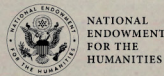




The Influence and Continuity of  
**Pre-Hispanic Textile Art**  
in Modern and  
Contemporary Art

Adriana Herrera Téllez, PhD



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Textiles—that manifestation constructed from some of our cultures' softest materiales<sup>1</sup>—are fragile and perishable<sup>2</sup>, yet they interweave a cultural paradox because their practice has been resilient and imperishable. Although fiber art is almost as old as agriculture, because it transcended the domain of the merely useful early on to connect to that which is ritual and symbolic, it remains both a timeless mirror and a creative art form that reflects our cultural present, with its hybridizations<sup>3</sup>, and with the vestiges of its resistance. To review the history of textiles in ancient America and its connection to modern and contemporary art involves threading the eye to visions that unweave and remake the fabric of knowledge and memory.

Textile art was preserved among the native cultures from all over America<sup>4</sup> generation to generation without disappearing in the maelstrom of the same history that had buried vast architectural complexes<sup>5</sup>. The appropriations of that knowledge were not only crucial in the genesis of modern Western textile art, but continued to be interwoven into contemporary art. Because of this it is essential to trace the origin of this undeniable influence which does not belong only to the past, but lives on in the work of indigenous contemporary textile artists, as well as in the art of nonindigenous creators who appropriate this living heritage and sew it into the fabric of our shared present. These explorations will have consequences in the way we construct and apprehend the narratives of art history. The continuity of this inheritance implies also processes of interaction and transformation, marked for cultural hybridization.

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<sup>1</sup> Kazuyasu Ochiai, "The Weavers from *Altos de Chiapas*. 'Hard' and 'soft' culture", *Desarrollo de los textiles mayas*. [www://arqueologiamexicana.mx/mexico-antiguo/desarrollo-de-los-textiles-mayas](http://www.arqueologiamexicana.mx/mexico-antiguo/desarrollo-de-los-textiles-mayas)

<sup>2</sup> Jenniffer Harris says: "Textiles begin to deteriorate from the moment they are made." *Vitamin T. Threads & Textiles in Contemporary Art* (London, New York: Phaidon), 2019, 8.

<sup>3</sup> On the concept of hybridization, this "encompasses various intercultural mixtures," and not only racial ones, to which the term *mestizaje* is limited, and on its difference from syncretism see Néstor García Canclini, *Culturas híbridas. Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad* (Mexico: Grijalbo, 1989), 14. An accurate definition of the term states that it "refers to the production of new cultural forms and practices through the fusion of previously separate antecedents." Michael Dear and Andrew Burrige, "Cultural Integration and Hybridization at the United States-Mexico Borderlands," *Cahiers de Géographie du Québec*, Volume 49, n° 138, December, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> In this essay I will be using the concept of America as one continent—from Patagonia to Alaska—in the same way in which the artist Alfredo Jaar did it in his revealing installation *A Logo for America*, 1987, projected in Times Square, New York City.

<sup>5</sup> Kazuyasu Ochiai, Op. Cit.



In truth, there were “communicating vessels” connecting the refined textiles of the ancient cultures of America and the avant-garde.<sup>6</sup> But the fundamental role of this influence in the modernity of textile art and in its insertion into contemporary art is usually presented in a diluted, imprecise way, which reduces it to the vague mention of the influence that the so-called “traditional crafts”<sup>7</sup> of original South American cultures and other peoples of the Global South played in the formation of celebrated artists. Hegemonic cultures tend to ignore the continuity and validity of the presence and influence of pre-Hispanic indigenous textiles on contemporaneity: it is tacitly stripped of its foundational value; or it is thought of only from an archeological perspective, as a trace of a past; or perceived within the narrow framework of a present where remain confined within the constrict of the production of an “ethnic minority”. But this limited and inaccurate vision is changing, undergoing a critical revision that seeks to include alternative ways of interpreting the past and present of textile art.

