



Title

Luchita Hurtado

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Luchita Hurtado

by Catherine Spencer • 19.09.2019

About halfway through the chronological retrospective devoted to Luchita Hurtado at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery (the funding may have stopped, but the name remains), there is a sudden and dramatic shift of perspective. In contrast to the predominantly flat and schematic abstract designs from the beginning of Hurtado's career, during the 1970s she embarked on the 'I Am' series, which pitches the viewer into a bird's-eye glimpse of the artist's body as she looks down on herself. The tops of red sandals whisk across the floor beneath a green dress; above a patterned rug, hands reach out across naked breasts, belly and thighs for some toothsome strawberries in a bowl. In perhaps the most striking image, the body is again nude but this time wielding a lit match, casting a phosphorescent glow into purple shadows **FIG.1**. These are meditative, contemplative pieces, capturing the sensation of self-conscious reflection and heightened awareness. Given the decade of their making, this embodied viewpoint that is at once intimately specific and shared has distinct political resonance.

The feminist affiliations of Hurtado's practice are indicated by another group of works made by applying paint directly to unprimed canvas, all dated to c.1970. Their predominantly square format evokes flags, banners, and ceremonial cloths. Some look like they might be abstract, until you realise that the pulsing shapes are actually letters spelling out the words 'womb', 'Adam' and 'Eve'. One is particularly explicit, with a geometric red and orange pattern punctuated at its centre by a circle containing a fetus **FIG.2**. They bring to mind the quilts by Faith Ringgold that are on show concurrently in the Serpentine's other gallery. What links the two artists is less a question of style or specific content, than a shared experimental turn to alternative painting formats in the pursuit of practices attuned to women's liberation and civil rights.

The political thrust of Hurtado's work is not overt, but it is apparent in her attitude towards abstraction: rather than a means of avoiding social realities, it is presented as a concrete part of lived experience. In a series of paintings linked to the word-banners, Hurtado rhythmically repeats the forms of letters until they buckle and burst, and sense drains away **FIG.3**. This effect is further enhanced by Hurtado's physical fragmentation and recombination of the canvases, which are sutured back together in formations that feel tantalisingly like they might at any moment clarify into intelligible phrases, but never do. The artist has linked

these works to the dizzying joys and challenges of translation, specifically her experience of switching between Spanish and English, having emigrated from Venezuela to the United States in 1928. According to the accompanying text panel, their arrangement in one of the central brick-lined galleries loosely references a self-organised exhibition of her work at the Los Angeles Woman's Building in 1974, indicating that intersectional feminist politics underpin the vibrant patterns and colours.

Allusions to protest materials and signs in the works from the 1970s are reinforced by Hurtado's recent production of placard-like pieces that address the climate crisis. One from 2018 consists of the phrase 'worms tilled the hard soil of our planet (not Adam and Eve)' scrawled in black ink on white paper [FIG.4](#). Within the setting of the retrospective, the reference back to the earlier Adam and Eve banners conveys the artist's acknowledgment of her previous work, at the same time as she moves determinedly on from it, continually refocusing the terms of her practice. These pieces could happily be taken out of the gallery and marched with down the streets, where they would be at home among the messages of the youth climate strikers.

This is not to suggest that the exhibition provides an inconsistent experience, far from it. The thematic circularity implied by the title is reflected by the continuities that run through Hurtado's oeuvre. A self-portrait of c.1954 shows Hurtado peering out from behind her glasses with a steely, appraising air. The subject returns in 1968, but in the second version Hurtado gazes back limpidly from a round vanity mirror held by her own hand [FIG.5](#), anticipating her engagement with gender constructs in the 'I Am' works a couple of years later. Although most viscerally apparent in the latter series, throughout the show Hurtado constantly grapples with the balance between observing personal experience and understanding its place within wider patterns of social relation.

Identifying continuities and departures is, of course, one of the particular pleasures of the retrospective format, which allows viewers to trace the commitments, processes and shifts over the course of an artist's career. The Serpentine's presentation of Hurtado is exemplary in this respect, allowing space for the full arc of her oeuvre. The curators, Rebecca Lewin and Joseph Constable, have designed a beautiful, thoughtful hang which is acutely sensitive to Hurtado's significant skills as a colourist. Although the work is arranged into coherent clusters, the show is refreshing in its refusal to fall back on timeworn distinctions between abstraction and realism, conveying how Hurtado's practice combines elements of both in a way that challenges these respective constructions

Yet it is difficult not to wonder whether, in the pristine spaces of the Serpentine galleries, the social engagement and critical capacity of these works risks being somewhat diluted and de-

historicised. The titles of thematic groupings, such as 'language and abstraction' and 'experimentation' feel vaguely formulated in comparison with the implications of the works themselves. Documentation of the Woman's Building exhibition could have anchored the works more securely in the context of their production, giving a stronger sense of how exactly they might have related to feminist art and activism on the West Coast of the United States. The large-scale photorealist versions of the 'I Am' compositions, in which gigantic pneumatic fruits float next to naked body parts [Fig. 6](#), call out to the work of Joan Semmel and Sylvia Sleigh, but within this setting there can be no answer.

