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Cecilia Vicuña: Spin Spin Triangulene

Author(s)

Matthew Cheale

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About the author(s)

is a writer, editor and art historian.

Cover image: **Fig. 2** *La Vicuña (The Vicuña)*, by Cecilia Vicuña. 1977. Oil on cotton canvas, 139.1 by 119.4 cm. (© the artist; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; exh. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York).

Cecilia Vicuña: Spin Spin Triangulene

by Matthew Cheale • 31.08.2022

In 2017 Lucy Lippard wrote that the sculptures of the Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña (b.1948) invite viewers 'to respect and rehabilitate [...] the discards of mainstream society' in different ways.¹ Lippard was responding to what have now become the artist's signature works: her *precarios*, small forms composed of natural and man-made objects that are bound with string. Vicuña's attraction to detritus was partly influenced by the work of Kurt Schwitters, whose room-sized sculptural installation *Merzbau* (c.1923–33) she read about in an anthology of European modern art. In response, she collected any objects that she could find and glued and nailed them into small constructions: 'I called it Merz'.² For her retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Vicuña has incorporated a series of these tiny, ephemeral structures in the site-specific installation *Quipu del exterminio / Extermination Quipu* **FIG.1**. Three large hanging sculptures, comprising strands of knotted and unspun wool, are suspended from the ceiling of the High Gallery, closely gathered, like drifts of towering water. Nearby, along the walls of the museum's spiral rotunda, Vicuña's paintings, works on paper and textiles are grouped into thematic 'bays' with such titles as 'Bay of Joy' and 'Bay of Broken Potentials'.

Vicuña began experimenting with woven forms in the winter of 1972, when she pulled red threads tautly across her childhood bedroom. She was drawn to the linear simplicity of the fibre and associated the knotted string with the ancient quipu, an Incan instrument used for communication and accounting. Vicuña has often cited the importance of the environment in her upbringing, most notably Concón beach, which was located a short distance from her parents' home. She wanted to learn about the ancestral history of the land – a combination of Basque, Irish, Spanish and Diaguita – and an awareness of indigenous cultures arrived early. She quickly learnt that in the Basque language *vicuña* translates as 'mountain goat' and, as Lippard notes, the artist began to 'think of herself as an Andean animal'.³ One of many self-portraits lining the Guggenheim's spiral rotunda shows the artist, naked, with her namesake **FIG.2**. She depicts herself in the centre of the image, one arm around the long neck of the creature, with a billowing scarf framing her sorrowful face. One half of the scarf depicts the military dictatorship in Chile in shades of black-grey and white; the other half, in radiant colours, illustrates the resistance to its oppression.



Fig. 1 Installation view of Cecilia Vicuña: *Spin Spin Triangulene* at Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2022, showing *Quipu del exterminio / Extermination Qipu*. 2022. Wool, natural plant fibers, horse hair, metal, wood, seashells, nutshells, seeds, bone, clay, plaster, plastic and pastel, dimensions variable. (© Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation; courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin; photograph David Heald).

A sense of interiority and defiance is common to all of Vicuña's portraits. Like her sculptures, they are anti-mimetic, creating an impression of a person rather than an exact likeness. Her figures are not set in recognisable locations but instead backgrounds of muted colours and imaginative landscapes. According to the exhibition curators, Pablo León de la Barra and Geaninne Gutiérrez-Guimarães, her *Angel de la menstruación* (*Angel of Menstruation*) **FIG.3** is reminiscent of Leonardo de Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (1503; **Musée du Louvre, Paris**). But there is something fantastical at play, too: the female angel floats in an ecstatic state, dreamier than Leonardo's portrait, attuned only to her transformation from child to woman. A red thread wraps around her body and loops around her calf, drawing attention to the thick blood appearing between her legs. The painting speaks to Vicuña's deft transformation in her sculpture-making: here, her red thread becomes menstrual blood, her strands of knotted wool turn to twisted hair.