### **Pre-Hispanic Visions Woven into Modern Textile Art**

During the years of the Bauhaus School (1919-1933), the aim was to blur the sharp lines that separated the crafts, applied arts, and fine arts.<sup>8</sup> It is true that, at first, female artists such as Gunta Stölz and Annie Albers had enrolled in textile workshops (the only kind they were then allowed in anyway) because fine art mentors like Wassily Kandinsky would be present. However, these female artists eventually discovered not only the intrinsic value of textile art, but also its power to shape a new era. “Yes!” exclaimed Stölz, “weaving is an aesthetic totality, a unity of composition, form, color, and substance.”<sup>9</sup> But the dazzlement of both the Bauhaus weavers, and the European avant-gardists in general, at what seemed to be brand new, had in fact very ancient roots. And they knew it.

For example, Sophie Tauber-Arp—one of the great artists, weavers, dancers, and choreographers who participated in the Dada events at Cabaret Voltaire—was inspired by the geometric designs of the Hopi Indigenous<sup>1</sup> costumes and incorporated them into her fashion and

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<sup>6</sup> Luis Rius Caso, “Leonora Carrington and the Magic World of the Mayans”, *Mexico in Surrealism. The Creative Transfusionn. Mexican Arts*, No. 64, 2003, 44.

<sup>7</sup> The powerful influence of pre-Hispanic textiles and other cultures on the work of Sheila Hicks is reduced to this term in the press release for her exhibition at the Kunstmuseum St.Gallen, *Sheila Hicks*, February -May 2023: February -May 2023: “On the one hand, the artist was influenced by modernism, having studied painting under the Bauhaus master Josef Albers at Yale University. On the other hand, she is influenced by the traditional crafts of different continents, which she learned about while traveling and during extended stays in Chile, Mexico, India, and Morocco, among other places”. Thus, the extraordinary influence of the masterful Andean textiles in her work is minimized in the North. [www.presseportal.ch/de/pm/100059306/100900247](http://www.presseportal.ch/de/pm/100059306/100900247). This was not the case, however, in the exhibition *Sheila Hicks. Hilos libres. El textil y sus raíces prehispánicas, 1954-2017*, curated by Frédéric Bonnet for the Museo Amparo in Mexico. Also see Carolina Castro Jorquera, *Destejiendo a Sheila Hicks, Artishock*. [www://artishockrevista.com/2019/12/18/destejiendo-a-sheila-hicks-entrevista/](http://www://artishockrevista.com/2019/12/18/destejiendo-a-sheila-hicks-entrevista/).

<sup>8</sup> Other art schools advocated that approach: The reformed art school Lehr- und Versuchsateliers für angewandte und freie Kunst in Munich was, as early as 1910, a place that aspired to attain that synthesis. Artists such as Sophie Arp initially trained in its space and at the *Schweizerischer Werkbund*. It was there that she met Jean (Hans) Arp. The artists' association Das Neue Leben (New Life) was not far from this vision.

<sup>9</sup> Sigrid Wortmann Weltege, “The question of identity”, *Bauhaus Textiles. Women Artists and the Weaving Workshop* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 53.

art designs in the early 1920s.<sup>10</sup> At the end of this decade, after she left Germany and settled in Paris, she and her husband Jean (Hans) Arp joined the influential *Cercle et Carré* (Circle and Square) abstract group, started in France in 1929 by the Uruguayan artist Joaquín Torres García and the Belgian Michel Seuphor.<sup>11</sup> Other notable artists—such as Vasily Kandinsky, Le Corbusier, Piet Mondrian, Kurt Schwitters, and Sonia Delaunay—also joined the group. Distancing himself from the materialist current, Torres García proclaimed that to attain a true universal vision, a “relationship between the most modern and the most ancient”<sup>12</sup> was always needed. For this reason, he gave talks in Paris to members of *Cercle et Carré* where he explained the pre-Hispanic textile legacy of the indigenous Andes, a legacy that included works that many of them had admired at the 1928 Louvre exhibition of Ancient American Art.<sup>13</sup> It is not uncommon to find, in Delaunay's textile designs, an echo of the textile language of the native peoples from America. “Abstract art is only important if it accommodates itself to the endless rhythm in which the very ancient and the distant future meet,” Sonia Delaunay would indeed assert.<sup>14</sup>

When Anni and Joseph Albers—two leading figures in art who would cause the influence of the Bauhaus to spread throughout the United States—arrived in Mexico in 1934 at the invitation of Cuban designer and artist Clara Porset, they had a revelation that would affect their artistry to the core. “Mexico”, wrote Joseph Albers, “is truly the promised land of abstract art, which here is thousands of years old.”<sup>15</sup> Years later, in the 1950s, Anni Albers would be dazzled by her discovery of pre-Hispanic Andean textile artistry. The excavation of ancient Andean textiles buried for centuries in places like the Paracas (where archeological sites were discovered in the early 1920s) and Machu Pichu (discovered in 1911) had a deep impact on Annie Albers's career as a textile designer and printmaker. Indeed, she would dedicate her book *On Weaving* (1965) “to my great teachers, the weavers of ancient Peru.”<sup>16</sup> Those Andean textiles were offered and given as tributes or valuable garments that ten thousand years ago conveyed sacred visions, sealed alliances, and served as ceremonial pieces to accompany the dead on their journey. And they had a powerful influence on Anni Albers's art: not only in the artworks that she produced

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<sup>10</sup> The Ukrainian-born artist Sonia Delaunay, creator of the “simultaneous dresses,” was herself a pioneer of avant-garde textiles and fashion in Paris in the 1920s and Amsterdam in the 1930s. Her geometric textile designs for costumes, such as the one she made for Gloria Swanson in 1925, are evocative of the vast textile legacy of ancient America.

<sup>11</sup> He was born Fernand Berckelaers in Antwerp, and adopted the pseudonym 'Seuphor,' an anagram for Orpheus, in 1917.

<sup>12</sup> Joaquín Torres García. “The plane on which we want to situate ourselves”, *Journal of the Association of Constructive Art. Circle and square*. Montevideo, Uruguay, August 1936.

<sup>13</sup> *Nosso Norte é o Sul. Our North is the South*, exhibition catalogue organized by Bergamin & Gomide in collaboration with Tiago Mesquita and Paul Hughes Fine Arts, São Paulo, Brazil, 2021 (August 21 – October 16), p.11. Torres García saw these textiles in 1922 at the National Museum of History in New York and in Paris, at the exhibition where his son Augusto worked as curator. The avant-garde had also appreciated pre-Columbian art in the middle of that decade at the Museum Für Völkerkunde.

<sup>14</sup> Sonia Delaunay, *Nous Irons jusqu'au soleil*, Robert Laffont, Paris 1978, p. 46, quoted in *Sonia Delaunay*, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (London: Tate Publishing), 2014, p.10

<sup>15</sup> Brenda Danilowitz, “No estamos solos: Anni y Josef Albers en Latinoamérica”, *Anni Albers Josef. Viajes por Latinoamérica*, exhibition organized by the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía and The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation [curated by, Brenda Danilowitz; Eds. Brenda Danilowitz, Marta González], (14 de noviembre de 2006-12 de febrero de 2007), 7.

<sup>16</sup> Anni Albers, *On Weaving* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1965). First edition.

that decade, but also in her later jewelry designs and drawings. For instance, she created necklaces in the shape of the Inca Quipus, those pre-Hispanic textiles that constituted a wordless script based on a system of knots, that would become a generating force of other artworks in the 20th and 21st centuries.

From the *quipus*, the Albers learned that this ancient writing was not only carved in stone, but also woven into fabric, and that its non-verbal signs convey an alternative kind of knowledge. They did not seek to silence this influence that had transformed their work<sup>17</sup> in ways that had tended to be forgotten. They were visionaries who were able to gauge the real scale of the ancient legacy, as well as its persistence: “Perhaps it was that timeless quality of pre-Columbian art that first spoke to us,”<sup>18</sup> Annie reflected when referring to her remarkable private collection of the same, now in the Yale Peabody Museum. And this is a key to approaching the study textile art: understanding that these cultures were not obsessed with the idea of change for change’s sake but instead seek to further and preserve ancient knowledge so sacred that, to them, it was tantamount to a cosmic vision.

Anni Albers, who by weaving felt united to a remote past<sup>19</sup>, would not be the only pioneer in contemporary textile art to create by appropriating that legacy. Sheila Hicks, a student of Josef Albers, traveled in 1957, on a scholarship, in search of pre-Hispanic textile art, initially to the Andes, where she completed her thesis. It was precisely in Chile where Hicks first exhibited and sold her art, before becoming one of the great figures of contemporary textile art. In the 1960s she went to Mexico, where she settled and learned about the living Mesoamerican textile tradition, before taking up residence in Paris in 1964. In an interview with Monique Levi-Strauss, she said: “...I was trying to learn how the ancient Andean textiles were made, trying to replicate them.”<sup>20</sup> That “replication” has been key to the recognition of fiber art as one of the means of global contemporary creation; but this precious original source is diluted or omitted in that narrative of art history that is often hegemonically constructed.

