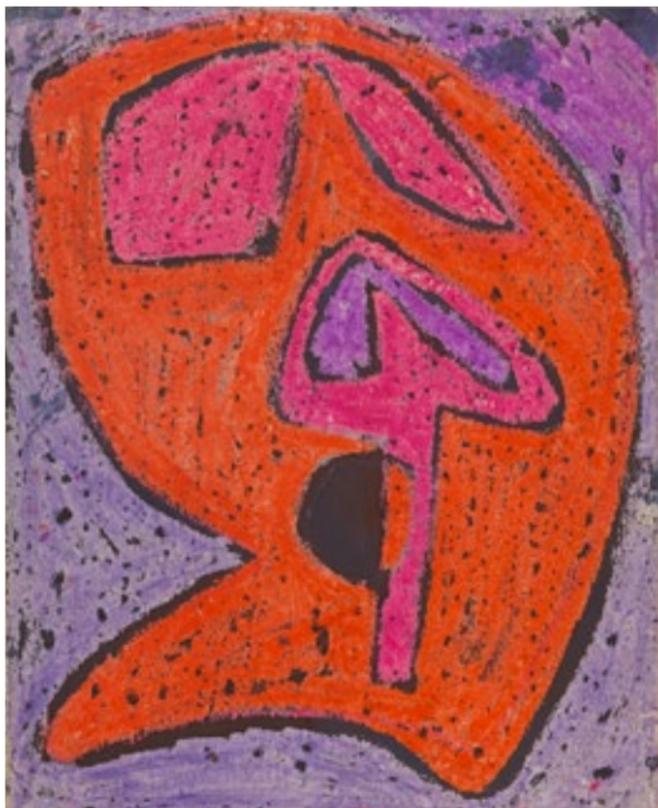


LUCHITA HURTADO

I LIVE I DIE I WILL BE REBORN

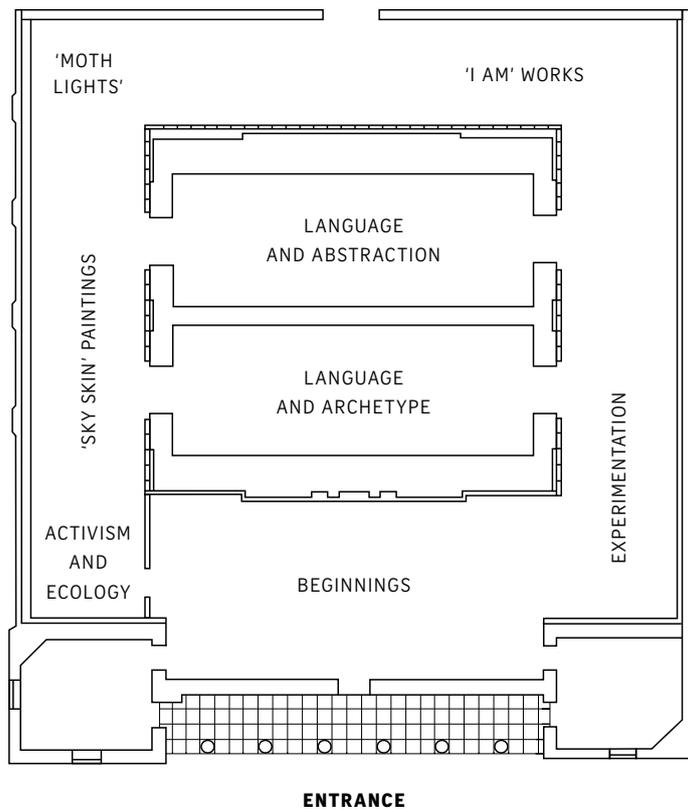
23 May _____ 20 October 2019





LUCHITA HURTADO

I LIVE I DIE I WILL BE REBORN



Throughout her career, Luchita Hurtado has created an extensive body of paintings, drawings and prints that bear witness to a dedicated and intense engagement with the world around her. *I Live I Die I Will Be Reborn* is Hurtado's first solo exhibition in a public institution and follows the trajectory of her practice, from her earliest surviving works from the late 1930s, through early experiments with abstraction in the 1940s and 50s, to later works that foreground the body as their starting point. The plurality of styles and techniques that mark Hurtado's eighty years of working speak to the geographies and events that have shaped her life. Born in 1920 in Maiquetía, Venezuela, she emigrated to the United States in 1928 and later travelled extensively in Mexico, before settling in Santa Monica, California, in 1951, where she has resided ever since.

