

VENUS LAU  
In conversation with

DONNA  
HUANCA









Donna Huanca's artistic practice samples our fear of skin. In her exhibitions, models wearing skin-colored body stockings stand, kneel, or sit in the exhibition space, sometimes on a pedestal or behind Plexiglas. Nudity is a tradition of contemporary art, and juxtaposing skin and painterly surface summons the spirits of Yves Klein and Kazuo Shiraga, whose masterpieces hosted the skin as poltergeist—a noise-making spirit, an invisible specter whose absent presence is defined by the traces of its own movement, and who is cloaked by the bodily movements (the corporeal freedom) it stages.

The exposed body in Huanca's work is a denudation not only of attire but also of movements and expressions. Bodies are clothed by patches and lines in mild-colored materials from clay to spices to pigments: minty green, blue, lead white, pink, bright yellow, black—a palette bearing a resemblance to cosmetic products. The lack of chromatic conflicts orchestrates a visual quietness along with the models' silence; the colors are like lone islands. The act of coverage is doubled and folded by the artist's painting on detailed photographic prints. She paints both surfaces—skin and its images—in the same way. The enveloping of skin with color is a slash-and-burn of existing skin-related identity narratives, rehearsing a pre-linguistic tabula rasa on the skin. The layers of drying pigment crackle as the tension between skin and this other element—its spirit—intensifies.

VENUS LAU Your works involve a specific color scheme (I actually listed minty green, Dodger blue, lead white, pink, bright yellow and black in another text about your artistic practice), especially blue—different types of blue, including Klein blue, which is an institutional blue now. Apart from the sake of aesthetics, what are the main factors behind your choices of shades?

DONNA HUANCA I am inspired by geology and birds of paradise, natural formations of color that are unexpected and rare.

VL Do you occasionally paint with cosmetics? What kind of materials do you use?

DH Yes, I use thick pigmented shadows and foundations, healing clays as well as charcoal and tumeric.

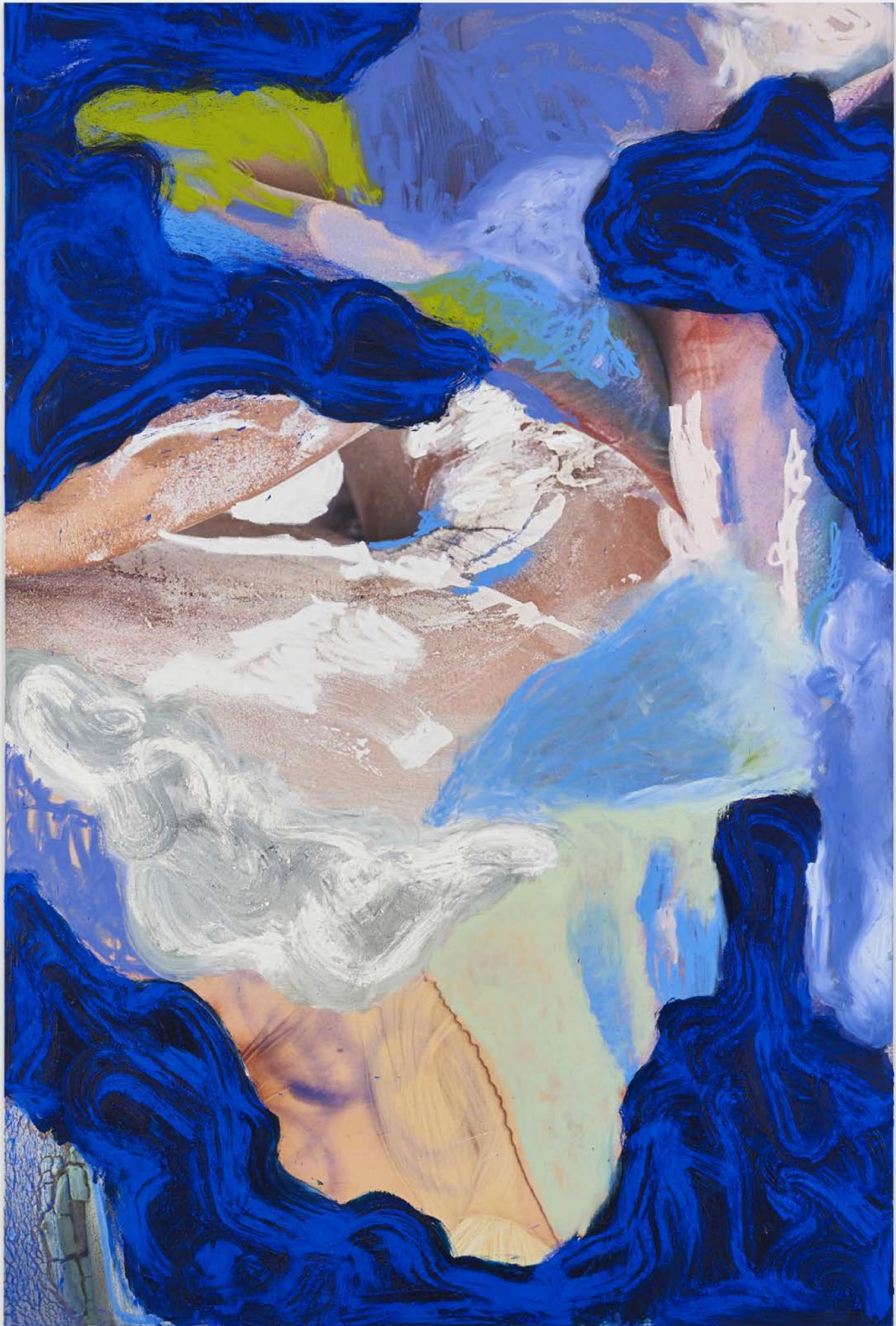
VL Human bodies are crucial sculptural elements in your practice. When did you start working with performers?

