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The Shipibo Conibo Center | *Art as Medicine for the Environment*

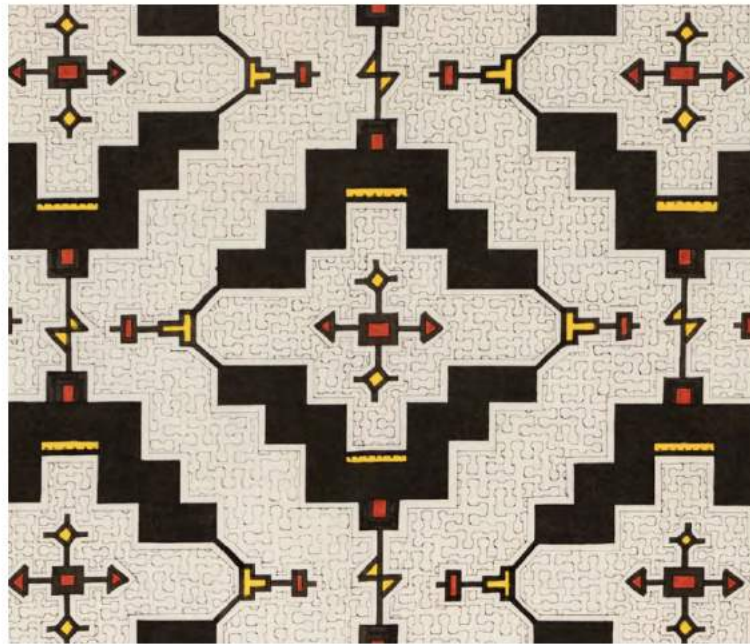
Based in Harlem, New York, the Shipibo Conibo Center (SCC) is a unique organization that serves as intermediary between the Shipibo Conibo people, an Indigenous group based in the Peruvian Amazon, and the Western art world. Far more than a gallery or a cultural center, the SCC is a multi-headed project that acts towards self-determination, environmental preservation, and intergenerational transmission of knowledge for the Shipibo Conibo People. It is, in the words of its co-founder, an invitation for Indigenous artists to make their work political so that the healing power of the *kené* (the linear patterns emblematic of Shipibo art) can benefit the Shipibo community at large.

The SCC came about after its co-founders filmed the movie *Icaros: A Vision* in collaboration with artists, activists, and healers from various Shipibo communities. When the film premiered at the 2016 Tribeca Film Festival, visas to attend the event in New York for the Indigenous actors featured in the film got denied, thus highlighting the extractivist nature of the cultural industry, which more often than not takes from Indigenous communities without giving back. This

manifestation of power imbalance sparked in the movie team a drive to break the colonial patterns that keep Indigenous artists away from mainstream discourses and platforms.

The SCC serves as a reminder that Indigenous ideas are contemporary and widely relevant to the art world today—a world that, as the SCC acknowledges, contributes to and benefits from the reproduction of unequal structures. Changing such

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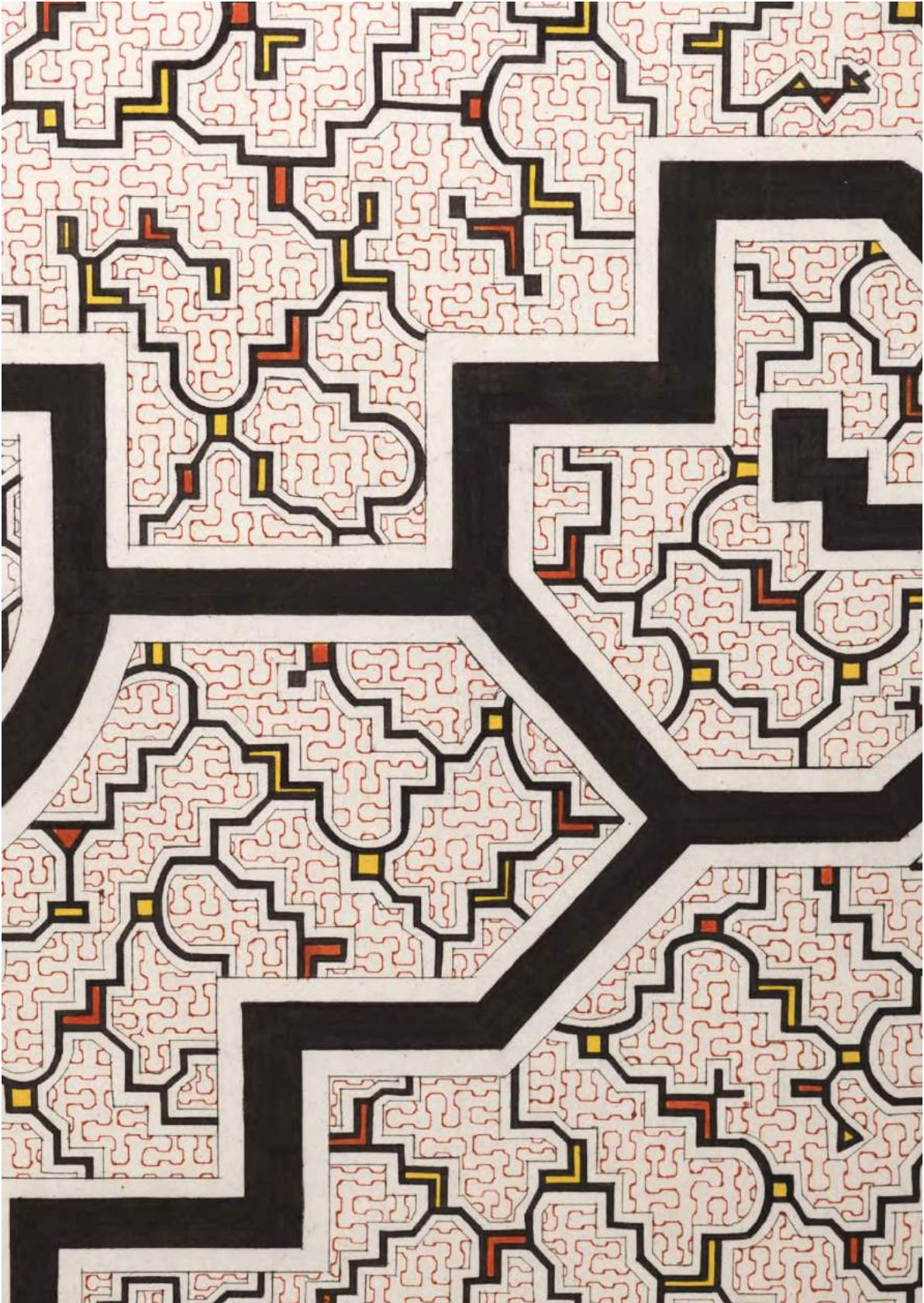
Sara Flores. *Untitled (Shao Kené 1. 2021)*, 2021 (detail)
Courtesy of the artist, The Shipibo Conibo Center,
and White Cube
© Photo Shelby Coley