### **Resonances of Pre-Hispanic Textile Art in Contemporary Latin American Art**

The memory of the Quipu has lived on through the work of pioneering artists from Latin America such as the Peruvian-Italian Jorge Eduardo Eielson, who died in 2006, or the Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña, both prodigious poets and artists whose series—which took a long time to become internationally recognized—revisited the ancient Andean textile legacy. Eielson's *Quipus series* honors and evokes the mnemonic system of Peru's ancestral cultures. Eielson had traveled the path of the European avant-garde, including the influence of Arte Povera, to return to that legacy

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<sup>17</sup> The homage to pre-Hispanic architecture that inspires his work *To Monte Alban* from the Graphic Tectonic series, 1942, is seminal in the later iconographic series *Homage to the Square*. Brenda Danilowitz, Op.Cit.

<sup>18</sup> Anni Albers, “Pre-Columbian Mexican Miniatures”, *Anni Albers Josef. Viajes por Latinoamérica*, exhibition organized by the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía and The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation [curated by, Brenda Danilowitz; Eds. Brenda Danilowitz, Marta González], (14 de noviembre de 2006-12 de febrero de 2007), 27.

<sup>19</sup> Brenda Danilowitz, Op.Cit., 4.

<sup>20</sup> Monique Lévi-Strauss, “Interview with the artist-Entrevista con la artista”, en *Reencuentro – Reencounter. Sheila Hicks* (Santiago de Chile: Museo Chileno de Arte Precolombino, 2019), 67.

that emerged in the treasured geography of his country.<sup>21</sup> Many years after having held in his hands a millenary reddish fabric woven by weavers of the Chancay culture, in 1965, while living in Italy, he twisted, stretched, cut, burned, and finally knotted fabrics of colored garments to create his own system of knotted fabrics, which he named after the system used by the Incas to cipher messages. His *Quipus* contained a universal expression, but also, as he told Martha Canfield in 1995, they were “a modest homage to those ancient Peruvians who knew how to turn a primordial gesture into a true and sophisticated language.”<sup>22</sup>

The *quipu*, certainly, were “part of the development of weaving technology as a primary means of expression”,<sup>23</sup> and today, as Carol Damian has said, “the *quipu* is alive and is activated by artists such as Cecilia Vicuña.”<sup>24</sup> She conceived “the idea of the *quipu* that remembers nothing: a *quipu* that has forgotten the message, because the memory was exterminated.”<sup>25</sup> This idea, not materialized, was the genesis of countless variants of *quipus*, “knots that speak, and are offerings to conjure and transform reality.” In response to the destruction of the glaciers in Chile, Vicuña made *El quipu menstrual* in 2006. In 2020, in her exhibition *Cecilia Vicuña: Disappeared Quipu* (organized by the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston in collaboration with the Brooklyn Museum) she created an on-site installation that combined a huge red wool *quipu* she had knotted herself with five ancient *quipu*—carriers of a nearly extinct language—from the collection at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University. Her pieces work by weaving elements of the past into the vision of the future that her messages of resistance conjure up.<sup>26</sup>

Colombian pioneer Olga de Amaral has woven high knots that evoke ancient monoliths, fulfilling her challenge, as a textile master to “weave a rock”<sup>27</sup> in color. Also, she uses gold evoking both its mythical use in pre-Columbian goldsmithing, and the obsession with El Dorado of the conquistadors, who seemed to worship it as a god. Belonging to the same generation and training, Stella Bernal de Parra interweaved in various series the allusions to pre-Hispanic

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<sup>21</sup> José Ignacio Padilla, “Eielson: materia y lenguaje: quipus”, *Hueso húmero*, 55, 2010, pp. 23-52. [www.academia.edu/10146110/Eielson\\_materia\\_y\\_lenguaje\\_quipus](http://www.academia.edu/10146110/Eielson_materia_y_lenguaje_quipus)

<sup>22</sup> Luis Rebaza, “Jorge Eduardo Eielson. El paisaje infinito de la costa del Perú”, *nu/do homenaje a j.e. eielson*, José Ignacio Padilla, Ed. (Lima: Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, Fondo Editorial, 2002), 278.

