HYPERALLERGIC

Art Reviews

Cecilia Vicuña's Charismatic Vulnerability

Combining elements of Surrealism, Symbolism, and portraiture, Vicuña's paintings are parables of personal and political awakening.

Louis Bury August 10, 2022

Cecilia Vicuña, "Autobiografía" (1971), oil on canvas, 23 1/2 x 25 1/4 inches (all images courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, Seoul, and London)

For almost two generations, Cecilia Vicuña's manifold creative practice has been beloved in poetry and arts circles, yet has remained under the radar of casual audiences and a bit beyond the ken of the art market. In recent years, that situation has changed, thanks to the Chilean-born artist's regular presence on the biennial circuit and her receipt of high-profile recognitions, including Spain's prestigious Premio Velázquez de Artes Plásticas, in 2019, and this year's Venice Biennale Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement. Arriving on the heels of these honors, *Spin Spin*

Triangulene at the Guggenheim, curated by Pablo León de la Barra and Geaninne Gutiérrez-Guimarães, will introduce many viewers to an oeuvre brimming with tenderness and verve. The exhibition, which sits somewhere between a survey and a focused selection, conveys the charismatic vulnerability of Vicuña's practice, if not quite a full sense of her extraordinary range.

The exhibition title alludes to the museum's notorious spiral shape, as well as, a bit more vaguely, Vicuña's interest in the affinities between scientific and indigenous knowledge (here, the triangulene molecule and Incan quipus). It begins with an exquisite new sculptural installation in the two-story gallery off the rotunda's entry ramp and continues with two levels of the artist's paintings, then gives way, in the middle rotunda levels, to a Kandinsky installation from the museum's permanent collection. It picks back up on the top level with nylon banners and a handful of books and films that showcase her politically minded linguistic play. Whatever its logistical and conceptual rationale, this exhibition structure makes the literary and performance sides of Vicuña's practice feel tacked on — the salt and pepper that add a bit of seasoning to the meat and potatoes of her paintings and sculptures — in ways that suggest the impossibility, as well as the temptation, of trying to understand her work within a strict museological framework.

Installation view of Cecilia Vicuña: "Quipu del exterminio / Extermination Quipu" (2022), wool, natural plant fibers, horse hair, metal, wood, seashells, nutshells and seeds, bone, clay, plaster, plastic and pastel, dimensions variable at Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Vicuña's best-known visual work encompasses two long-running series: *Precarios* and *Quipus*. The former, the earliest of which date to the 1960s, are spare, tiny assemblages of natural and

human-made detritus — shards of driftwood and stone, tangles of string and wire, scraps of twigs and textiles — whose wispy forms indicate comfort with their own fragility. Many individual precarios have been preserved as fine art objects, while others have been incorporated into performances and then left to the elements, similar to how contemporaries such as Andy Goldsworthy and Ana Mendieta made ephemeral artworks within nature. Each individual "precario" looks like it could be an object hanging from a mobile; when grouped together in galleries, typically at all manner of heights and locations, the scruffy totems coalesce into irresistible constellations.

Her quipus also make poetic use of exhibition space. The works are creative reimaginings of proto-writing devices from Andean antiquity, in which knots were tied into a necklace-like array of strings to record information regarding things such as tax obligations, census figures, and calendar dates. Vicuña's artistic quipus from the 1960s to the 2000s, often made from strands of string or yarn, have the same slender quality as her precarios. But in the past decade their materials have grown bulkier, their scale more monumental: floor-to-ceiling ribbons of thick, knotted wool whose dangling, bunched together forms have a visceral quality. These recent quipus, which have been exhibited internationally and become something of a signature style, maintain a sense of delicateness yet are more assertive in how they occupy space and implicate the viewer's body in relation to them.

Cecilia Vicuña, "Amados (Loved Ones)" ((1969), oil on canvas, 36 x 28 1/2 inches

At the Guggenheim, “Quipu del exterminio / Extermination Quipu” (2022) combines these two cornerstones of Vicuña’s practice into a spare climate elegy. Three columns of scraggly materials hang across the room, each a mix of gauzy wools and precario-esque relics in, respectively, the red, black, and white color families to symbolize blood, death, and mourning. But the work’s symbolism feels subsidiary to its tactility, to the droopy ache of fabric, shell, and bone. The installation has the same vertical orientation of her recent quipus yet its component parts appear more distressed and less uniform, almost archaeological. Though the museum didactics describe “Extermination Quipu” as “a call to action” in the face of cultural and ecological losses, the artwork operates in a wistful register.

