Burnt Mirror: Donna Huanca at Ballroom Marfa
by Barbara Purcell | December 24, 2021

In *Espejo Quemeda*, on view at Ballroom Marfa, Donna Huanca evokes geologic time and metaphoric place through a series of paintings, sculptures, and soundscapes inspired by the West Texas region and beyond. Huanca, who first visited Marfa in 2005, planned to return in preparation for this solo exhibition. But the pandemic (and the show’s postponement) meant conjuring the beauty and mystery of West Texas from her studio in Berlin, where she is currently based.

“We kept thinking the pandemic would pass, and Donna would get to come back to Marfa and be inspired with a whole new body of work,” recalls the show’s curator Daisy Nam. “Instead she channeled her energy and memories of that first trip.”

Memory itself is like an abstract artwork: *Espejo Quemeda* embodies that sentiment with its layers of sound, scent, and circular motion, inviting the viewer into a sensory activation tank of quiet reflection. The title, which translates from Spanish as “burnt mirror” (the phrase is intentionally inflected as feminine), opens the viewer up to the present moment through an accordion-like expansion and contraction of time.

“Burnt mirror” likely references Tezcatlipoca (“Smoking Mirror”), the Aztec deity of conflict and change, who is often depicted with polished obsidian (black volcanic glass) to invoke divination and protection. There is no obsidian, per se, in *Espejo Quemeda* — only mirrors made of metal: one which contemplates the West Texas Sky, the other our own obscure reflection.

Huanca, who was born in Chicago and grew up in Houston, spent summers in her parents’ native Bolivia, where she encountered a colorful and syncretic culture that fused Catholic beliefs and Andean traditions. This amalgamation of myth and meaning has perhaps informed Huanca’s own understanding of time and place: precolonial — even prehistoric — motifs effortlessly exist in the simultaneity of a far-off future, traveling from one end of the universe to the other in a single step.
Ballroom Marfa’s North Gallery is a fine example of this construct: a Kubrick-esque zinc-white light box, offset by a geologic narrative of blue and orange paintings — from the oceanic to volcanic — that allegorically mirrors current cataclysmic shifts. An almighty sculptural disc presides over the space, capturing the cosmic schmutz of chaos through its stainless steel surface.

*Guerrera Protectora (pacha)* (2021) is an inkblot mandala made of body piercings and butt plugs; a bit of Berlin mixed in with an ancient Incan deity and her long, knotted hair. The Protective Warrior sits atop a dollop of pure white sand, like a divine alien goddess.

From across the space, a large-scale painting titled *Karita De Diosa* (2021) pulls toward the metal sculpture. An oculus in the upper left-hand corner of the canvas signifies something of a human quality, formed vigorously by the artist’s own fingers. (Huanca paints primarily with her hands.)

Live bodies are often used to activate Huanca’s works, but lingering social distancing measures have meant that these objects must exist on their own. “The pandemic changed the way she made sculpture,” says Nam, gesturing toward *Guerrera Protectora*. “These to me are so anthropomorphic and performative — they act as a stand-in.”
A set of energetic imprints, made by Huanca’s model/collaborator Cassandra Momah, mark the walls of the Center Gallery. They’re remnants of a private performance that took place during the exhibition’s installation this past June. Huanca (who finally made it to Marfa) repeatedly coated her model with blue water-based paint and had her move through and respond to the space. The delicate blue tracings offer evidence of a kind of presence that remains long after physical bodies have left the building.

Models serve another vital function in Huanca’s work: their skin acts as a canvas, which the artist photographs and prints onto actual canvas, only to be painted onto again. The South Gallery’s video installation *Piedra Quemada (clay)* (2021) gets at this multi-layered process with its projected images of painted body parts that, up close, present new landscapes not unlike the surrounding desert terrain. A faint, woody scent and low sonic hum cocoon the pitch-dark space in a sort of *jamais vu* of the subconscious. This sound and scent installation shares the same name as the exhibition, as if to reaffirm the internal process of conflict and change.
In Ballroom Marfa’s courtyard, the syncretic culmination of a lost civilization: *Scrying Con Dios(a) (2021)* is a cosmic mandala centered upon a white geoglyph that encompasses the ground, offering up an ancient indigenous SOS to any extraterrestrial takers. Distorted bird sounds pierce the warm air from a set of outdoor speakers as the desert sun hits the circular sculpture just so, signaling the aliens, the ancient Andeans, and the present-day mortals in need of a portal.

*Scrying With God* is the ultimate looking glass, revealing only what we choose to see, even if what we see is our own masked reflection. Like all the works in *Espejo Quemeda*, possibilities exist everywhere and at once:

![Image of the sculpture](image)

*Donna Huanca, SCRIVING CON DIOS(A), 2021. Polished steel. 77 x 77 x 39 in (195 x 195 x 98 cm). Courtesy the artist and Ballroom Marfa. Photo by Makenzie Goodman.*

“Because it’s mirrored there’s this interesting element of pulling in and then projecting out,” says Nam, as we both squint at the circle’s blinding center. “The birds have the best angle of this piece — sometimes artworks are not meant for us.”

Donna Huanca: *Espejo Quemeda* is on view through January 2, 2022 at Ballroom Marfa.