

DONNA HUANCA

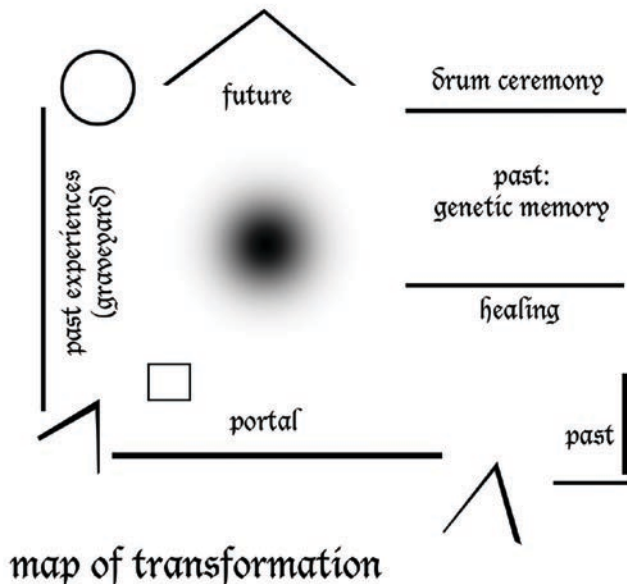
SECRET MUSEUM OF MANKIND



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

JANUARY 12 - FEBRUARY 16, 2008

AUSTIN, TEXAS



DONNA HUANCA

Secret Museum of Mankind

“There is nothing new in art except talent.”
– Chekhov

In the center of the room a pulled-cotton cloud hangs over a pyramid made of white gallery pedestals. In the center of this pyramid sit two things: a smoke machine and a black light. After much buzzing and huffing, the smoke machine eventually produces enough fog to diffuse the glow of the black light.

There is a lot to be said about the peculiar goings-on in this Secret Museum of Mankind. Within this exhibition, ideas and objects bang against one another in the unnamed limbo that looms between the eye and the mind, the hand and the spirit. Things that are complete meet those which will remain forever undone.

Seen from the middle of the center gallery, the overall impression is that of a multi-sensory occult zoetrope of personal narrative, found objects, psychedelic light and sound, metaphysical symbols, and New Age aromatics. Behind it all lies free collaboration and anarchy, pleasurably jarring.

The opening night of the exhibition saw an improvised ritualistic performance during which the artists, their friends, and complete strangers alike attempted to attain a trance-like state through several hours of continual drumming. During

this time, Lizzy Wetzel, aka Glossolalia, haunted the room like a witchy Stevie Nicks, obsessively stirring a clutch of animal bones in a bowl of white paint while dressed in a costume she created based on an Owleyes collage titled *The White Goddess*. Robert Graves wrote the book of the same name, a compendium of esoteric erudition in which he presents the White Goddess as the primal creatrix, a sublime force and the source of all poetry and art. Owleyes considers his digital collages, shown previously only on the internet, as beacons whose function is to summon like-minded persons to him. What’s more, they work, as is evidenced by his presence here and in other exhibitions nationwide.

Magic is the language of desire and magic is a substitute, however unreliable, for other kinds of thought. Is the world in a state of constant change or has everything been fixed within an intricately designed series of eternal

orbits? A multitude of pyramids both step and triangular appear throughout the exhibition acting as symbols and signposts. There are pyramid-shaped entrances, pyramid soft sculptures, a large painted pyramid, a painted Native American tipi as well as the soft light and sound pyramid described above. The very repetition of this visual form recalls the kind of circular mental experience that attends a ritual action, whether it be attending a church or brushing one’s teeth or having a rote conversation with a co-worker or loved one.

Contradictions and non sequiturs abound. Donna Huanca is a born contrarian. She’s already tangled with both the FBI and the Secret Service. It should come as no surprise that given the opportunity to put on a one-woman show in a venue directly in tune with her own convictions regarding the empowerment of women, she instead enlists a cabal of artists including Lizzy Wetzel, Owleyes, and Jon Read, many of them men, to share the spotlight with her.

This contrarian spirit impels this show. On one hand, it is no great leap to note that the geometric portals that lead into the main space, the painted black circle that appears like a portal in time, the piles of unprocessed materials – spices, weeds, dirt, as well as the strings dividing space all allude to various high water marks of the progressive and subversive tradition in recent art history: Dada, Minimalist and Post-Minimalist art, Arte Povera, Joseph Beuys, Eva Hesse, Fluxus, as well as artists such as Jesse Lott, Martin Zet, Thomas Hirschhorn, Forcefield, and Caroliner Rainbow. Any human activity is done with an echo chamber. In *The Secret Museum*, you catch the voices of artists who strove to break free from the



conventions set upon them by an art world that is in its worst aspects often imperialist, sexist, racist, classist, a craven apologist for capitalism and self-contained by a peculiar type of myopia which would rather declare itself a universe even if it means shutting out the world. Even the history of art as taught in schools, with its emphasis on modernity (i.e. the Renaissance and afterward) and the biographies of individual artists compressed to resemble the Lives of the Saints is itself incomplete and unsatisfying, for the tradition of making art dates back to prehistoric custom. Before museums and galleries, before churches or even the glyphic records in Egypt and Sumeria, there were images in the caves, on the hides of animals, and in the dwellings and structures whose functions are lost to us.

The Secret Museum of Mankind is split into two main material and philosophical sections (more or less): a self-proclaimed "Graveyard of Old Art;" and THE REST, what appears to be an ad hoc theater for anarchic action and improvised rituals. Materially speaking, almost everything here comes from that class of things that are cheaply and easily acquired – debris from the streets, dollar store gems, and the miscellaneous objects that were already on hand in the back storage rooms of the gallery itself, and objects brought by Huanca's collaborators. Namely, laser eggs (pen lights lodged inside eggshells,) tree branches, mittens, hanging ferns and other potted plants, candles, cinder blocks, black lights, cotton clouds, neon colored strings, small animal skulls and bones, and drums.

One may take comfort in the many soft surfaces. The floors are bestrewn with dirt, mounds of spice, and clutches of pigment powdered weeds. Felt paintings, rag puppets, shamanic costumes, cotton clouds, and hazy

lighting lessen the sharp psychological effects of the gallery space's hard geometric lines and bright white lights. Light is an important part of the exhibition. The specter of Manichean thought takes solace here. Light, you should remember, stands in for the soul. Darkness for darkness. The universe of solids, a mixture of the two. Sculptural installations provide the majority of the illumination. What's more, there are different sources of light here: candles and black lights and fluorescent tubes and pen lights ablaze with wan eminence, each imbuing different hues and luminosities to the room and its contents.

Arguably, most of the work in this exhibition is trying to upend any sense of containment, whether specifically in the gallery as gallery or more generally the idea of art as a career requiring a good amount of consistency and quality control. Huanca's own statement regarding this show is literally: "No Mistakes Were Made."

The Graveyard of Old Art consists of installations of Donna Huanca's paintings and sculptural works depicting aspects of her life and identity. There are portraits of her mother and father in addition to a host of totems, personal fetishes, and symbols drawn from her Incan heritage and time spent in the underworld of punk rock and experimental music. They are presented catch-as-catch-can, jammed together on each side of the room.

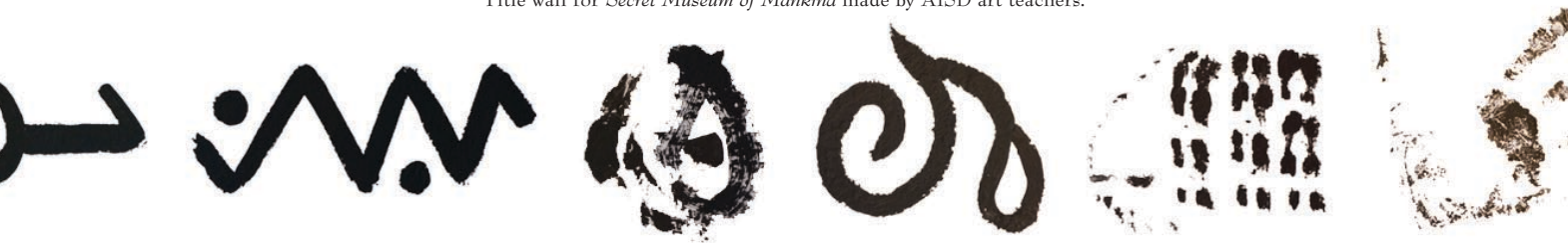
Just beyond the first pyramid-shaped portal that leads inside the show, a shaky video projection of a plane's aerial path traveling north from Bolivia represents her mother's own emigration to the United States and the distance, physical and psychic, she had to travel to arrive in a place that was at first hostile to immigrants. Two fabric murals facing one another recreate, on a large scale, photographs taken of her father

and the combat unit he served with in the jungle as a young soldier in the Bolivian army. These murals are labor-intensive, wall-sized, the hard masculinity of their subjects belied by tropical color and tactile softness. The murals present this group of working-class soldiers with the scale of Rembrandt's *Night Watch* and the nobility and dignity we associate with the burghers and aristocrats in famous works of art.

Across the gallery stands a motley group of puppets, gathered Sgt. Pepper's style, including iconic representations of many of Huanca's idols – Leon Theremin, Dot Wiggins, and her deceased dog – before an Incan pyramid painted on the wall behind them. This installation suggests the path to an afterlife for these fallen heroes in her personal pantheon. It is also an homage to the universe of color and activity suggested by the artwork of her friend and sometime collaborator, Jon Read, whose paintings, drawings, and woodcut sculptural figures are preoccupied with depicting a post-Apocalyptic narrative on the scale of Henry Darger's collected life work. Presented together these works represent a self-portrait, concluded for the time being, and an official farewell to the past.

The rest of the works in the show are more oblique, conjoined in spirit rather than direct narrative. Everywhere is the aftermath of insensate communal activity. A visiting class of teachers was conscripted to create the hieroglyphics that adorn the title wall. Donna Huanca, Lizzy Wetzel, and Owleyes crowned a small pedestal with an assemblage of dirt and moss and plants. It is pretty and, like many of the byproducts of their collective effort, inscrutable, as forms and colors and scents and sounds collide in anti-didactic combinations. Here and there one

Title wall for *Secret Museum of Mankind* made by AISD art teachers.



can almost match a name to the work. In addition to her voluminous and extravagantly detailed White Goddess shroud, Lizzy Wetzel wove neon string sculptures across the walls. Owleyes created the illuminated grove that occupies the far center wall of the room as well as leading the conclusion of the drumming ritual to a crescendo of two-by-four blows on sheet rock during the opening rites. Jon Read brought in a small armory of hand-made Mayan-colored wooden rifles to arm the puppets in the afterlife in much the same way that many of the Zapatista soldiers bore wooden simulacra of firearms during their 1994 uprising. He also painted hybrid monster graffiti on the walls and worked on some of the other objects here.

To be sure, there are loose ends, but as Hamlet puts it: "There are more things in heaven and earth... than are dreamt of in your philosophy." In the end, all things may come to light. Men and women early in the dawn of civilization, sitting in the trees and setting up the dog cult. Men and women deep in the future, sitting in trees and reminiscing about the dog cult. There is a lot to be said that remains unsaid about the peculiar goings-on in this Secret Museum of Mankind.

Tex Kerschen

Tex Kerschen is a writer. He was once a curator. He is currently a member of Indian Jewelry.

DONNA HUANCA

Born in Chicago, Illinois. Lives and works worldwide.