Vicuña’s paintings sound that call with greater affirmation and joy. Most were produced not long before or after the 1973 Chilean coup d’état, an event that marks a sort of pre- and post-lapsarian line in the artist’s biography. Her paintings combine elements of Surrealism, Symbolism, Art Brut, portraiture, and history painting to produce candid parables of personal and political awakening. “Autobiografía (Autobiography)” (1971), for example, depicts her at 10 different ages, from infancy up to the time she composed the painting in her early 20s, engaged in activities that include dancing and falling in love. The self-portraits float atop a saffron background and, with their slightly disproportionate body parts and non-sequential arrangement on the canvas, are unencumbered by normative visual logic without devolving into bizarrerie. “Amados (Loved Ones)” (1969) utilizes a similar compositional scheme — featuring over 20 disembodied heads of religious and artistic figures, from Ramakrishna to William Blake — to create a pantheon of her historical influences at the time.

Cecilia Vicuña, “Janis Joe (Janis Joplin and Joe Cocker)” (1971), oil on canvas, 78.74 x 86.61 inches

Near the center of that pantheon, Vicuña includes an image of herself and her then-partner, a quietly self-assured gesture that encapsulates the way her paintings portray history as fundamentally participatory. “Janis Joe (Janis Joplin and Joe Cocker)” (1971) and “Biombo casita para pensar qué situación real me conviene (Little House to Think What Real Situation Suits Me)” (1971), the latter of which has been painted on a colonial folding screen with double-sided canvases, both teem with real and imagined scenes of countercultural liberation. Likewise, “Karl Marx” (1972), part of her anti-patriarchal “Heroes of the Revolution” series (1972-ongoing), drolly depicts the German philosopher, clad in a black suit and with a somber visage, towering over a lively, pastel-hued garden in which several naked women writhe. The human agency in Vicuña’s paintings, always a touch impish, belongs to anybody willing to exercise their sensuous or creative capacities rather than exclusively to history’s most celebrated actors.

This Romantic faith in creativity’s revolutionary potential, which walks the line between naive and inspired, also encompasses her work in poetry and performance. *Spin Spin Triangulene* nods toward these facets of Vicuña’s practice through the inclusion of 11 “Palabrarmas,” a Spanish portmanteau for “word-weapons,” as well as two films and a vitrine with literary and documentary ephemera. Made in exile during the time of General Augusto Pinochet’s Chilean junta, and fabricated as nylon banners or paper screen prints, the colorful “Palabrarmas” meld simple slogans and images into rebus-like protest symbols, such as that of an outstretched human

arm whose forearm is shaped like an eye, with the Spanish word *verdad* written across it ("Ver dad, Dar ver (Truth: To Give Sight)," 1974/2022).

Visitors who linger with the nearby 54-minute movie *Kon Kon* (2010) will be treated to scenes of Vicuña in performance. The free-associative documentary chronicles the artist's return to the Chilean coastal town of Concon, where she reads and chants poetry and undertakes beachfront rituals with ephemeral precarios and quipus. It is hard to overstate the peculiar gravity of Vicuña's performances, even when mediated by video. She enunciates words in conspiratorial hisses, chants improvisatory, para-semic mixes of Quechuan and other languages, and, when there's an audience, often connects its members together with umbilical strands of yarn. Such methods allude to indigenous oral traditions without staking possessive claim to them, in a manner that chimes with the pathbreaking style of ethnopoetics cultivated by poets Jerome Rothenberg and George Quasha beginning in the late 1960s.

But long films in large exhibitions are tempting to skip for all but the most committed of visitors, and the banners and screen prints dotting *Spin Spin*'s capstone level create the impression that Vicuña is a visual artist who dabbles in literature and performance. This partial view of a polymathic creator is unfortunate not only because her writing and poetic performances are bracing, essential parts of her practice, but also because her performances are well-documented, particularly in recent decades. While books and performances can be difficult to represent in a gallery exhibition, and while Vicuña will deliver one new live performance as part of this exhibition, more could have been done to highlight the many short videos of her prior performances.

A partial Vicuña is better than no Vicuña at all, though, and *Spin Spin* doesn't pretend to be comprehensive. Indeed, it was surprising to discover that no precarios proper were included here, perhaps so as not to reduplicate the contents of other recent exhibitions. Still, such omissions raise the question of what gets lost from public view, and why, when an underdog artist, nurtured by small presses and scrappy arts organizations, receives heavyweight recognitions. "Maximum fragility/ against maximum power," writes Vicuña in the wall drawing that accompanies "Extermination Quipu." The lines could serve as her artistic credo yet the drawing, a cosmic mind map, has been tucked away in a gallery corner so that the impressive sculpture is the main thing visitors see.

Cecilia Vicuña, Spin Spin Triangulene *continues at The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (1071 Fifth Avenue, Upper East Side, Manhattan) through Sept 5. The exhibition was curated by Pablo León de la Barra and Geaninne Gutiérrez-Guimarães.*