Following page:
Sara Flores. *Untitled (Ani Maya Kené 1. 2021)*, 2021 (detail)
Courtesy of the artist,
The Shipibo Conibo Center, and White Cube
© Photo Shelby Coley

a system whose roots are deeply embedded within colonialism is not an easy task, but the SCC believes the first step in that direction is the questioning of the problem. Today, after many years of pushing artistic and industrial boundaries, doors are beginning to open. Major galleries are now interested in exhibiting works from the Amazon; artists represented by the SCC, like Sara Flores, Celia Vasquez Yui, and Chonon Bensho are reaching a level of success unprecedented among Shipibo Conibo artists. International recognition on the art scene is however not an end in itself for the Shipibo Conibo people or the SCC.

In Shipibo cosmivision, kinship extends beyond the human to include animals, plants, water, spirits, and more—a connection often materialized in the works of the artists featured by the SCC, such as in “The Council of the Mother Spirits of the Animals,” a ceramic installation by Vasquez Yui. A Shipibo artist does not create in a vacuum, but within an intricate ecosystem that needs care. Art, environmental activism, and struggles towards self-determination are interwoven in this worldview, which is why the SCC does not approach Indigenous art as a product, nor the artists as self-motivated individuals. Instead, among the Shipibo, human and non-human beings are all considered nodes in a web of reciprocity.

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Celia Vasquez Yui, *The Council of the Mother Spirits of the Animals*, 2022 (Installation view)
Courtesy of the artist, The Shipibo Conibo Center, and Salon 94
© Photo Elisabeth Bernstein

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When one purchases an artwork through the SCC, they agree to that principle of reciprocity and become embedded within a larger network of human and non-human relations. Simultaneously, following the purchase, the artist shares some of the earnings to support initiatives that protect Shipibo land, lifeways, and sovereignty. That is, rather than asking for donations from people outside the community, the SCC financing model offers a venue for Shipibo artists to create revenue to fund local community projects. Collaboration with major contemporary art fairs and galleries at an international level, such as Art Basel Miami and New York galleries White Cube, Clearing, and Salon 94, is thus a way for the SCC and its represented artists to fund programs focused on resisting external threats that are eroding Shipibo's community bond and traditional lifeways.

Over the last few decades, the 176 Shipibo Conibo communities that live in the Peruvian Amazon have faced increasing pressure from lumber and oil companies, coca farmers, crop monocultures like soy, as well as ayahuasca tourism, all of which have contributed to deforestation, the contamination of waterways, and the loss of cultural traditions. Spread over eight million hectares of land, the Shipibo Conibo people struggle to monitor the boundaries of their

territory, making them vulnerable to occupations. As a result, some of the projects developed by Shipibo leaders and artists in collaboration with the SCC intend to provide, for example, community patrols of land defenders, a radio that facilitates communication within each group, and the establishment of an ancestral healers' union that respond to non-Indigenous people's interest in Amazonian medicinal plants.

If the COVID-19 pandemic was a tragic period for many peoples in the Amazon, it also created an opportunity for Indigenous groups to come together and lead the way. During that time, Shipibo organizations stepped in to get access to resources and distribute them as needed. In doing so, they were able to demonstrate what self-governance brings to the Shipibo nation. "Shipibo Multiversity," an SCC-founded institute dedicated to plants, art, and politics in the Ucayali region of Peru will build on this momentum. This center will provide room and board for Shipibo people to meet and organize, learn self-governance strategies from other Indigenous groups, as well as create a space to share traditions. Through this center, the SCC hopes to secure Shipibo intergenerational transmission of knowledge to build the Indigenous identity of the future.

Louise Deglin

Shipibo Conibo Center
 Website | shipiboconibo.org
 The Shipibo Conibo Center's NY headquarters on ancestral Lenape land
 are open to visitors by appointment at info@shipiboconibo.org

"Shamanic Journeys. Visionary Arts
 from Peruvian Amazonia in Circulation"
 November 2023-January 2024
 Curated by David Dupuis
 Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, Paris

Sara Flores Solo Show
 November 10-December 23, 2022
 Clearing Gallery, Brooklyn, NY

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Living quarters, Shipibo Multiversity, Ucayali, Peru
© Courtesy The Shipibo Conibo Center, and Ani Nii Shobo