Given that this is Hurtado's first solo exhibition in a public institution, the single-artist focus is in many ways laudable, and an important political move in its own right. But even within the parameters of a retrospective, it is possible to get a sense of with whom and what an artist might be in dialogue. These conversations are a constitutive part of Hurtado's practice, but there is relatively scant reference to them here. Nevertheless, the force of Hurtado's painting and drawing ensures that her deep and ongoing exploration of the relationship between the individual and the collective comes powerfully across.



Fig. 1 *Untitled*, by Luchita Hurtado. 1971. Oil on paper, 64.8 by 77.5 cm. (Private Collection; exh. Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London).



Fig. 2 *Untitled (EVE)*, by Luchita Hurtado. c.1970s. Acrylic and oil on canvas, 124.5 by 87.3 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth; exh. Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London).



Fig. 3 *Face for Arcimboldo*, by Luchita Hurtado. 1973. Oil on canvas, 189.9 by 189.9 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth; exh. Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London).

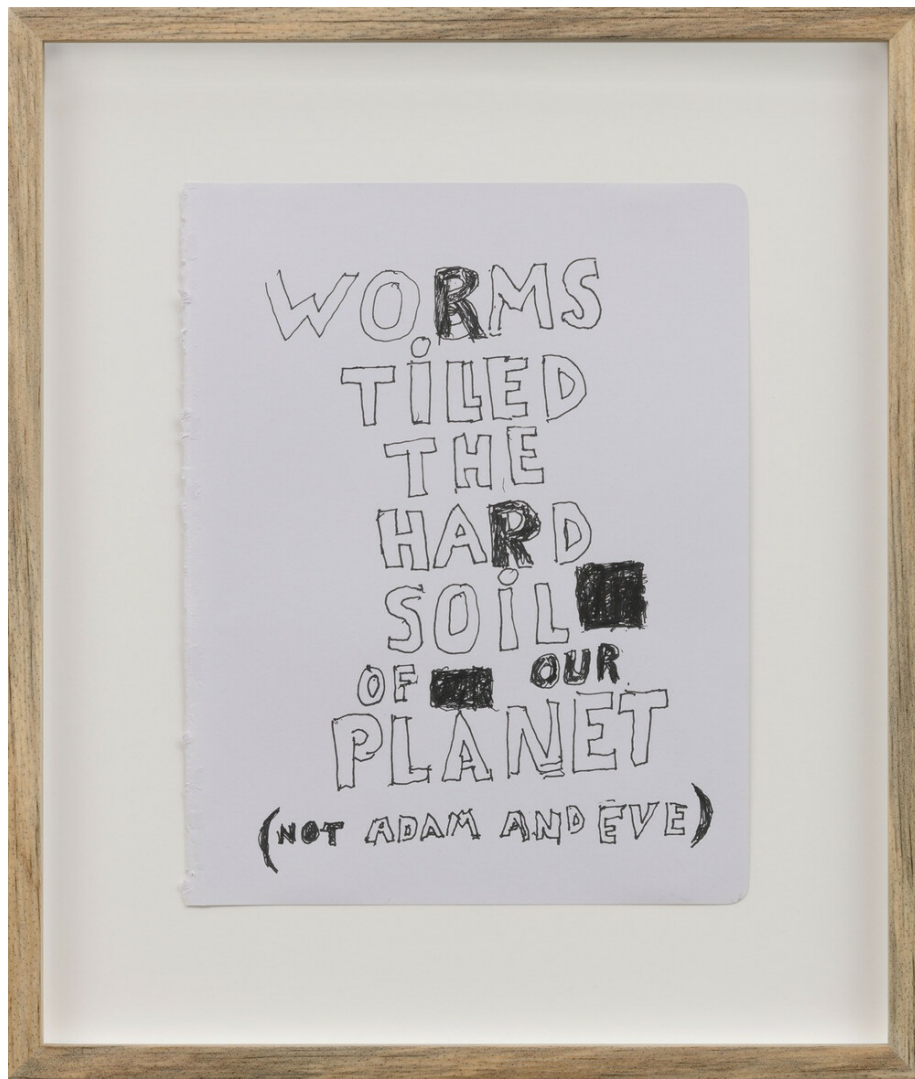


Fig. 4 *Untitled*, by Luchita Hurtado. 2018. Ink on paper, 27.3 by 21.6 cm.
(Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth; exh. Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London).



Fig. 5 *Untitled (Self Portrait)*, by Luchita Hurtado. c.1968. Oil on linen, 82.6 by 67.9 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth; exh. Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London).

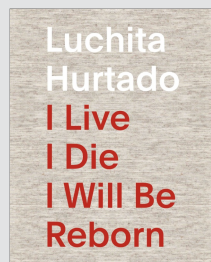


Fig. 6 *Untitled*, by Luchita Hurtado. 1971. Oil on canvas, 127 by 88.6 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth; exh. Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London).

Exhibition details

Luchita Hurtado: I Live, I Die, I Will be Reborn
Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London
23rd May–20th October 2019

About this book



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