

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Garage
In Hulda Guzmán's Work, Nature Takes Precedence
Haley Mellin
30 October 2020

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The artist's solo show, "Hulda Guzmán: my flora, my fauna," is on view at Alexander Berggruen until December 21.



Image: *Quarantine Visitor* (detail), 2020, acrylic gouache on canvas in artist's frame. Courtesy of the artists and Alexander Berggruen

In Hulda Guzmán's solo exhibition at Alexander Berggruen in New York, paintings of figures, flora, and fauna from the Dominican Republic depict an artist exploring reality from multiple perspectives. The paintings, at times featuring the artist, her cat, and conjured-up creatures, are large, while the figures within are usually small, basking in the warm hues of the Dominican light. In self-portraits, Guzmán unfolds a scene from various points of view, bringing reflective opportunities to the forefront. As an optimistic response to the anthropocene—an era marked by the effect of humans on the environment—the artist paints nature's omnipresence in a scale that is overwhelming. A feeling of acuity and gumption is present. After studies at the Chavon School of Design in the Dominican Republic, Guzmán furthered her schooling in photography and mural painting at the National School of Visual Arts in Mexico which layered complexity to her technique. Born in 1984 in Santo Domingo, Guzmán was featured in the Dominican Republic's pavilion at the 58th International Art Exhibition at the Venice Biennale. GARAGE caught up with the artist about her current show, while she was at her rural ocean-side studio.



Image: "Pintando La Almendra", 2020, acrylic gouache on linen in artist's frame. Courtesy of the artist and Alexander Berggruen

In your fall 2020 show at Alexander Berggruen, *Hulda Guzmán: my flora, my fauna*, your paintings focus on the natural world.

I started painting this series right when the quarantine hit our island. Coincidentally, I moved two weeks prior to a new apartment/studio to live alone for the first time in a long while. I found myself challenged by the presence of fear. I have long painted my tropical environment in celebration of nature, but this year I have referenced nature more than ever: in the face of isolation, I found that portraying trees, especially those outside my windows, helped divert my mind from destructive negative thoughts and visualizations, and bring my attention back to the present moment where fear doesn't exist—as fear is just imagination used poorly. Painting from direct observation is an exercise of rendering three dimensions into a two-dimensional picture plane. This inherently requests the mind's complete presence in order to abstractly visualize the shapes, colours, textures, and rhythms. I am grateful that, from the seclusion of my apartment, I was still able to witness nature and to be in awe of its miracle of complexity, its mastery in design, and its balance of frivolity and elegance. Nature has appeared to me as a divine refuge from the shackles of my mind.

Can you tell me about *Painting the Tropical Almond tree*?

The title of my painting, *Pintando la Almendra*, translates to *Painting the Tropical Almond tree*. It depicts my self-portrait in the action of painting the tree seen from my studio window. The Droste effect in this painting, recursively appearing within itself, creates a loop, or a *mise en abîme*, suggesting Infinity, or Eternity. Christianity

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preaches Eternal life, but this doesn't mean immortality: it references the timeless dimension of who we are. When we identify with our mental, emotional streams, we become absorbed by our thoughts, and this is from where suffering derives.

Contrarily, when we are aware of the positions of the mind, a deeper dimension is revealed, and our identity lies no longer in the mind, but rather in awareness, in consciousness. We are restored to wholeness, not lost in the fragmentation of our

mind. When thinking subsides, the personality, the egoic conditioned entity also subsides, and that is the awakening: something more fundamental than the person arises, a dimension of consciousness, inseparable from who we are. This is the essence of meditation: finding that transcendent dimension, the unconditioned being of ourselves, which is already complete, perfect and whole. It has always been there, it is not subject to time. It is within ourselves, and it is the realm of the holy, as in we are intrinsically connected to the source of all life (which is traditionally called God). Therefore, it cannot be defined. We can only get a glimpse of what this means within ourselves, beyond conceptualisation. We may use concepts, as long as we don't lose ourselves in them by generating a narrative in our mind that says, "this is who I am." The story of ourselves is not essentially who we are: it is a limited entity, it's a surface phenomenon. What subsequently happens on an external level is, to a large extent, determined by consciousness in the present moment.



Image: "Una Película de Terror (Bajo La Amapola y La Manzana de Oro)", 2020, acrylic gouache on canvas in artist's frame. Courtesy of the artist and Alexander Berggruen

How do you develop a composition?