<sup>23</sup> Tom Cumins, “Representation on the Sixteenth Century and the Colonial Image of the Inca”, *Writing Without Words. Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerica & the Andes*, Elizabeth Hill Boone & Walter D. Mignolo, Editors (Durham and London: Duke University Press) 1994, 96.

<sup>24</sup> Carol Damian, “Fiber Art. Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow”, *Circularity of Textil Time* (zoom talk), November 17, 28:45,

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=aonq4ae7DSQ&ab\\_channel=AlunaArtFoundation](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aonq4ae7DSQ&ab_channel=AlunaArtFoundation).  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=aonq4ae7DSQ&ab\\_channel=AlunaArtFoundation](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aonq4ae7DSQ&ab_channel=AlunaArtFoundation).

<sup>25</sup> Adriana Herrera, “Cecilia Vicuña. El arte como ofrenda”, *Art Nexus* No. 115, Diciembre-Febrero 2020.

[www.artnexus.com/es/magazines/article-magazine-artnexus/5e5692e9a81bfd1d68e93661/115/cecilia-vicuna](http://www.artnexus.com/es/magazines/article-magazine-artnexus/5e5692e9a81bfd1d68e93661/115/cecilia-vicuna)

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> *Olga de Amaral: To Weave a Rock* was also the title of the artist’s first major museum retrospective in the United States, at Cranbrook Art Museum October 30, 2021 - March

2022. [www://cranbrookartmuseum.org/exhibition/olga-de-amaral-to-weave-a](http://www.cranbrookartmuseum.org/exhibition/olga-de-amaral-to-weave-a-rock/#:~:text=Tracing%20the%20artist's%20career%20over,seminal%20influence%20and%20technical%20innovations)

[rock/#:~:text=Tracing%20the%20artist's%20career%20over,seminal%20influence%20and%20technical%20innovations](http://www.cranbrookartmuseum.org/exhibition/olga-de-amaral-to-weave-a-rock/#:~:text=Tracing%20the%20artist's%20career%20over,seminal%20influence%20and%20technical%20innovations).

cosmogonies with a geometric vision also connected to the conquest of space, building a language of her own that anticipated the power of textile art in the 21st century.<sup>28</sup>

It would be impossible to name here a sufficiently comprehensive selection of non-indigenous Latin American artists who have woven their work together using the threads of pre-Hispanic textile memory, but I cannot avoid mentioning the Peruvian Cecilia Paredes. In addition to her mastery of cultural camouflage with fabrics, she weaved tying herself with the kingdoms of nature: she delicately sewed chrysalises abandoned by butterflies, revived the art of ancient ritual feather costume-making, and restaged—in powerful, documented performances—ancient rituals that linked animal guides and shamans. Paredes has transformed herself into different creatures, including a peacock and a parrot. There are also contemporary artists like Sandra de Berducy, or “aruma”, who learned ancestral weaving skills from Bolivia’s native peoples, but complemented that knowledge with modern technology and the various lingos that have sprung from the use of new media. The 21st century will see the thread of textile artworks spread along all cardinal points from that America that is a continent full of cultural diversity and where indigenous cultures continue to radiate their influence.

### **Continuity of the Indigenous Textile Legacy in Miami's Art Scene**

The exploration and revitalization of the textile legacy that predates the arrival of Europeans in the so called “New Continent” is also creating a fiber art movement in South Florida marked in part by the educational work of Pip Brant, who grew up on the Indigenous reservations of the western plains. She learned from the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Assiniboine communities the close relationship between the textiles and the worldview of native cultures. At the same time, there is a growing group of immigrant artists in Miami interested in learning about the textile traditions of Latin America, which continue to be part of a living knowledge, and which is now also hybrid and in continuous transformation. Several of these artists participated in the exhibitions organized within the framework of the Threading the City event, conceived by the Fiber Artists Miami Association (FAMA) and the World Textile Art (WTA), with the support of Florida Humanities and the National Endowment for Humanities, among other institutions such as Aluna Art Foundation.

