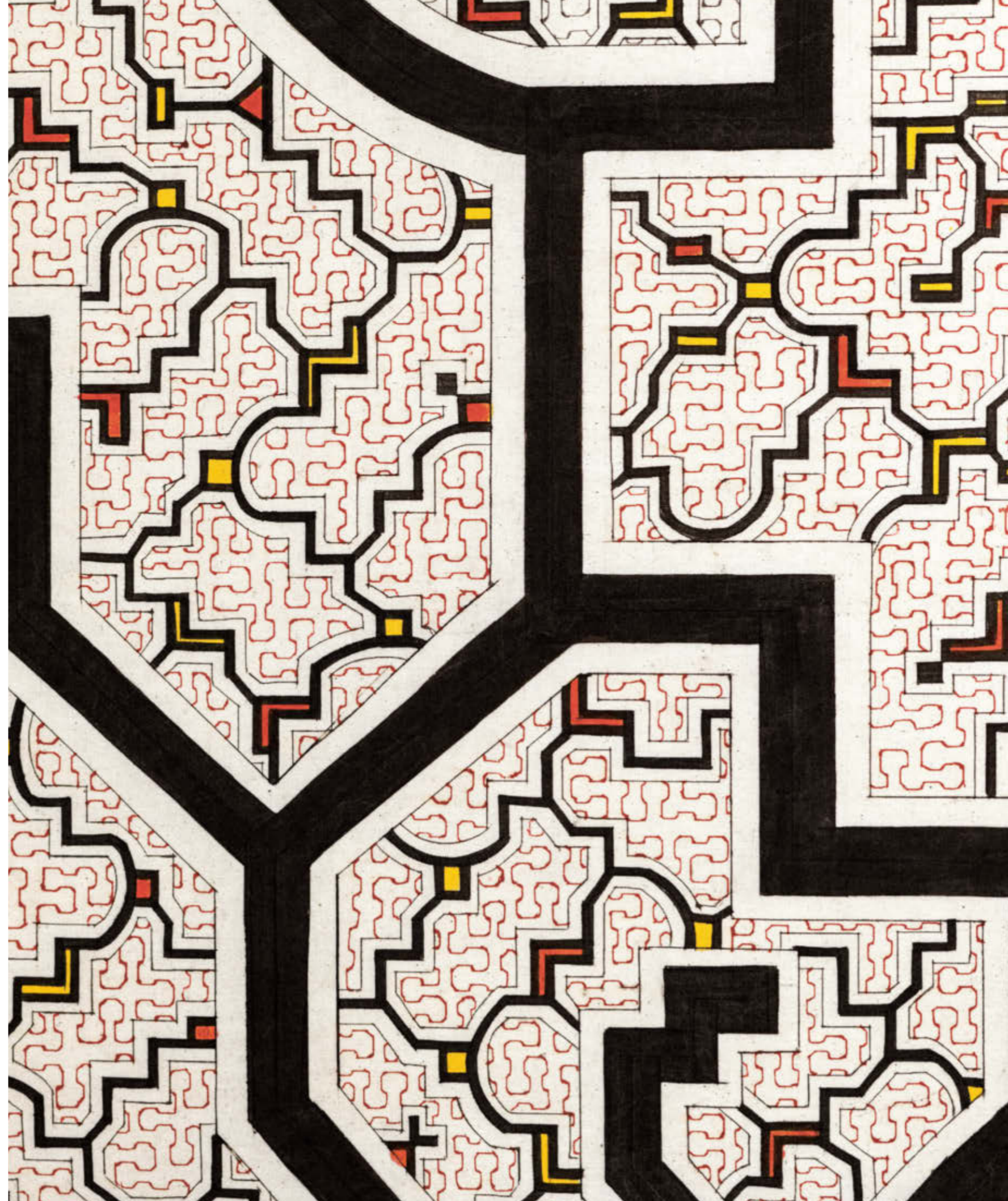


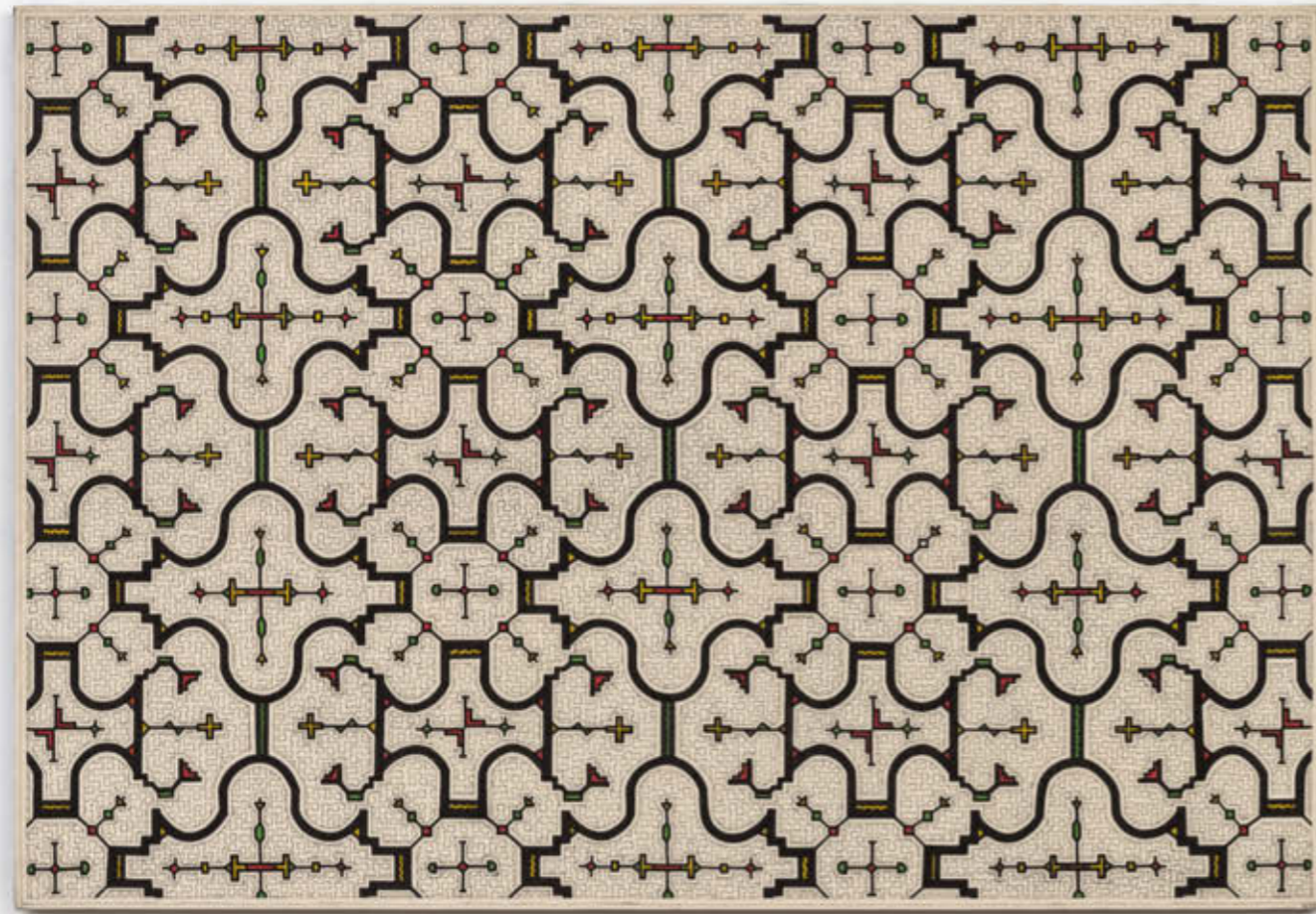
S A R A

F L O R E S

With a practice based on traditions hundreds, if not thousands, of years old, Peruvian artist **SARA FLORES** has suddenly struck a chord in Western art capitals. Preparing for her first solo show in New York, the 73 year old welcomes *Blau International* to her studio in the Amazonian city of Pucallpa. Here, assisted by her daughters and working solely with the fruits of her harvest, the eminent Shipibo painter puts the relational into aesthetics while wedding the visual and healing arts like no one we've interviewed before. Having ingested the odd cup of ayahuasca, *Cornelius Tittel* discovers what holds her work—and the universe—together

Right: UNTITLED (ANI MAYA KENÉ, 2021) (detail), 2021
Vegetal dyes on wild-cotton canvas, 144 × 136 cm
Opening spread: UNTITLED (KANO KENÉ 1, 2019), 2019
Vegetal dyes on wild-cotton canvas, 142 × 276 cm





UNTITLED (MAYA KENÉ 1, 2022), 2022, vegetal dyes on wild-cotton canvas, 226 × 156 cm

