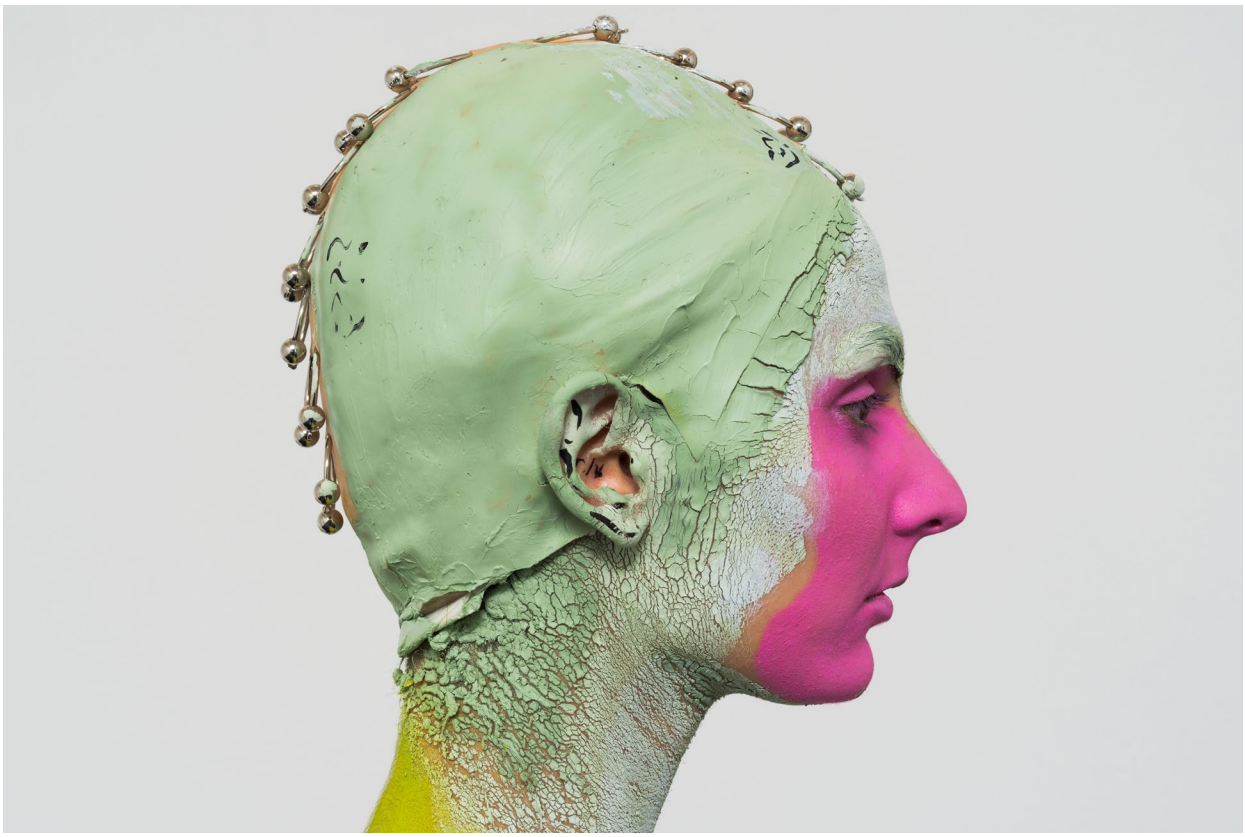
DH: We have to surrender to it.

LPZ: Performers inhabit the space at the Marciano just once a week on Saturdays. If viewers see the work without the performers, are they having an incomplete experience?

DH: I'm interested in the practice of femme mark making, the echoes and traces of the bodies in the space when they aren't present, how the space holds and retains that energy. When the models are not present, you can still trace their bodies through their footprints left in the sand and the rubbings that they've left on the wall from their bodies. All the works in the exhibition are interconnected and rely on one another; the paintings would never exist without the performances, the sculptures emerge from the paintings, etcetera.

Lindsay Preston Zappas is the founder and editor-in-chief of *Carla*.

Donna Huanca, born in Chicago in 1980, studied painting at the Städelschule in Frankfurt am Main, the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine, and the University of Houston in Texas. She has previously had museum exhibitions at the Zabludowicz Collection in London (2016) and the Yuz Museum in Shanghai (2018). Huanca lives and works in Berlin.





Above: Donna Huanca & Przemek Pyszcek, *MUSCLE MEMORY* (installation view) (2015). Image courtesy of the artists and Peres Projects, Berlin. Photo: Trevor Good.

Below: Donna Huanca, *OBSIDIAN LADDER* (installation view) (2019). Image courtesy of the artist, Marciano Art Foundation, Los Angeles, and Peres Projects, Berlin. Photo: Joshua White.