When I am about to start a painting, and I still have no idea what I will paint, I am faced with infinite possibilities. I wonder how to choose one single idea, one story. I ask myself, "What do I want to talk about? What is worthy of this precious time on this planet? Where to focus attention and intention? What do I wish to nurture?" I usually begin with a setting, the main ambiance that I'd like to have, a particular point of view, vertically and horizontally, and the field of view. Then, I add a story into the defined space. For example, in the painting *Quarantine visitor*, I started the painting by illustrating a wide-angled view of my space and I remember being aware of how I have a tendency to edit my scenes with my ideal furniture or architectural scales. For this painting, I decided to remain faithful to my actual situation, in a symbolic acceptance of my present state. Introspection and solitude influenced me to portray myself (and my cat) which were the only models around. When the time came to paint the surface of the table (on which I was actually painting) I realised that because of the perspectival distortion in the painting, the picture within the picture within the picture would be cut, interrupting the canal to infinity (symbolic in this case for lack of perspective, in the sense that the transcendent dimension or consciousness is interrupted by the mental process).

The palm tree in the scene suggests that the seclusion and months of introspection might have provoked a strong desire for company, and the ultimate fantasy would be that the tiny palm tree in the landscape, seen from my balcony, that I've been painting from so far away, would approach, climb the building and slip into my apartment and do a little dance with me. The scene conveys, on one side, an enjoyment of personal space and my tropical surroundings, and on the other, the effect of solitude to a point of losing connection with reality and having the hallucination of personified flora. As Ram Dass wrote, "I practice turning people into trees which means appreciating them just the way they are."

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What is your experience as an artist today?

On one hand, being an artist now is like being an artist in any time period: a person using a medium to express their impressions of life that might focus on the emotional, or the abstract, possibly an attempt to express the unfathomable or that which cannot be defined. One of my favourite painters, for example, is Van Gogh. He had challenges in his time, and I have a completely different current situation, but he, as I, and as many others, found peace in observing nature.

On the other hand, being an artist is different than it was in the past. We have been destroying nature for a long time because we lost the ability to sense what is there. There are forests with gigantic trees that have been here for thousands of years; these are sacred spaces. But if humans cannot sense this anymore, and all they see is possible profit, it is because they have lost their sense of being. If you can't sense your own being, your own wholeness, then you cannot sense the wholeness of the forest, or the sky, or the ocean. We need to find that connection urgently in order to stop destroying nature.

Now that we are moving into a critical time period for the totality of humanity, it is actually a unique opportunity for spiritual awakening, for dis-identifying from the egoic mind, from the unconsciousness that otherwise runs the world, and for finding the transcendent dimension to who we are: when we are not being challenged, motivation to evolve is lacking. When disruption brings uncertainty into our lives, we're taken out of our comfort zone, and we may face loss or the possibility of loss (which is a projected future, and we suffer just as much as if we were already in that situation, which may never happen). This potentially becomes the motivating force for deep profound inner change, for a shift in consciousness. This is why this is potentially an auspicious time, so we need to welcome the challenges we are confronted with externally.

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different: it is a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. Pretending is imagining a possibility: it is a very valuable life skill, and we do it all the time. Fantasising about events that may never happen is just one way we use our mind's eye. We also wield our imaginations to envision scenarios that we actually want to create in our real lives. In fact, that is the first step in actualising those scenarios: to play around with picturing them; to pretend they will one day be a literal part of our world; to supercharge the generative aspect of our imagination.



Image: "Higüero", 2020, acrylic gouache on linen in artist's frame. Courtesy of the artist and Alexander Berggruen

What Dominican artists are you learning from?

My favourite artists here in the Dominican Republic are thankfully my best friends: the ceramicist Natalia Ortega; Gustavo Peña, an oil painter; my sister Julia Aurora Guzmán; my sister, the filmmaker Laura Amelia Guzmán; my father Eddy Guzmán; Ricardo Ariel Toribio; Patricia Castillo; Laura Guerrero; Guiselt Thaiz, and Dalton Gata.

What is your aim with these paintings?

Through this series of paintings, I would like to point out that the primordial fact of our lives is not what happens around us, but rather it is our state of consciousness, with which we meet the circumstances of our lives. Our consciousness determines how we experience our reality, how we respond or react to events or situations. What

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subsequently happens on an external level is determined by the consciousness in the present moment, so the problem can only be tackled there, because it is the root. In order to inhabit a better world, we need to go to the realm of cause in our consciousness, and not seek a better world in the realm of effect.

These paintings are a celebration of nature and set a perspective of feeling humbled by the mechanics of our planet and the universe. On the other hand, they question our own nature as creators of our "reality" and examine the manifested world in relation to and reflection of the inner world. The trajectory of human history at this point is moving in an unsustainable direction. Our planet is facing climate and ecological breakdown because of man's dissociation from nature. We must transition from our industrial materialistic society to a more contemplative culture, one that is based on consciousness and ecological symbiosis, one that understands the delicate balance between man, wildlife and the environment. Therefore, I wish to convey to the viewer a sense of the natural environment to transmit a perspective of synergy, to portray trees and plants in a glorified way and to inspire worship, respect and reverence of nature.