

The Pleasures and Perils of the Amazon Rainforest

What the artworks in *Amazonia* offer is a means to communicate complex or abstract subjects with uncommon immediacy.



Louis Bury October 25, 2023



Claudia Andujar, *Horizontal 2 - the Marcados series (Village: Ericó)* (1981–83), inkjet print, 12 panels, 14 2/4 x 22 inches each (all photos Louis Bury/Hyperallergic)

The opening section of *Amazonia*, a group exhibition of historical and contemporary art about the Amazon rainforest at Pratt Manhattan Gallery, presents a telling aesthetic contrast. Black and white photographic prints of Indigenous peoples line an entryway wall that opens out onto a gallery whose immersive sound installation and vibrant paintings depict the rainforest as a profusion of sound and color. Curator Berta Sichel and Assistant Curator Patricia Capa wisely argue that “environmental problems require analysis in cultural as well as scientific terms” and their distinct selections highlight art’s peculiar analytic strengths and limitations.

Consider two works situated next to one another in that opening section: Claudia Andujar’s grid of photographic portraits, *Horizontal 2 – the Marcados series (Village: Ericó)* (1981–83), and pablo sanz’s six-speaker projection of ambient rainforest sounds, “entangled” (2023). Andujar is renowned for her decades-long photographic and activist work with the Amazon’s Yanomami people. Yet these portraits, taken as identification images for a government vaccination campaign, showcase her unsmiling, number-wearing subjects in a dour ethnographic light. Conversely, sanz’s rainforest soundscape teems with the buzzes and chirps of multi-species life. Both artworks are powerful but the former requires context while the latter is more readily understood through the senses alone.



Installation view of *Amazonia* at Pratt Manhattan Gallery. Pictured: Susana Mejia, “Color Amazonia” (2017–21), organic pigments on cotton paper, 32 panels, 26 3/8 x 39 3/8 inches each

In *Amazonia*, the artworks that rely on supplemental information are black and white photographs from previous eras. Barbara Brändli’s 1960s images of Indigenous Yekwana, Sanemá, and Yanomami peoples focus on those groups’ rituals and attire. João Musa’s series of images of a boat voyage down the Amazon River, *Amazônia 1975* (1975/2023), fixates on the swampy landscape. Today, such historical artworks provide a record of the changes development has wrought upon the Amazon. But even at the time they were made, the *National Geographic*-esque works served an informational and advocacy function in addition to an aesthetic one.

This communicative emphasis differs from that of the exhibition's contemporary artworks, which operate in a more sensuous register. Sergio Vega's short film, "Paradise Burning" (2008), employs one static, continuous take to portray wildfire as a thick, crackling envelope of flame and smoke. "Color Amazonia" (2017–21), Susana Mejía's massive grid of monochromatic paintings made from pigments she created from rainforest plants, defies Minimalism's typical austerity, and botany's taxonomic orderliness, with its runny, ebullient colors. While contextual knowledge can enhance appreciation of such artworks (for example, as Amazon wildfires have increased in frequency, the rainforest has shrunk in size), their vivid aesthetics remain the point.

The two main types of work in *Amazonia*, while not mutually exclusive, nonetheless point up art's curious capacity for cultural analysis. Artworks can convey information, and even make arguments, but other media, such as writing, can do the same with greater nuance. What artworks offer is a means to communicate complex or abstract subjects with uncommon immediacy. In a culture where information is abundant, yet empathy is in short supply, it's no wonder that contemporary art about the Amazon is designed to make the region's perils and pleasures feel more real.



Barbara Brändli, "Untitled (Yanomami community of Mavaca, Upper Orinoco region, Amazonas State, Venezuela)" (1965), digital print, 10 3/8 x 15 3/4 inches



Installation view of *Amazonia* at Pratt Manhattan Gallery. Foreground: pablo sanz, "entangled" (2023), ambisonics sound installation, dimensions variable



Javier Andrada, photograph from the series *Camelôs en Manaus, Brasil* (2008), digital prints, 34 photographs, 15 3/4 x 10 3/8 inches each



João Musa, photograph from the series *Amazônia 1975* (1975/2023), inkjet print on cotton paper from digitized 35mm black and white analogue negative, 16 1/2 x 23 3/8 inches

Amazonia continues at Pratt Manhattan Gallery (144 West 14th Street, Greenwich Village, Manhattan) through December 9. The exhibition was curated by Berta Sichel with Patricia Capa.
