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Johanna Unzueta

*Naturalist*

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In *Naturalist*, Johanna Unzueta's (b. 1974, Santiago, Chile) first solo exhibition at Casey Kaplan, the artist draws from the natural world and the balance between the earth and its living counterparts. In an intimate exploration of her surroundings, Unzueta engages with her Chilean history through its landscape, communities, and labor practices, incorporating organic materials that are indigenous to Latin America. Within the scope of an interdisciplinary practice that spans drawing, weaving, installation, mural-making, film, and performance, Unzueta uses common materials such as recycled wood, thread, felt, cotton, paper, and natural pigments to describe the social impact of grown and circulated objects within a belabored economy. In a shift towards natural ecosystems, Unzueta pays homage to her immediate landscape and its effect on the human condition.

A series of wooden sculptures of various scales and formats stand upright across the gallery floor, punctuating the space like a topographical map of earthly objects. Mostly in round or oval shape, some life-size and others miniature, their surfaces are laboriously tinted with indigo dye, a natural material sourced from the Guatemalan indigo plant, predominantly used in Unzueta's works on paper and wood sculptures since 2014. Atop each surface, mappings of irregular forms play and overlap in dense, geometric areas of pastel green, blue, red, and gold hues. On the back side of the wood panels are groupings of gold dots and lines like hieroglyphic markers of identity. Unzueta's circular and elliptical forms are manifestations of an intuitive drawing approach, rendered from paper templates and embroidery hoops that transcribe the social and biological qualities of nature while engaging with the artist's diaristic vocabulary of form. Plant clippings, biological cells, oceanic organisms, and planetary orbits provide examples for scientific studies to her intuitive hand. In the work *Zwischendeich 2022*, *Berlin 2023*, *Resonance*, curvilinear patterns interconnect in a web of natural tones and gridded lines, mimicking the wood's shape. In an effort to maintain equilibrium, the line is continuous and rarely breaks — each leads into the next in a feverish balance of form. In its immediacy, the line maintains an honest connection to the self and to the practice of automatic making. Like an unending cycle, where one shape begins and the other ends, Unzueta renders the infinite rhythm of life.

Needlework was rooted in Unzueta's upbringing and further expanded by spinning and weaving lessons during her apprenticeship with indigenous Mapuche women in rural southern Chile in 1999. By bridging cultural craft practices and modern art-making, Unzueta recontextualizes the dialogue around labor and production. Within this new body of work, pastel markings generously cover each wood foundation and serve as the backdrop to a woven template. Like a network of constellations, locally grown and hand-dyed linen thread extends across each surface, connecting Unzueta's intuitive gestures to their substrate. The three-dimensionality of the raised string activates the surface of the work like a loom in the studio, rendering the function of textile production as more than a means to an end. Here the loom is inextricably bound to its output— individual structures are tied to the literal strings that hold their internal system together.

As the threads tether Unzueta's abstractions to their surface, other forms rotate in kinetic movement. *Berlin 2023*, *Elica* spins on its axis and, as it revolves, its relationship to the viewer alters as well — a counterbalance between human and natural object materializes. A residency at the McDonald Observatory at The University of Texas between October and November 2022 provided a framework for planetary research and access to observations of the night sky. The unique pathways between stars and planets further fueled Unzueta's interests in the cosmos — the standard deviation of patterns in orbit informed her organic compositions and repertoire of shapes.

Bisecting the gallery space are two chairs encased in deep blue, hand-stitched wool felt connected by an elongated sewn section that reads "ekwelbreeum" (or equilibrium, phonetically). *Berlin/Zwischendeich 2023*, *Art is Education/Education is Art* poses an imagined scenario in which the chairs are occupied by two people facing in opposite directions; by facing outwards, each person is encouraged to observe their surroundings, not each other.

Their connection is maintained by the text inscribed in the material, waiting to be decoded. By dwelling in the idea of equilibrium, the installation is activated by the balance of bodies and minds. As such, the work is in an inherent state of flux and reliant on individual action. Its stasis is determined by the viewer's involvement and the registering of personal experience.

Each work is titled according to its place and time of creation, ultimately serving as a cartography of place and a bridge between maker and community. In a cross-continental practice, sculptures begun in Zwischendeich (a small German country town) were completed in Berlin within a year, while others (*New York 2020, Berlin 2023, Somewhere in the Cosmos* and *New York 2020, Berlin 2023, You saved me*) spanned a three-year process. Grounding the works to their new location are gold pastel mural drawings imprinted on the gallery's two structural columns. By mirroring the sculptures' markings, Unzueta unifies the open space with impressions of her hand. The viewer, in turn, is positioned within the complex web of the artist's abstract language, navigating the objects in situ, only to remain in orbit.

Johanna Unzueta (b. 1974, Santiago, Chile) lives and works in New York and Berlin. Unzueta's work spans installation, sculpture, drawing, film, and mural-making. Recent exhibitions include: *The Sky's the Limit*, National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC (2023); *In the Studio*, Tate Modern, London (2023); *Drawing in the Continuous Present*, The Drawing Center, New York (2022); *Tools for life*, Modern Art Oxford (2020) (solo); and *From My Head to My Toes, to My Teeth to My Nose*, Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University (2019) (solo). Unzueta's work is in the permanent collections of Tate, London; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; The Queens Museum, New York; MSU Broad Art Museum, East Lansing; Frac Bretagne, Rennes; and Museo de Artes Visuales, Santiago.