

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Artforum
Hulda Guzmán, Dio Horia Mykonos
Cathryn Drake
February 2020

ARTFORUM

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Image: Hulda Guzmán, *Selfportrait*, 2019, watercolour and acrylic gouache on cedar plywood, 39 × 24 1/8".

In her exhibition “With the Mother,” the Dominican artist Hulda Guzmán conjured a liminal state between the supernatural and terrestrial in fifteen vivid paintings. Set in the stark new storefront space of Dio Horia—a gallery founded on the Greek island of Mykonos—the show, mainly of recent work, opened with a couple of earlier large-scale works, *The Arch II (chibirica)* and *The Arch III (nairi)*, both 2013, which beckoned through the glass facade like portals into a psychedelic jungle, summoning Henri Rousseau on LSD.

Everyday life and the uncanny coalesced in a potent brand of magical surrealism that oscillated between Guzmán’s own private cosmos and a universal collective: the superficial warmth of the home, the sacred embrace of the Mother, and the alluring terror of everything else. Lurid demons confronted the bedridden artist in the painting *Sickness as a wonderful part of it*, 2019. Materialized in the delirious dreams of an invalid, these grotesque apparitions clamber into the window and fly through the air. A blue nebula orbited by diaphanous rings hovers on the wall like an oculus affording a glimpse of the celestial sphere.

Guzmán’s brush seems guided by the subconscious to create strangely familiar scenarios set in a perpetual twilight. As in paintings by René Magritte, shrouded heads and disembodied orbs, along with arched openings and incongruously natural wood-grain surfaces, symbolize multiple, often contradictory, aspects of reality and convey the mystery in the ordinary. Surrealist allusions came to a head, so to speak, in *Blue moon Sculpture*, 2019, which is not a sculpture but a depiction of one—a sensual collage of various wood veneers, some stained with colour, showing a veiled feminine blue moon balanced precisely, yet precariously, on a plinth, perhaps like perception.

The beautiful woman in *Selfportrait*, 2019, raised a hand in greeting as she leaned against a tree—formed, as is her skin, by exposed plywood, so that she and the tree become one. With dark skin and Caucasian features, she does not resemble the artist so much as an idealized Creole of Hispaniola—calling to mind the Western fantasy of a primitive paradise. The British slave trade began with this very island—now shared uneasily by Haiti and the Dominican Republic, the most visited tourist destination in the Caribbean—where Sir Francis Drake sold the Africans he had tricked into boarding his ship with promises of free land and riches. The fragmented nuances of skin colour, shaped by the tides of European colonialism, have perpetuated violent class divisions among Dominicans and Haitians, the latter largely of African descent.

The discrepancy between Guzmán’s physical appearance and that of the woman portrayed elicits uneasy questions about the duplicitous dynamics of identity and social privilege. Similarly, the modernist furniture in the artist’s spare interiors is formed from wood-veneer inlays cut in pristine lines that contrast with the lush vegetation nearly invading the porous tropical abodes. The International Style is not just a sign of class status but also a metaphor for an artificially constructed human order, a reflection of the commercial exchange of goods around the globe, a most insidious form of colonization. The gaze of the woman in *Selfportrait* is direct and knowing; her wave is poised like a signal from beyond.

The title of the triptych *Pachamama*, 2019, referred to the fertility goddess, aka Mother Earth, worshipped by indigenous people of the Andes. As in *Selfportrait*, the grain of the plywood insinuates itself into the picture,

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blurring figure and ground in a visionary landscape centered on a brilliant cerulean pool. Ethereal foliage dissolves into the haptic texture of the wood pattern, a record of time and growth, evoking the temporality of existence. Trees—sentient spirits rooted in the earth—bridge the astral and physical realms of experience. Prescient presences vibrate in everything around us, yet we are blinded by what Émile Durkheim called the modern “malady of the infinite”: the desire for fulfillment beyond what is offered by the earth.