I have been talking to painters for most of my life. I was good at tennis, even better at writing, and I'm told I have a bright future as a yoga teacher. But my greatest talent might be knowing how to talk to painters.

Every painter I have met has almost exclusively been interested in other painters. Even when they are no longer carousing with their close colleagues, they still seem to be in a constant, and mostly imaginary, dialogue with them. It has always been my privilege—and my most valuable journalistic currency—to have spent time with the very best. Young or old, famous or obscure, every painter has seemingly been interested in what Baselitz had to say about Hockney, or Hockney about Baselitz. In such moments, any initial shyness would evaporate. The exchange rate of the cleverly placed quote, the apt comparison, or the telling anecdote was reliably solid—until May 22, 2022, that is.

That morning I sat in a studio in Yarinacocha, an Indigenous suburb of Pucallpa, the largest city on the Ucayali river, which flows into the Amazon several hundred kilometers upstream. On the walls were unstretched canvases with breathtaking labyrinthine Kené patterns, and under the table, one of those hairless Peruvian dogs that are hard to beat in either charisma or ugliness.

Sara Flores, the Kené painter I had come to talk to, would, I was soon to find out, sooner quote Ronín, the mythical anaconda spirit that dominates the water world, than Rodin. Similarly, my question about a certain shade of red in her work did not lead to a monologue about Titian, but evoked long-repressed memories of my last urologist visit. She extracts that red from the leaves of the Achiote tree, she said, adding, with a smile, “I could heal your prostate with it too.”

It has been more than half a century since Joseph Beuys put the figure of the shaman back on the contemporary Western stage. Yet within five minutes, Flores reminded me that, in some societies, the healing and the visual arts never parted ways. Rather, they are fed from the same sources, and they can even serve the same purpose.

Flores, who first raised international eyebrows last year with her solo exhibition at London's White Cube, and who is now preparing her New York solo debut at Clearing gallery, was born in 1949, under the name Soi Biri, in Tanbo Mayo, a small Shipibo settlement halfway between Pucallpa and Iquitos.