Vicuña's life was upended in 1973 when Salvador Allende, the president of Chile, was overthrown by Augusto Pinochet, who authorised the censorship of Leftist parties and the assassination of over three thousand dissidents. Allende was a close friend of her grandfather, who was a reactionary intellectual. Having travelled to London with the support of a British Council scholarship the year before, Vicuña sought asylum and remained in the United Kingdom. León de la Barra and Gutiérrez-Guimarães reference

this difficult period in the artist's life in the 'Bay of Joy and Sorrow', which includes two self-portraits that portray Vicuña's life before and after the coup respectively. *Pantera negra y yo (ii)* (*Black Panther and Me (ii)*; 1978), a replica of a lost painting originally made in 1970, depicts the artist in a sparse but fantastical garden, her naked body multiplied twice behind her. A black panther – a direct reference to the political organisation – crouches nearby, as though preparing to pounce. In the wall text the artist explains that she 'look[s] forward to any of his attacks, because this is [her] friend' in the fight for justice and against racism. This representation of liberation is juxtaposed with the aforementioned *La Vicuña*, which references her life in exile after the coup. Her paintings of revolutionary figures too depict the imaginary landscapes of her subjects. The figure posing proudly in *Karl Marx* FIG.4 is taken from photographs of the philosopher and political theorist in interior settings, but Vicuña depicts him in a garden of eternal delights. Similarly, *Amados (Loved Ones)* FIG.5 is a visionary manifesto of sorts – a constellation of artists, poets, musicians and religious figures who were Vicuña's key influences at the time.



Fig. 2 *La Vicuña* (*The Vicuña*), by Cecilia Vicuña. 1977. Oil on cotton canvas,

139.1 by 119.4 cm. (© the artist; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; exh. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York).

'I had this awareness – an awareness of its awareness', Vicuña has said of her attraction to the sea – specifically the Concón coastline. 'I felt that I needed to respond, to make a sign to indicate to the ocean that I understood'.⁴ In her work, natural forms rendered in one medium often feed into another: the ebb and flow of the disappearing shoreline prompted an evocative, dissonant soundscape and an ephemeral performance, which in turn, led to the fifty-four-minute film *Kon Kon* FIG.6. The latter opens with the artist's words: 'I knew the body and the sea dialogued in a language I needed to hear'. Her intimate, visually complex collage of digital footage includes archival images of the region's historiography, its indigenous precolonial past, performative rituals and experimental poetry. The film has been included in several important exhibitions, including *About to Happen* at the Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans, in 2017, where Vicuña noted that she felt a deep affinity between the Concón and the Gulf Coast.



Fig. 3 *Angel de la menstruación* (Angel of Menstruation), by Cecilia Vicuña. 1973. Oil on canvas, 57.1 by 48.2 cm. (© the artist; private collection; courtesy

the artist and Lehmann Maupin; exh. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York).

Although *Spin Spin Triangulene* is the first large-scale presentation of Vicuña's work in New York, she has not been neglected elsewhere. An installation she made with hanging *Quipus*, paintings and small sculptures afforded her the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement award at the 59th Venice Biennale, she had her first retrospective at the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, in 2019, and she will create a new site-specific installation for the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern, London, in 2023. If her work has been admired, however, it has often come at a cost to her philosophy. Here, Vicuña's socially engaged statements about the Chilean landscape and its disappearance are at times glossed over by the curators – *Extermination Quipu* is read as 'umbilical cords to the cosmos' in the wall text – as is the relevance of her work to ecofeminism, a theory that emerged at the time she was creating her early paintings. Despite this, the Guggenheim show grounds her paintings in her wider practice and principles. Vicuña is an activist and the visionary nature of these smaller, two-dimensional works are at one with her larger installations. The painting, *Janis Joe* (1971), for example, in which images of reality are mixed with others from dreams to capture the revolutionary spirit of the early 1970s, makes it easy to see why she is popular today. The work shifts from conceptualism to Pop activism while, Vicuña, in all her manifestations across the canvas, reminds us that paradise is possible on Earth.