This chronological survey of Hurtado's work moves anti-clockwise around the space, providing successive encounters with distinct bodies of work but also revealing the artist's recurring exploration of the boundaries where the self meets the world. Figures touch, embrace and dance throughout Hurtado's paintings and drawings from the 1940s and 1950s; the artist's body becomes a frame and a landscape in the late 1960s and 1970s, and a group of paintings from the early 1970s appear to be abstract but are in fact composed from fragments of letters and words, attempts at translation and connection.

I have a
responsibility
to the world,
to my planet.

The newest works in the exhibition, completed during the past twelve months and exhibited here for the first time, reveal Hurtado's continuing relevance to contemporary environmental and political issues in their bold slogans, their echoed forms of figures and trees, and references to the human life cycle. From a commitment to ecological and feminist activism throughout her life to the act of designing and making her own clothes, Hurtado's intimate and mystical visual language uniquely captures our responsibility to the natural world, as it has persisted through the seismic changes of the last century.

– Luchita Hurtado

When I was a child, I had a great sense of smell. I could smell a butterfly when it was breaking the cocoon. I watched the whole procedure, and I think that was a great influence, to see this magic.

– Luchita Hurtado

BEGINNINGS

Throughout her life, Hurtado has been associated with a wide network of artists and intellectuals, including the Mexican muralists, the Surrealists, the Dynaton group and the Los Angeles Council of Women Artists. Her practice, however, has always remained an independent and, until recently, largely private pursuit. *I Live I Die I Will Be Reborn* begins with a selection of works made by Hurtado during the late 1930s through to the 1950s, a period defined by intense experimentation with form, material and subject matter. Hurtado describes one of her earliest starting points as her desire to paint fire. This subject matter was manifested in a series of paintings and drawings depicting gas rings on domestic cookers, one of which is presented in this gallery. Made c. 1938, it is the earliest work in the exhibition and highlights the significance of everyday references, which become defamiliarised through the act of painting.

From these beginnings, the works in this gallery follow Hurtado's continued negotiation of the relationship between abstraction and figuration. From delicate depictions of flora and fauna to clustered, abstract compositions and regular intimations of human forms, the drawings and paintings from this period are notable for their dynamic movement and use of vivid colour.

This varied approach is also present in the artist's use of different materials to execute her works, employing

graphite, watercolour, oil and acrylic in order to achieve an impressive stylistic range. In particular, Hurtado's introduction of a combination of crayon and watercolour or ink allowed her to explore what she described as a 'resist' technique, resulting in multi-layered and highly textural compositions.

EXPERIMENTATION

During the course of the 1960s, the distinction between abstraction and figuration becomes more marked. Expressive compositions layer translucent paints and multiple techniques, and are combined with formal experiments that resemble the composition of a film strip. These works prefigure several from the 1970s, where Hurtado physically cuts up and sews back together the canvas.

The figure, meanwhile, shifts in and out of focus, sometimes compressing the space between it and the shapes around it, and elsewhere marked by bold outlines. At the same time, more intimate depictions of the human can be found: an isolated, melancholic figure crouched in a seated position above a reclining nude from 1960, a suggestive drawing from 1965 where male and female forms approximate a landscape and, towards the end of the 1960s, a series of simply-rendered naked forms. The earliest of these works directly anticipates the artist's radical positioning of the body as geography that she would develop throughout the 1970s and 80s.

Very early on, I started with these totemic figures dancing in abstract landscapes. That was one of the first images that came to me. I made them with drops of ink over bright crayon.

– Luchita Hurtado

SELF-PORTRAITS

The gradual shift towards a more representational approach to the body during the 1960s is also evident in the series of self-portraits presented in this exhibition. Positioned as markers throughout the gallery, Hurtado's recording of herself marks the stylistic shifts within her work.

In figurative examples, her face is captured in the mirror, and her body is observed from above, especially in the 'I Am' works from the late 1960s and early 1970s. In addition to these figurative self-portraits, Hurtado also started at this time to write the words 'I Am' on the canvas. This linguistic form of self-portraiture anticipates her works from the early 1970s, where words and letters become encoded within each composition. Her declaration of selfhood through both recognisable self-portraits and the fragmented language in the works on display in the farther brick room, are all powerful and contemplative acts that command attention and affirm the physical and temporal experience of the artist.

