



## ***Soi Biri***

An exhibition of works by

**Sara Flores**

CLEARING, New York

September 6 - October 22, 2023

Curated by John Utterson

CLEARING presents *Soi Biri*, an exhibition featuring a new body of work by artist **Sara Flores**, one of the leading contemporary practitioners of the enigmatic visual language of kené design. Hailing from the Shipibo-Conibo communities of the Amazon rainforest of Peru, Sara's creative process adheres to the principles of a deeply ritualized artistic heritage, while exploring new grounds for post-colonial representation of Indigenous contemporary art. In a continuous interplay between tradition and innovation, Sara's creations serve as gateways to ancient knowledge systems and the complex realities of Indigenous existence, threatened by the impact of neocolonialism and globalization.

Born in 1950, Sara Flores explores the visual language of kené design, a Shipibo art form known for its serpentine geometric patterns reflecting hallucinatory visions during ayahuasca ceremonies. Rooted in the belief that design disharmony can lead to disease, the elaborate symmetries of kené are believed to hold inherent healing properties, capable of restoring balance in the mind of the observer. Just as ayahuasca rituals seek to expand individual consciousness, kené artworks serve as spiritual healing guides, capable of accessing hidden disharmonies within the individual and collective psyche.

Following a matriarchal lineage, kené patterns are directly transferred from the painter's mind onto the canvas. The result is a harmonious blend of structured craftsmanship created through both technical knowledge (*menín*) and innate visionary imagination (*shinán*). Shamans, on the other hand, perceive kené as intangible vessels of the healing power of medicinal plants. They bring these patterns to life through melodic chants known as *ícaros*, in a synaesthetic interplay between the tangible and the intangible.

Originating from the cosmic anaconda *Ronín* – the mother of all mothers, whose skin holds unlimited design possibilities – Sara Flores' kené embodies the feminine essence of creation. Gracefully traced by hand, her work on canvas encapsulates sensations of vibrational energy, with the remarkable ability to transform the very act of viewing a painting. As their lineal designs proliferate across the wild-cotton surface, the viewer's gaze is unable to focus, entranced by the illusion of boundless expansion and variation. Unlike the often cunning and disorienting effects associated with Western Optical Art, Sara Flores' fractal-like creations emanate a distinct empathy, tranquility, and groundedness, warmly inviting the viewer into a state of harmonious contemplation.

Crafted using vegetal pigments on wild cotton, Sara's paintings carry the essence of the forest. Each color symbolizes a plant, and each plant holds the memory of a place she visited. With the reverence of a healer, the artist seeks permission from plants and their spirits to procure her painting material. The connection to medicinal plants is also invoked through the floral accents in her paintings, whose proliferation across the canvas conveys a sense of organic growth and interconnectedness. Sara's non-hierarchical relationship with her land is rooted in the Shipibo-Conibo ethics of mutual respect and collective responsibility. Given that the well-being of the rainforest is indivisible from the vitality of their community, maintaining a robust connection with the Amazon rainforest becomes a means of both territorial and cultural resistance.

The title of the exhibition, *Soi Biri*, represents Sara Flores' name in the Shipibo language. Carrying this dual identity is a tradition that reflects the Shipibo-Conibo's enduring dedication to cultural preservation, wherein each individual is conferred a 'true name', separate from the Spanish ones imposed during European colonization.

In Sara Flores' words:

*"True names are kept quite confidential or used for intimate settings, only among family. They are conferred on us in different circumstances. By the grandparents, naming after someone skilled, hard-working, or strong, so that when we grow older, we share some of those same qualities; or by the midwife at the time when the newborn's umbilical cord is cut. They are sometimes given in the context of the rite of passage to puberty; some other times by the healer in a curing session. You can call me Sara Flores, but my true name is Soi Biri. The terms describe something dazzling, beautiful to watch, smooth, and well-ordered. Funnily enough, it is just about what they say when they talk about my work."*

Despite enduring a history of colonization, in recent decades, the Shipibo-Conibo People have faced relentless capitalist forces that have radically altered the ecosystem of their territory and the lives of its inhabitants. Industries such as logging, oil and gold mining, palm oil and coca monocultures, and even ayahuasca tourism have, to varying extents, driven rampant deforestation, land grabbing, and water pollution. Faced with these challenges, the Shipibo-Conibo community remains steadfastly dedicated to safeguarding and restoring their sacred lands, asserting their rights to ensure a sustainable future for their communities.

By collaborating with the Shipibo-Conibo Center in New York, Sara Flores' art transcends its role of cultural expression and emerges as a powerful tool of political agency. Through a reciprocity agreement, the sale of her artwork supports her community's initiatives for cultural preservation and territorial resistance, striving to establish an Indigenous Nation. Sara Flores' mesmerizing art offers a worldview through which alternative ways of existence can be envisioned. As a visual manifesto for Indigenous ethics, it stands as a reminder of the urgent need for ecological preservation and cultural revitalization, while also exemplifying the transformative properties of art for societal evolution and spiritual growth.

Camilla Giaccio

**Sara Flores** (born in 1950 in the Loreto region of the Peruvian Amazon, under the name Soi Biri) lives and works in Yarinacocha, Peru. She is part of the Shipibo-Conibo People, an Indigenous group spread out alongside the Ucayali River.

Solo exhibitions of her work have been held at White Cube, London, and C L E A R I N G New York.

Her work has been included in group exhibitions at El Museo del Barrio, New York; Para Site, Hong Kong; Museum of Contemporary Art, Lima, Drawing Lab, Paris; C L E A R I N G New York and Brussels; Inca Garcilaso Cultural Center, Lima; Outsider Art Fair, New York; and Austrian Cultural Forum, New York.

Later this year she will have a solo exhibition White Cube, Paris, and will be included in a group exhibition at the Musee du quai Branly, Paris.

Sara Flores's work belongs to the collections of Mali, Museo de Arte de Lima, Peru; Museum Voorlinden, Wassenaar, Netherlands; NewYork-Presbyterian Brooklyn Methodist Hospital Contemporary Art Collection, and JPMorgan Chase Art Collection, New York.