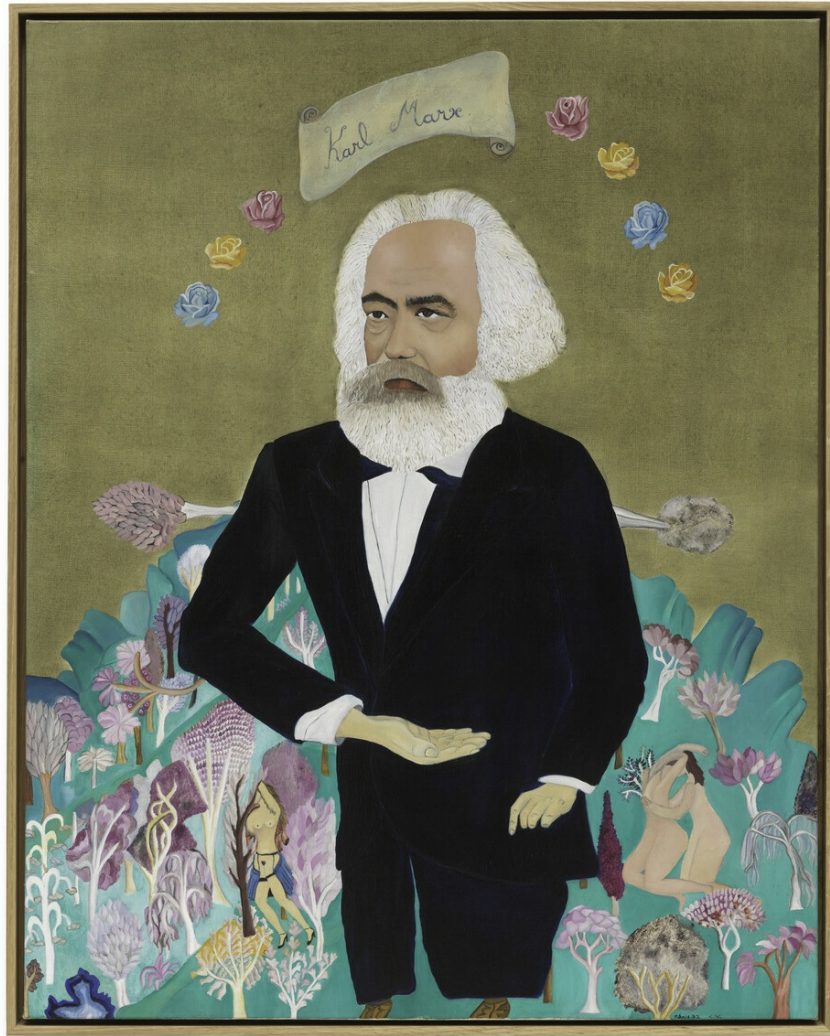


Fig. 4 *Karl Marx*, by Cecilia Vicuña. 1972. Oil on canvas, 92.1 by 71.7 cm. (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York).



Fig. 5 *Amados (Loved Ones)*, by Cecilia Vicuña. 1969. Oil on canvas, 91.4 by 72.4 cm. (Courtesy the artist; exh. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York).



Fig. 6 Still from *Kon Kon*, by Cecilia Vicuña. 2010. Digital video, duration 54 minutes. (Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin; exh Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York).

Exhibition details

Cecilia Vicuña: Spin Spin Triangulene
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New
York
27th May–5th September 2022

Footnotes

- 1** L. Lippard: 'Floating between past and future: the indigenization of environmental politics', in A. Andersson, L. Lippard, M. Gómez-Barris and J. Bryan-Wilson: exh. cat. *Cecilia Vicuña: About to Happen*, New Orleans (Contemporary Arts Center), Berkeley (Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, University of California), Philadelphia (Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania), Seattle (Henry Art Gallery), Miami (Museum of Contemporary Art) and New Orleans (Contemporary Arts Center) 2017–20, pp.130–136, at p.133.
- 2** Cecilia Vicuña quoted from A. Andersson: 'Vicuña in retrospect' in *ibid.*, pp.122–29, at p.129.
- 3** Lippard, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.130.
- 4** Cecilia Vicuña quoted from J. Bryan-Wilson: 'Awareness of awareness: an interview with Cecilia Vicuña' in *op. cit.* (note 1), pp.110–22, at p.111.

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