'I AM' WORKS

From around 1970 onwards, there is a dramatic stylistic shift within Hurtado's work. The expressionistic dynamism embedded in works of the 1950s and 60s is replaced by a naturalistic and constructed description of the body in relation to other bodies, objects, textures and colours. Alongside Hurtado's body, which is shown entering the composition on one or more edges of the frame, deep red and bright green fruits sit on patterned rugs, matches are poised to light a cigarette in the artist's hand, or a bowl of cherries is illuminated by a shaft of sunlight. The inverted perspectives of these works draw us in to the intimate spaces of Hurtado's making; our viewpoint becomes that of the artist, as she looks down or across her own body, confronting and shaping its contours in space. Hurtado's subject matter – the everyday activities of eating, drinking, smoking or resting – imbues each work with the energy of time's movement; the hours, minutes and seconds that pass and the daily gestures that define them.

This is a landscape,
this is the world,
this is all you have,
this is your home,
this is where you live.

You are what you feel,
what you hear,
what you know.

-Luchita Hurtado





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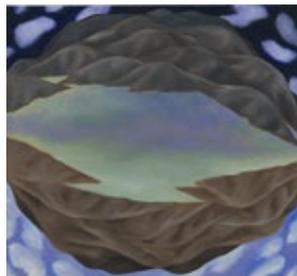
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'SKY SKIN' PAINTINGS

From the mid 1970s onwards, Hurtado's gaze turned upwards, from the private spaces of the house – the rugs that adorn the floors and the objects and body that stand upon them – to the sky. The works in this section of the gallery create an explicit link between the body and the cosmos. The landscape of breast, stomach and knee is transformed into a vast, ochre terrain in a series of paintings referred to by Hurtado as her 'Sky Skin' works, where swirling blue skies are partially or wholly framed by cavernous edges. In some, these landscapes are tunnels or frames behind which the sky opens out; in others, the sky resembles stretched animal skins, with feathers arranged across each expanse, suggesting facial features or figures. Inverting the perspectives inherent to the downward-facing angles of her earlier works, these paintings create a direct connection to the universe that exists above our heads.

When I saw the first photographs of the world, where you saw this little planet in the darkness of space, it gave me the same feeling of tenderness that you have for family, for your own children. I feel very much that I'm part of this planet.

– Luchita Hurtado

'MOTH LIGHTS'

This group of paintings maps Hurtado's continued exploration into how to render light on canvas. Hurtado describes these as her 'moth lights', recalling that 'I always painted those squares of light hoping that an insect would come and try to get to it'. In each of these works, a bright white shape in the centre of the canvas is surrounded by different combinations of colour and different intensities of tone, suggesting a concentration of light and heat. The attempt to capture intangible energy connects to the earliest work in the exhibition, a drawing of flames on a kitchen stove.

LANGUAGE AND ABSTRACTION

The selection of works displayed within this gallery constitute a partial recreation of a self-organised exhibition of Hurtado's work at the Women's Building, Los Angeles, in 1974. In this group of apparently abstract compositions, the expressive lines and geometric shapes are in fact fragmented lettering. Some of the works have been cut into strips, reconfigured and stitched back together again, hiding their original words, while others employ thinned paint to create layered patterns. In one work, *Self Portrait* (1973), these abstract geometries hide the linguistic source for the title of this exhibition: 'I Live I Die I Will Be Reborn'.

These works feature the expressive application of colour and geometric abstraction that characterises the paintings produced during the 1960s. However, they also further Hurtado's interest in seriality within her compositions and perhaps refer to the dynamic patterning of the native American rugs depicted in works from the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Through her deliberate fragmenting of each letter and, by extension, their signified meaning, Hurtado not only creates her own coded compositions, but she also draws attention to the limitations and gaps that result from the translations between thought and language. She had experienced this phenomenon herself and observed it in her children, who learned and switched between English and Spanish in their early lives.

They seem to anticipate the digital glitch. The linearity, geometry, and sewn assembly approximate patterned textiles, ethnic fabrics, and traditional weavings, crafts all tied to the genesis of digital technologies.

– Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer

Hurtado's word-subjects tend to foreground a woman's subjectivity (at least partly self-referential as verbal self-portraits) and echo her figurative strategies in the pulsation of line, pattern, and evocation around the perimeter, once again expressing an allegiance to looking at and living in relation to the periphery, the margin, the recesses, the acute edge of things.

LANGUAGE AND ARCHETYPE

Produced shortly after the fragmented text-based works displayed next door, this gallery is dedicated to a series of white works, created by applying acrylic paint to raw, unprimed canvas. Here, Hurtado departs from the enigmatic abstraction of meaning in the earlier works by imprinting each canvas with charged and symbolic words that gesture to the underlying concerns and questions that she addresses in her wider practice – how to identify the self and the other, and the origin of this sense of identity. Words such as 'EVE', 'ADAM' and 'WOMB' sit in contrast to the only colour painting in the room, which depicts a curled-up foetus at its centre and the outline of breasts at the lower edge of the composition. In another work, the branches of 'Y' in 'YOU' become the boughs of a tree, the 'O' becomes a sun or moon, and the 'U' a grave. The space at the centre of each painting is reminiscent of the 'moth light' series, while the emphatic use of text as both content and composition anticipates Hurtado's most recent body of work, displayed nearby.