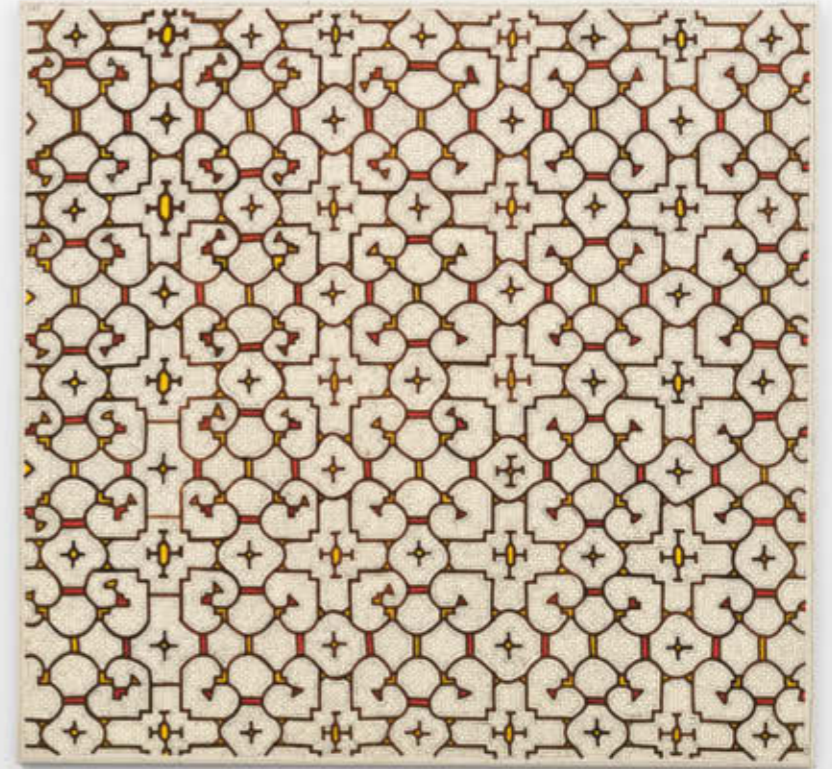
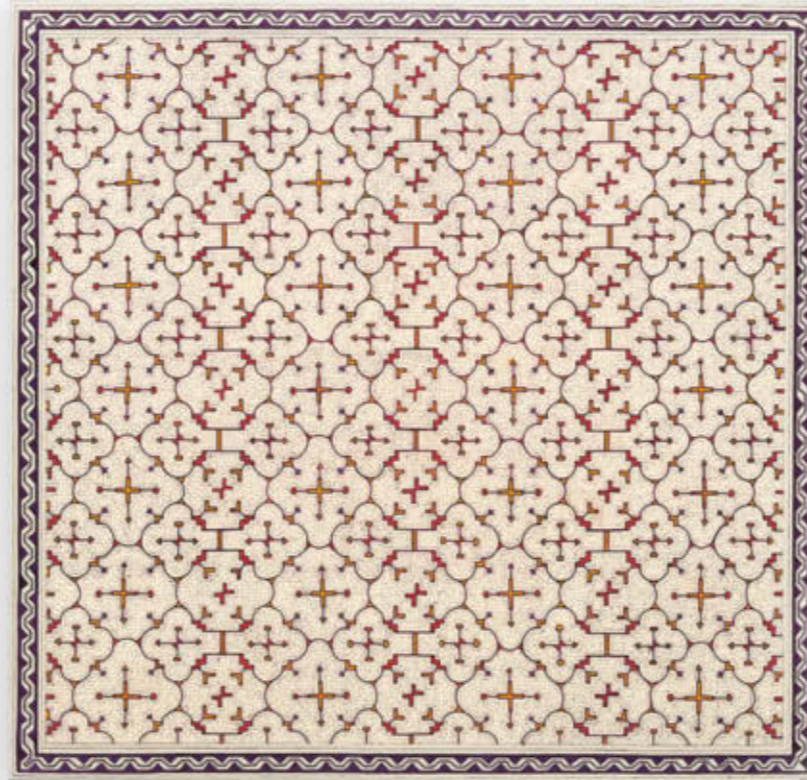
That original name—her Spanish one she received only upon her government registration—already made it clear she was predestined to live the life of an artist: in Shipibo, Soi Biri means “well done,” she told me, but also “precisely drawn.” After her umbilical cord was cut, her mother rubbed a special tincture into her navel to strengthen her artistic vision, while a shaman sang a special song to further enhance it.