EDUCATION

- 2006 Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, Maine
 2004 Bachelor of Fine Arts Painting, University of Houston, Texas

RESIDENCIES

- 2008 Headlands Center for the Arts, San Francisco, California
 2008 Art Omi International Artist Residency, Ghent, New York
 2007/8 Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, New York, New York
 2007 Lawndale Art Center, Houston, Texas
 2006 Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, Maine

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2008 *Secret Museum of Mankind*, Women & Their Work, Austin, Texas
 2007 *Learning to Communicate*, L'Ecole du Baoum, Grenoble, France
Planeta de Fortuna, Meals and SUVs, London, UK
Philosophy of The World: New York, Susan Inglett Gallery, New York, NY
 2006 *Band (Sound Remitting Puppets)*, Lo-Fi Cleaners, Houston, Texas
2012/1980: 'Interrupting Shopping', Abasto Shopping Subway Tunnel, Buenos Aires, Argentina
 2005 *Warscapes*, Plush, Dallas, TX
Forty Foot WARSCAPE, Richland College, Dallas, Texas

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2007 *Material Culture*, Longwood Arts Center, Bronx, New York
Philosophy of the World: Houston, Lawndale Art Center, Houston, Texas
Color Me Badd, The Royal Hotel, London, UK
World View, Dallas Contemporary, Dallas, Texas
Nervous Jungle, Skloska 28, Prague, Czech Republic
 2006 *Manic and Wasted*, Swing Space, New York, New York
Flex Your Textiles, John Connelly Presents, New York, New York
Sugarcoated, Women & Their Work, Austin, Texas
CULTURE AND CONFLICT
 part of *Imagining Ourselves*, International Museum of Women, San Francisco, California

Sampler Stitch,

- Dam, Stuhltrager, Brooklyn, New York
GRRRRLZSTUFF, Plush, Dallas, Texas
 2005 *La Frontera*, Gescheidle Gallery, Chicago, Illinois
Affair at the Jupiter Hotel, DiverseWorks Room, Portland, Oregon
Handmade In Texas, XIE, Houston, Texas
ART CHICAGO, Plush, Chicago, Illinois
 2004 *Wayward Girls*, Plush, Dallas, Texas
Ain't That a Groove, Project Row Houses, Houston, Texas
Temporary/Contemporary, The Orange Show, Houston, Texas
 2003 *Trailer Park Art Show*, felt-assault series, Sound Installation, A Trailer, Pasadena, Texas

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 2008 *The Secret Museum of Donna Huanca*, Sarah Johnson, DT Weekend, 1/29/08
Weekend Picks: Donna Huanca in Austin, Caroline Kinneberg, ARTINFO.com, 1/31/08
 2007 *Report from Austin*, Charles Dee Michell, Art in America, Dec 2007
PLUSH HEROICS, Whitney May, NYArts Magazine, New York, NY, July-August Issue
Donna Huanca: Philosophy of the World, Wendy Dembo, Cool Hunting, New York, NY
 2006 *Donna Huanca*, Whitney Klassel, Alarm Press, Issue #24, Chicago, IL, pg.66-67
 2005 *Donna Huanca Goes To War with a Needle and Thread at Plush*, Charles Dee Mitchell, Dallas Morning News, March 16th pg.12E
 DallasNews.com
Global Ear: Houston, John Fenn, *The Wire*, Issue #255, May 2005, London, UK

AWARDS/GRANTS

- 2007 Lawndale Art Center, Residency Fellowship, Houston, Texas
 2006 Fellowship, Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, Maine
 2004 DeGolyer Grant Recipient, Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, Texas

LECTURES

- 2008 *Visiting Artist*, Purdue University, Lafayette, Indiana
 2006 *Nomadic Art Practice*, University of Houston, Houston, Texas
 2005 *Visiting Artist: New Painting Process*, Richland College, Dallas, Texas

PROJECTS

- 2001 *RUA MINX*: alias for sound experiment (ongoing)





This Panel: Installation views *Memories/Past*, 2008. Found fabrics, paint, found objects. 600 square feet.

Cover Panel: Installation views from *Secret Museum of Mankind* and opening night performance by Lizzy Wetzel, 2008.





Cuban Rebels, 2007. Found fabric. 12' x 9'.

Women & Their Work

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Known for its pioneering spirit, embrace of artistic innovation, and commitment to Texas audiences and artists, Women & Their Work is now celebrating its 30th anniversary. Presenting over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film, the gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,793 artists in 249 visual art exhibitions, 107 music, dance, and theater events, 13 film festivals, 20 literary readings, and 335 workshops in programming that reflects the broad diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in Art in America, ArtForum and on National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from

the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches over 2,500 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



women and
their work

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