Aurora Molina is a referential Cuban artist, who also leads the fiber art movement in Miami. She embroiders, sews, weaves, and makes collages with fibers in a political way, not only because of the themes she addresses—the thousand and one faces of immigration, for example—but also because of her active learning in Mesoamerica and the Andes from indigenous women weavers. Her artistic practice extends the communal way of working and the use of textiles to narrate stories and weave the present without letting go of the thread of the past. Art historian Carol Damian highlights Molina’s sewn masks that reenact the mythical link between a person and an animal, as well as the series of portraits she made with children in Oaxaca, Mexico,

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<sup>28</sup> The exhibition *Women Weavers*, 2018, at Ideobox Art Gallery, Miami, brought together the work of both pioneers of fiber art in Colombia, along with that of other international artists under the curatorship of Aluna Curatorial Collective.



inviting them to preserve a textile legacy that is also valuable for creators in the rest of the world. CITA. For her part, Miami-based Mexican artist Laura Villareal, with the support of Oaxacan weaver Diego Mendoza, drew on this ancestral knowledge to create a series of embroidered interventions on the pages of copies of the books that educator José Vasconcelos had conceived a century ago as part of his country's educational reform. The abstract geometric forms, superimposed on illustrations on paper from the history of the West, constructed convergent spaces in which neither culture tried to erase the other.

The territory of the assimilations of those knowledges, whose continuity has been uninterrupted, forms part of Miami's textile scene where weavers from all over the continent converge, bringing with them the roots of ancient textiles practice and putting into motion multiple cultural influences on their own production. Isabel Infante is a Chilean artist initially trained as a designer, with a master's degree in sustainable textiles from the University of the Arts, UAL, London, but it was in Mexico where she began to work with natural fibers, and in particular with henequen, also known as sisal, which before plastic was exported from the Port of Sisal, Yucatan, as the raw material for all the ropes in the world. Her works pay homage to pre-Hispanic iconographies, to the plants that since before the Conquest were used for dyeing, and to the backstrap loom technique that she now practices in Miami. While she creates her own fiber art, she continues collaborating as a volunteer with the Mexican community of Ensamble Artesano, designing pieces for its weavers to make. Sisal was also the fiber that Bolivian artist Sonia Falcone –who has participated in the past in Miami in various textile art exhibitions– used in her hanging tapestries and in installations with natural ropes that aim to grasp the use of materials on the verge of extinction.

Fiber art is also made with papers that served as memory support in pre-Hispanic times. The material with which Mexican artist Karla Kantorovich makes her textile pieces, amate paper (from the Nahuatl *āmatl*), is the same that Mayas and Aztecs used as an offering or as a support for their painted books, the codices, systematically destroyed with few exceptions after the Conquest. Though events, rituals, astronomical records, and numerous forms of knowledge were painted on the surface of this paper –made from fibers of trees endemic to Central America–, after the Conquest its production was banned. It was only preserved in some populations such as the Otomí indigenous community in the state of Puebla, which never stopped making it. In the installation *Ámate*, curated by RTCurated for Piero Atchugarry Gallery, Kantorovich interweaved amate with other organic papers, and with found fragmented alphabetic writings that she spread out in the form of a tree with its branches ascending until they took over the ceiling. By doing this, she was not only constructing a powerful woven sculpture, but also mixing and healing memories of different times. She also exhibited in *Subverting Materials*, curated by Francine Birbragher for the Museum of Contemporary Art of the Americas, MOOCA, during the event organized by the Miami Fiber Artist Association, “Threading the City”.

Colombian artist Martha Alvarez sewed a likeness of the face paintings of Embera Indians, from Colombia's Chocó region, on paper. She conducted fieldwork with three native communities in the 1990s to learn about the art of *kipará*, a type of painting which, as she

explains, “synthesizes reality through abstraction”<sup>29</sup> in a universe where gods, people, animals, and plants were intertwined. The black and red vegetable pigments she applied constitute a system of memory and identity. Alvarez embroidered paper made from the fiber in vegetables like yucca palm or cane using cotton and silk threads, thus preserving, in a new medium, the ancestral, corporeal writing. Her fiber work was exhibited in Miami in commemoration of the 25th anniversary of World Textile Art, WTA.

In addition to these artists, who throughout the continent give continuity to an ancestral legacy, there is a growing strengthening of indigenous textile art with creators who, without uprooting themselves from their native way of life, extend their projection to contemporary art. The exhibition *Tiempo Circular* (Circular Time), curated by Aluna Curatorial Collective at Tanya Brillembourg Art, brought together textile pieces by Maya Tz'tulil artists Manuel Chavajay and Antonio Pichillá Quiacaín, intertwined with the daily life of the native communities in Lake Atitlán, Guatemala, and with their calendars: the *Haab'*, a period alluding to the solar year, and the *Tzolk'in*, a cycle or count of 260 days that coincides with the duration of human pregnancy. Shelly Burian, curator of Textile Arts at the George Washington University Museum, states that the weaving techniques of ancient America –particularly in the Andes– were very complex, more so than in other parts of the world, precisely because they use a technique called four selvages, to complete each textile without breaking it:

“(…) what they wanted was a completely closed fabric that would never need to be cut to take it off the loom (…) what they believed was that the cloth is alive, that the process of weaving a cloth, assembling the loom, and placing all the threads is the same as giving birth and raising a person, and that, therefore, when you finish a cloth you have a fully developed animated being whose arms and legs were not cut off to say that it is already finished.”<sup>30</sup>

To this day, also in Guatemalan communities, many textiles are weaved as entire pieces without cutting them.

Manuel Chavajay embroiders the stars and other elements on pieces of paper painted with the burned oil used by the motorboats that have changed the rhythm of the waters of Lake Atitlan, in whose shores his community resides. Pichillá Quiacaín sculpted one piece using wood taken out of the loom itself to form the sacred figure of Kukulcán (or Quetzalcóatl) according to the ancient codices. He also renewed the ancestral geometric abstraction, paying homage to the traditional white pants used by Mayan men in his community. A rotative system of squared fabric woven now not only in white but in red, black, and yellow, with traditional small lines dyed in black or in white on each surface, formed his series of *Abuelo* (Grandfather). The primary colors,

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<sup>29</sup> *pintura corporal emberá*, mayo 2011, [Video]. YouTube.

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=dgeJGByANcw&ab\\_channel=MUTEX2010](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dgeJGByANcw&ab_channel=MUTEX2010)

<sup>30</sup> Shelly Burian, “Art Conversation: Four Sedvages Weaving”, *Circularity of Textile Time*, [Video], Zoom, November 17. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=aonq4ae7DSQ&ab\\_channel=AlunaArtFoundation](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aonq4ae7DSQ&ab_channel=AlunaArtFoundation)

associated in Western cultures with neoplasticism and constructivism, correspond for the native Mesoamerican people to those of the different states of corn and to the four cardinal points. At the same time, the exhibition shows the inquiries of tepeu choc, a Mayan artist descended from the Q'eqchi'e and Kaqchikel peoples. Starting from the line, he constructs a language in the form of expanded textile art, which transitions from drawing to sculpture. Like the ancient Maya, who invented the number zero and calculated with surprising precision the cyclical movement of the planets, he uses mathematics to structure his works of art.

There are many indigenous artists who, by linking the way of life of their communities to the contemporary art system, are breaking the increasingly questionable practice of artisans anonymously executing the works only signed by recognized artists. The case of Teodoro Pacco Choque, a Peruvian indigenous, founder of the Association of Artisans Las Vicuñas de Palca, whose creations are appreciated as art, is exemplary. Today there is a growing trend towards collaborations between indigenous weavers and artists who do not do the weaving themselves. And when the weavers are different from the artists, they are now being credited for their work, as in the case of Peruvian artist Miguel Aguirre, who mentions Elvia Paucar for her collaboration.

From one end of the continent to the other, there are more and more visible indigenous fiber artists who are weaving, in their works, a plea for the protection of life –of the natural elements that sustain the planet–and threading it with perspectives needed on the contemporary global stage. The textile contemporary art of the native peoples–which has sustained countless forms of assimilation and cultural hybridization– ensures the continuity, but also the transformation of the past in the present, and outlines paths for the future, which would not clear without the recognition of its own genesis.

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