DH My work is an evolution of music practice which began in 2002, so collaboration is always a part of my work. I am interested in creating live, visceral experiences that are more like encounters rather than observing finished artworks usually found in an art context.

VL On the one hand your performers/human sculptures are getting more and more static/immobile in your works, making themselves into a sculpture in a more conventional contemporary art way, in which the positive and negative spaces are very clearly demarcated; and on the other hand, your sculptures are undergoing a process of resembling the appearance of human bodies. What do you think about these two ways of presenting human bodies and how do you see the difference and sameness between them?

DH I always wanted to display the live body as immobile as possible, in order to see the movement and life in the materials it is surrounded by... Essentially collapsing the materiality of both.







VL What are you going to do for your project in Shanghai? How do you imagine your show in that context, where the idea of nudity and exposure of skin is totally different from the West?

DH For the exhibition in Shanghai, I plan to create an evolving stage performance which is deconstructed for its duration. Even though some viewers can't see past some aspects of nudity in my performance work, I hope it eventually transcends this question. Of course there are different views towards the body and nudity in cultures around the world, but I try not to factor this into my conception of the performance. I believe and hope that it is understood that the work is coming from a genuine place and therefore is received with an open mind.

VL *PANIC FEAR CRYING FITS* is one of the rare works of yours without the presence of human bodies, but it shows the traces of human bodies/activities. What are the reasons behind making something present versus absent (or present absence) in your work?

DH I am interested in the nature of temporality in all things. We travel constantly in our virtual experiences while seeing the world from a screen. I am interested in the potential of scarring the brain with human smell/scents and the approximation of physicality, which is rare. The audience can see themselves through the models, feeling empathy for the human body. *PANIC FEAR CRYING FITS* was a homage to materials that had continuously reappeared for years in my work. Leather pants, velvet shirts, etc.; I wanted to mortalize these materials, these gestures, and present them as the characters in my morphed language. They had a long life, first as my clothing, then they have been reassembled into many artworks. I wanted to reduce them to observe their potential and beauty.

VL Skin is a connecting surface in your practice, from your act of painting the performers to the prints of the painted bodies to your painting on pictures of the performers' skin (that is cloaked under the flaky dry paint). Skin creates the inner walls of your immersive practice. Why do you choose skin as a medium for your practice?

DH Skin is a universal tissue that connects all humans.

VL There are a lot of bodies in your works, and also a lot of double of human bodies—clothes and mannequins (like the one in *Mariposa Amor*). How do they converse with the sculptural bodies of the performers?

DH I see the sculptures as surrogates of the performers, posing them as the performers themselves once the space is without the live body.

VL According to your observation, how does the audience usually interact with the performers? Can you recall one particular instance of this?

DH The audience is observing what essentially is a meditation that is hardly theatrical. The works are allowed to be entered and exited without a timeline. The performers are living in their own universe and the audience has the privilege to be in the same space.

VL The spatial experiences constructed by your artworks are usually of domestic scale, probably because there are a lot of elements in human sizes: human bodies, clothes, shoes,























etc. You conceived a project for the Zabłudowicz Collection space, which was formerly a chapel, a huge religious architecture with divine spatiality. What is the intriguing part of working in a space like this?

DH Every installation I create takes into account the history of the space and its original intention/use. Zabłudowicz Collection's venue was a former Methodist chapel, while its back space was a former dance school. For my upcoming show at the Belvedere Museum in Vienna, for example, I am thinking about its original intended use as an entertaining space. The choreography of the performance will take this into account and challenge the original intention.

VL One of your projects is entitled *Muscle Memory*, and in an interview in *Studio International* you mentioned that memory is "the most permanent architecture," with a practice involving time-based sculptures. How do you describe your relationship with memories?

DH Our reality is a consequence of our memories. Our memories create a version of our reality that serves whatever narrative we need to survive. I am fascinated by the potential of this to create or destroy reality.

VL There is a totemic structure in your sculptures. Can you talk about this aspect of your work?

DH The materials in the sculptures are like diary entries for me, as they are made up of my clothing and searching. The totemic form refers to the idea of stacked and draped materials having a spirit and a certain history, which resonates with my work as the sculptures are made up of materials that are meaningful to me. Ultimately the form refers back to the scale and forms of the body.

VL Your recent works (especially the ones made in 2017) feature different types of languages in the titles, such as within *Hangisi*, *Awankitu (Abuelito Fuego)*, *Mami Wata*... Is there any reason behind this?

DH There are clues to my personal interests in the titles of my works which help describe what it is that I am drawing from.

VL There is an increasingly repetitive presence of braids in your sculptures, why? Hair is sort of creepy, I don't know why, and I always see a kind of spectrality in your works...

DH I am interested in hair as a recording device as it can tell your history and carry so much information per strand that describes trauma and even drug use. Native people see hair as sacred and powerful, as antennas for psychic ability.