Flores remembers a childhood without property, without money, without a doctor. The guiding principle: “When one Shipibo eats, all Shipibo eat.” She remembers a childhood steeped in traditions hundreds of years old, recalling walks with her

After Flores's umbilical cord was cut, her mother rubbed a special tincture into her navel to strengthen her artistic vision



SARA FLORES photographed by PAUL HANCE for BLAU INTERNATIONAL



UNTITLED (SHAO KENÉ 1, 2021), 2021
Vegetal dyes on wild-cotton canvas, 132 × 149 cm
UNTITLED (TSITSON MAYA KENÉ 3, 2018), 2018
Vegetal dyes on wild-cotton canvas, 145 × 150 cm
UNTITLED (MAYA KENÉ 7, 2019), 2019
Vegetal dyes on wild-cotton canvas, 140 × 147 cm
INTRODUCTIONS exhibition at White Cube, London, 2021

mother, who picked leaves off the *ipobekené* plant by the edge of the path and pressed them onto her eyelids “so I could better receive the designs.” All this, she said, was part of what the Shipibo call *joni-ati*—person-making—training a person from birth to play a predetermined role important to the tribal community.

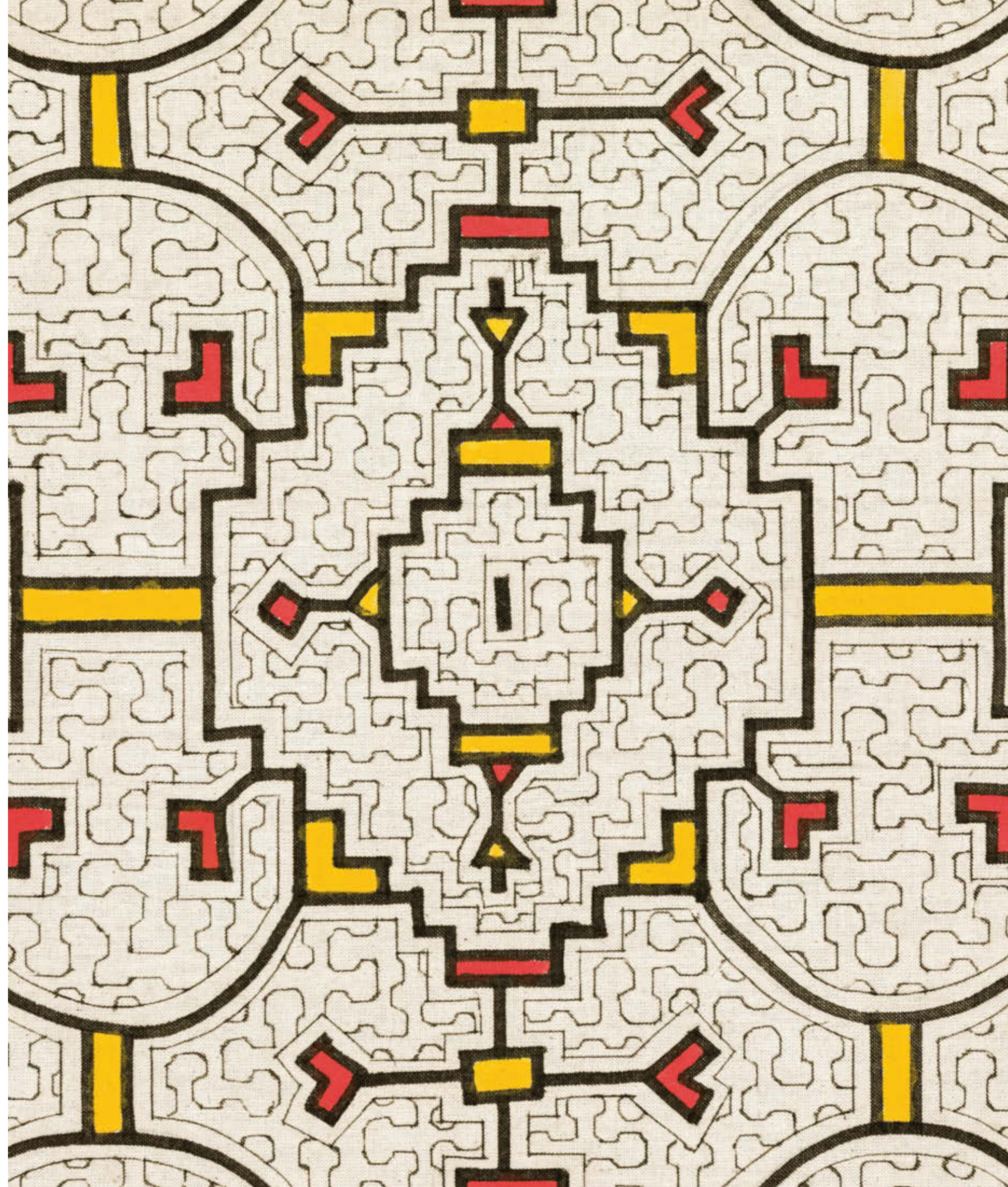
Shipibo, Flores said, firmly believe that many diseases are caused by poor design and aesthetic disharmony

