



The Council of the Mother Spirits of the Animals

An exhibition of works by

Celia Vasquez Yui

CLEARING, New York

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CLEARING presents *The Council of the Mother Spirits of the Animals*, an exhibition featuring large-scale ceramic sculptures by Indigenous artist and activist **Celia Vasquez Yui**. The works are part of an ongoing installation currently displayed at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University, Ithaca, NY. In an effort to dismantle colonial paradigms that have historically isolated Indigenous artists from the contemporary art scene, Celia's art stands as a testimony of the cultural, social, and political universe of the Shipibo-Conibo people. In recent decades, rampant capitalist forces such as agribusiness and logging have caused ecological disasters and pollution in the Amazon, altering the ecosystem and the lives of its inhabitants. As the political representative of the Shipibo-Conibo people, Celia's work alludes to a spiritual conception of ecology in which all beings possess a mother spirit, urging swift action to protect the rights of nature.

In *The Council of the Mother Spirits of the Animals*, a group of zoomorphic ceramic sculptures is displayed in the form of an assembly, symbolizing the unity between the Shipibo and the creatures of the forest. Jaguars, armadillos, snakes, crocodiles, and monkeys, among others, return the viewer's gaze with inquisitive energy, as if they are questioning our actions in the world: "Why are you destroying our lands and all the lives of those who inhabit them? What makes you think you are more important than us? Don't you see? There is no difference between you and me. We are all part of the same earth, breathing the same air, drinking the same water, sleeping under the same sky."

Celia Vasquez Yui is part of a matriarchal lineage of ceramicists linked to the polychrome horizon cultures. She received her artistic training from her mother and now collaborates four-handedly with her daughter Diana Ruiz. She approaches her work like a healer, fasting for several days, abstaining from sex and specific foods, chanting, and smoking tobacco. In alignment with the Shipibo tradition, Celia draws inspiration from the spirits of the rainforest, envisioning them in her dreams and imagination. She then journeys along the Ucayali River, gathering various types of clay that will yield a diverse array of colors and intensities when fired in an open flame. Adorned with kené design – a complex visual language made of intricate linear patterns – each piece carries its distinctive identity and embodies the spirit of the animal that inspired its creation. Reflecting hallucinatory visions during ayahuasca ceremonies, harmonious kené designs are believed to hold inherent healing properties. Their fractal-like structures evoke the substrate of the universe, evolving through continuous variations, and forging new connections among their fundamental elements.

Inspired by the female energy of the creator Ronin, Celia breathes life into her creations. As a result, the sculptures are no longer inert objects. They radiate a compelling magnetism and vitality. Never static, nor perfectly symmetrical, the animal bodies of Celia's ceramics intertwine with the abstractions of kené designs, prompting the eye to trace the figures as it navigates a labyrinth. Their combination of figurative and abstract elements indicates a potential gateway to alternative cosmic dimensions. Driven by the belief that disharmony leads to suffering, the convergence of sacredness and beauty in Shipibo art reflects an enduring quest for reciprocity and balance with the cosmos.

Care emerges as a fundamental moral principle in Celia's work, serving as a guide towards coexistence and a non-hierarchical kinship among all beings. By shifting our perspective of human beings living within the world rather than at its center, Shipibo art opens up new possibilities for constructing contemporary values, leading to a broader philosophical, ethical, and political revolution.

Asomashk

A Ceremony for the Mother Spirits of the Animals, 2021

157 minutes loop

The exhibition is accompanied by an immersive soundscape recorded in the heart of the Peruvian Amazon during a special ayahuasca ceremony conducted in the absence of any human patients.

Five members of the Shipibo Union of Ancestral Healers, known as Asomashk, perform healing invocations and chants to connect with the sound-spirits of the jungle in a non-linguistic interface between humans and non-humans. Bird calls, chirps, roars, hisses, snorts, and squeaks are sent into the realms of water and forest, where bodies, spirits, and territories form an inseparable unity.

With nature as the primary beneficiary of this sonic interaction, one of the healers sings: "I'm traveling on land and underwater. I'm flying over the sky and the mountains. I'm searching the riverbed to understand your sickness." In these verses, the words of the healer transcend the boundaries between the celestial and aquatic worlds, bridging the above and below, revealing interconnected worlds within worlds.

In this multiverse, human beings are intricately intertwined with and dependent upon nature. The practice of ceremonial plant medicine encompasses both social and physiological dimensions of healing and in this framework, becomes an avenue for ecological exploration and an exhortation for harmonious coexistence.

ASOMASHK, the Union of Shipibo Healers, was formed to take a stand against spiritual appropriation, given the enormous foreign interest in Amazonian plant medicine. Its mission is to call for a politically conscious and anti-colonialist set of practices that take into account power differentials, economic inequality, and the social reality of Shipibo communities. The five healers are Elisa Vargas Fernández, Walter Ramiro Lopez Lopez, Rogelia Valera Gonzalez, Claudio Sinuiri Lomas, Francisco Vargas Fernández.

This piece is a collaboration with the **Shipibo-Conibo Center**, in New York. The Center is an art project in the form of a nonprofit organization that works alongside Indigenous leadership in the Amazon toward Shipibo self-determination and territorial sovereignty in a sustainable future.

Celia Vasquez Yui (born 1960 in Pucallpa of the Peruvian Amazon) lives and works in Pucallpa, PE. Celia Vasquez Yui 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 Salon 94, New York; and Cornell University, Ithaca.

Her work has been included in group exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Lima; Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin; Outsider Art Fair, New York; and the Inca Garcilaso Cultural Center, Lima.

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

Celia Vasquez Yui's work belongs to the collections of Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago; Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College, Clinton; and Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick.