



Title

A figure unbound

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Cover image: **Fig. 3** Detail from *The Lieutenant-Nun Is Passing: An Autobiography of Katalina, Antonio, Alonso and More*, by Mercedes Azpilicueta. 2021. Merino wool, cotton and metallic yarn, 160 by 400 cm. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Andy Keate).

A figure unbound

by Tess Charnley • 04.06.2021

Comprising a stage set of jacquard tapestries, sculptures and holographic vinyl, Mercedes Azpilicueta's exhibition *Bondage of Passions* at Gasworks, London, explores the slipperiness of gender through the history of the seventeenth-century one-time nun, Catalina de Erauso. As a teenager Erauso travelled from the Basque Country to the New World, spending their subsequent years living under various male identities and eventually becoming a lieutenant in the Spanish Army. Although Erauso's decision to bypass the societal constraints of womanhood in order to achieve power could be construed as a feminist act of the time, their ruthlessness as a colonial warlord renders them a problematic figure. Azpilicueta's exhibition is an act of speculation, one in which the artist has expanded historical research into a dreamlike narrative of an imagined life. The work is populated with references to gender and its undulating movement between fluidity and constraint.

Central to the show are two jacquard tapestries, made in collaboration with TextileLab Amsterdam **FIG. 1**. They are presented on curved structures, the deliberate minimalism of which references theatrical props and stage sets **FIG. 2**. The tapestries are positioned to allow the viewer to walk around them, recalling dressing screens – a playful deconstruction of performance and privacy and revelation and disguise, which cannot be separated from gender and passing. *The Lieutenant-Nun is Passing: An Autobiography of Katalina, Antonio, Alonso and More* collages disparate imagery to create a surreal sequence, inviting the viewer to piece together the threads of Erauso's life. In tapestry form, the artist's research endeavours are rendered playful rather than entirely factual: an earthy landscape against a pink sky; maps of Latin America reproduced in thread; a host of erotic scenes; a bust of Erauso; floating serpents; botanical illustrations; compasses; weaponry; and headless bodies and bodiless heads **FIG. 3**.

The work fuses elements of Surrealism and the Baroque, particularly in the strangeness of its floating bodies, highly detailed yet cleanly dismembered, at points morphing between animal and human. The recurrent botanical imagery alludes to the flowers and plants that were traded throughout Europe's colonisation of Latin America in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For *Abya Yala (Tierra Madura)*, the second tapestry viewers encounter in the gallery space, Azpilicueta worked with the archivist and

curator Verónica Rossi to source imagery from colonial etchings, paintings and segments of manuscripts and maps **FIG. 4**. The references are diverse, ranging from portrayals of the Incan leader Topa Inca Yupanqui to Henri Rousseau's painting *The Dream* (1910). By weaving this collection of sources into the tapestry, Azpilicueta presents the different facets of Erauso's imagined life – the historical, art historical, interpretive and factual – on equal footing.

In both tapestries, Azpilicueta has incorporated a metallic thread into the weave. This is most visible from the back of each tapestry, which come to exist as separate works entirely: blue, orange and red figures shimmering with the detail of their metallic finish. The introduction of metal references Erauso's military career in its allusions to chainmail, but also translates the armour's hardness into the softness of fabric. Azpilicueta presents the viewer with fragments of Erauso's life – a reconstructed narrative that aligns with their position as an individual who resists categorisation. In allowing the viewer to experience the work in the round Azpilicueta invites us backstage into her constructed world.

On the gallery walls, abstracted manuscripts and strange figures made from holographic vinyl loom like ghostly gargoyles overlooking the scene **FIG. 5**. The colours change depending on the viewing angle, at times disappearing entirely and at others appearing in sharp relief. Their smooth waxiness contrasts with the solidity of the tapestries as well as the exhibited sculptures, which hang like waiting costumes. Azpilicueta presents a series of elaborate codpieces made from leftover fabric from the works in the exhibition. Subverting the historical function of the garment to cover men's genitals, the sculptures are gender fluid. Some are vaginal in their form, some are phallic, the curvature of their forms mirroring the plinths on which the tapestries stand. Rope and string trail from them like untethered leashes, evoking the structure and constraint of bondage, which is undercut by the softness of their forms.

Although alluding to the shapes and textures of Baroque fashion, there is also a contemporaneity to these sculptures in their allusions to bondage and peripheral sex cultures, which are further conjured up in the exhibition title. Again, Azpilicueta embeds Erauso in the material, using a knitting machine to create a chainmail effect with metallic threads, juxtaposing the malleability of the fabric with its hard metal components. Woven depictions of Erauso's face appear on the crotches of selected codpieces; here s/he is smaller than in *The Lieutenant-Nun is Passing: An Autobiography of Katalina, Antonio, Alonso and more*, and only visible upon close inspection **FIG. 6**. While this exemplifies the humour that exists in Azpilicueta's practice, it is disrupted by something more probing: a critique of our persistent association of identity and personhood with sex or gender, always looking for the



Fig. 6 Detail from *On the Dignity of Codpieces*, by Mercedes Azpilicueta. 2021. Wool felt, merino wool, cotton, viscose, metallic yarn, holographic vinyl and cord, dimensions variable. (Photograph Andy Keate).

Exhibition details Mercedes Azpilicueta: *Bondage of Passions*
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