ACTIVISM AND ECOLOGY

The final section of the exhibition is dedicated to a series of new paintings produced by Hurtado within the last twelve months and displayed here for the first time. Both a testament to the energy and dedication with which the artist continues to work at the age of ninety-eight, and a continuation of her passionate awareness of our responsibility to the planet, these works can be seen as a series of powerful proclamations executed through text and image.

Throughout her life, Hurtado has maintained a commitment to environmental activism, transposing the energy of her ecological awareness directly into her compositions. In these works, human forms have become intricately woven into an ecological fabric: standing figures become trees in forests, and reproductive organs merge with flowers and fruits. This synthesis of body and nature is accompanied by placard-like messages; they are both an explicit mode of protest and an illustration of the ways in which all life-forms are connected and interdependent. This sentiment is similarly embedded within the proclamation that gives this exhibition its title: 'I Live I Die I Will Be Reborn'. A life cycle, rather than a single, isolated life, is perhaps expressed most directly in Hurtado's 'Birthing' series. The downward-looking perspective that defines so many of her works is used here to describe a pregnant body that is in the process of giving birth. The head and body of the child is revealed at different stages, always looking back at the mother/viewer.

There is a feeling about
a child in your arms that is...
you know, the smell of the
head, the whole thing.
You become nature. We are
all related. And there is this
absolute love that you have
for your offspring that
doesn't exist anywhere else.
It's a very animal experience.
Terrestrial.

- Luchita Hurtado

LIVE PROGRAMMES & EVENTS

SATURDAY TALKS

Saturday 15 June, 3pm, Serpentine Sackler Gallery
Joseph Constable, Assistant Curator

Saturday 27 July, 3pm, Serpentine Sackler Gallery
Rebecca Lewin, Curator, Exhibitions and Design

BSL interpretation is available upon prior request for all our Saturday Talks. For more information visit: serpentinegalleries.org/bsl

DIGITAL GUIDES

sgtours.org

Discover more about the artists and exhibition with a free guide. Inviting visitors to explore the Serpentine Galleries in a new way, the digital guide offers an interactive gallery experience by providing access to additional content, audio, video and curator tours. Supported by Bloomberg Philanthropies.

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Cover image:
Mill Valley Beginning c. 1949
Crayon and ink on paper
18.4 × 14.6 cm
Collection of Jill and Peter Kraus
Photo: Genevieve Hanson

Inside cover:
Untitled c. 1950 (detail)
Crayon and ink on paper
58.4 × 43.2 cm
Courtesy Chris Wiley
Photo: Genevieve Hanson

Central image section, front:
Untitled 1971 (detail)
Oil on canvas
127 × 88.6 cm
Photo: Jeff McLane

Central image section, centre:
1. *Untitled* c. 1970s
Acrylic on unprimed canvas
76.8 × 79.4 cm
Photo: Jeff McLane

2. *Untitled* 1966
Oil on canvas
50.8 × 55.9 cm
Photo: Jeff McLane

3. *Earth & Sky (diptych)* 1973
Oil on canvas and thread (two panels)
Overall: 225.7 × 229.9 cm
Left Panel: 225.7 × 117.5 cm
Right Panel: 225.7 × 112.4 cm
Photo: Jeff McLane

4. *Untitled* 1969
Oil on canvas
90.8 × 121.9 cm
Courtesy Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Purchased through the Board of Overseers Acquisition Fund
Photo: Jeff McLane

5. *Untitled* c. 1970s
Oil on canvas
55.9 × 61 cm
Photo: Jeff McLane

6. *Untitled (Birthing)* 2019
Acrylic on canvas
76.2 × 55.9 cm
Photo: Jeff McLane

Central image section, back:
The Umbilical Cord of the Earth is the Moon 1977 (detail)
Oil on canvas
101.6 × 58.4 cm
Photo: Jeff McLane

Inside back cover:
Untitled 1972 (detail)
Oil on canvas
83.5 × 48.9 cm
Photo: Genevieve Hanson

Back cover:
Untitled (Self-portrait) c. 1968
Oil on linen
82.6 × 67.9 cm
Photo: Jeff McLane

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