At her mother’s side, Flores learned to apply Kené designs to fabrics and ceramics. “*Menin*, the technical aspect, can be learned. *Shinan*, the visionary aspect, cannot. You either have *shinan*, or you don’t.”

This painting tradition has a set of very strict rules and codes, and at the same time, it’s committed to innovation, to never repeating oneself. Flores skillfully navigates between these two extremes, and her heterogeneous variations within a homogeneous universe connect surprisingly well to the world of minimal art. It’s not for nothing that her London gallerist, Jay Jopling, dreams of showing her works alongside those of Agnes Martin.

When, I asked, did she realize she had *shinan*? Flores told me of the long hours she spent under mosquito nets as a child. That’s when the designs she would later paint first formed inside her: with eyes wide open, she received detailed black and white patterns—their colors would not reveal themselves until she closed her eyes. By now, as soon as she sits in front of an empty canvas, she has the gift of *shinai picotai*: “The hand goes by itself, and inspiration emerges.”

The longer the unbroken, broad lines, or *peshtin*, she manages to paint—without any planning or preliminary drawings, of course—the more successful her work is in the eyes of the Shipibo. For the secondary lines, *ketana*, drawn in perfect parallel, Flores is now assisted by her daughters Deysi and Pilar Ramirez, but the responsibility for harvesting the painting material remains entirely in her hands.



For the black of her *peshtin* alone, she collects the bark of two trees that can only be found in a certain river delta, as well as the bark of another tree that exclusively grows in the highlands. From that blend of barks, she cooks a brown tincture that becomes black on the canvas when it is washed off with a clay solution, for the harvesting of which she also has to undertake a separate journey.

Why, at the age of 73, does she still take these trips? There seems to be no alternative for her to build a deep relationship with her material; it is always an expression of its terror. “I approach the tree and ask for its bark,” she said. “Then I sing for the tree.” The relationship with the plant is maintained throughout the work until the painting is finished, so that the spirit of the tree will live on in her art.

It used to be, she said, that she had more shades to choose from. She would get a special light brown from the bark of the *jene joshón* tree. “These trees once grew by a small stream behind our house. Then Nahuas people came and started to throw litter and pollute the waters, so Ronín decided to go away. The waters of which she is the mother left with her too.” Now the stream has dried up and the trees are no longer there, so she has no other choice but to paint her Kené without that brown.

When Flores speaks of Ronín, she means both the mythical ruler of the water world and the very concrete anaconda of the boa constrictor species, regarded as a key group whose presence or absence decisively affects the population of others. Up to 10-meters long, it digs passages and tunnels, creating a network of canals that regulates drainage during the rainy season and, in the hot season, irrigates the fields between the river’s arms. Flores’s painting is so interwoven with her terrain that neither her material, nor her motifs refer to other painting traditions. They refer to the veins of certain leaves, to germination and growth processes, and to the skin patterns of the anaconda. This is why a sudden lack of pigment can be a harbinger of ecological disaster.

By lunch time, Flores wanted to invite me to a restaurant built on stilts in the lagoon. As we left, she told me about her son, who wants to become a painter but struggles with the prejudice and ridicule of his friends. The Shipibo believe that—back when the heavens were still so close to the earth you could touch them, when animals could talk like humans and humans could turn into animals—Kené,

along with its associated botanical knowledge, was revealed to women alone. Since then, painting has been in the feminine domain. Still, she said, she encourages her son.

Over lunch I had a lot of time to think about the gender discourse of the art world as I knew it, and how it differed from the Shipibo's. It was a Saturday. Every table was crowded with families, and the band played so loudly that conversation was utterly impossible. The piranha ceviche was superbly seasoned, although not sufficiently enough to mask the slightly muddy aftertaste of the local freshwater fish.

Back in the studio, I wanted to talk to Flores about an aspect of her work that was even more thought-provoking to me than her son's equality struggles. Without calling for clinical trials, how would she describe the healing power of her art?

What her paintings do to someone who has them on their walls in London is a complete mystery to her, simply because she has never talked to any of her international collectors. She could only speak for the Shipibo: contemplating a Kené image, tracking its lines, confuses the gaze and stimulates the optic nerve, thereby triggering healing. The whole painting also transmits the good energy that has flowed into its creation, starting with the harvesting of materials.

When the heavens were still so close to the earth you could touch them, Kené was revealed to women alone

Shipibo, she said, firmly believe that many diseases are caused by poor design and aesthetic disharmony. The word *kikin* signifies the opposite and is key to understanding Kené: a visual or acoustic experience is *kikin* if it delights through its unique harmony, symmetry, and sophistication—and thus stands in healing contrast to everything untamed, unorganized, and ultimately toxic. At the same time, *kikin* also denotes good intentions, perfect manners, and exemplary discipline.

Not only does Flores's work show us that “the aesthetic is at the same time ethic and synesthetic,” as Matteo Norzi of the Shipibo Conibo Center in New York wrote in an essay about her work; it clearly must also be understood beyond its visual surface, as a portal into those inviting synesthetic worlds that once led William S. Burroughs and Timothy Leary to Peru.

On the way out, I ask Flores what exactly does her painting have to do with ayahuasca—the psychedelic plant medicine that is ingested in ritualized ceremonies, and has become both a popular export and a tourist draw for Peru in recent years?

Flores herself, as is the custom for Shipibo women, only completed her first ayahuasca ceremony after the birth of her children—half a life after Kené became her vocation. “But you will see,” she said, “the one who drinks ayahuasca sees the snake coming.”

The next night, in a tent on the edge of the Shipibo village of San Francisco de Yarinacocha, the shaman Elisa Vargas would hand me a small mug of ayahuasca painted with Kené. Half an hour, maybe 45 minutes later, exactly when the ayahuasca kicked in, the Shaman started to sing. It was as if the song projected a never-ending stream of Kené patterns onto my closed eyelids. Patterns that spread throughout my body and began to interlock like gears—as if I were entirely made up of what at first I could only see.

At some point, I opened my eyes again. I wasn't to see Ronín that night. What I definitely did see were the energy fields between the shaman and myself, and the other people in the room. We were all connected by continuously interlocking patterns.

Perhaps ayahuasca, I thought that morning, is just as much of a litmus test for the latest hypotheses of quantum physics as it is for the oldest of all yogic theories. We are all one, a huge cosmic organism working together, and Kené is nothing less than our operating system.

Sara Flores's solo show at Clearing Gallery, New York, is open from November 10 to December 23, 2022

UNTITLED (WIRISH KENÉ 1, 2017), 2017, vegetal dyes on wild-cotton canvas, 156 x 181 cm

