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Mouths as Shadows

Lorena Ancona

Organized by Austin D Bowes

17 APRIL TO 29 MAY, 2022

“The loss of stories sharpens the hunger for them.” - Saidiya Hartman¹

Initially passed down as an oral history, what we now know as the Popol Vuh became a written text in the 18th century when the Dominican priest Francisco Ximénez recorded the narrative in K’iche’—the language and eponymous name of Indigenous people within Mayan cultures—and in Spanish. The phonetic manuscript Father Ximénez used to make his translations has never been found, leaving the Popol Vuh as our earliest written documentation of Maya creation-myth and K’iche’ history, though they are often interpreted as one in the same. Lorena Ancona, like many scholars and artists before her, employs the Popol Vuh to rethink and reimagine our contemporary understandings of ancient Mayan culture.

Growing up in the Yucatán Peninsula, Lorena tells me that her experience of the cultural tourism in the area and its exploitative relationship to ancient Mayan cultures initially dissuaded any further serious interest she may have had in her youth. But something changed when she wanted to explore the materiality of Maya blue, a pigment made from indigo dyes and clay. This curiosity led Lorena to archives across the Américas and Europe, and then to meetings with Indigenous Mayan communities throughout Mexico where she learned from elders about their region-specific processes for making and firing plant-based pigments. From this research, Lorena continued to enmesh herself in Mesoamerican artifacts, myths, performance, and language. She articulates her visual language through the Surrealist practise of automatism, which she describes as “connecting us to a deeper self, liberated from any social attachment with an open dialogue to the sensuality, the will and imagination, which becomes a powerful mechanism to conceive alternative realities in the search for social transformation.”

The title of this exhibition, *Mouths as Shadows*, is pulled from a poem Lorena wrote in English and translated to K’iche’ titled *Took ti Nikte ha* (or *Water lily in flames*).² In this poem, Lorena reinterprets a story from the Popol Vuh wherein the hero twins Hunahpú, representing the sun or the hunter, and Xbalanqué, representing the moon or the jaguar, fight the underworld gods. While these two figures are traditionally thought of as twin brothers, Lorena understands Xbalanqué to be a female protagonist through her rereading; pronouns in Mayan languages do not necessarily denote gender.

¹ Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12 no. 2 (June 2008): 8.

² Lorena has told me that she begins her translations in English because it is closer to the rhythms of Mayan languages than Spanish.



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This retelling through language and poetry could be read as an extension of Saidiya Hartman's concept of critical fabulation. Critical fabulation is a kind of creative nonfiction that expands the limits of the archive to include narratives unwritten, to include the notion of possibility beyond what we have as the "facts." Lorena expands the limits of language and ancient stories to inform her visual practice.

In *Mouths as Shadows*, Lorena brings us monotypes and ceramic-based works shaped by her poem. Seeing the night as "a window of agitation where life connects," Lorena depicts—in dyes of indigos and violets—the jungles of Quintana Roo, where pools of lapping water agitate the dens of snakes. Pulsing through the vines, we meet the night.



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Lorena Ancona (b. 1981, Chetumal, Quintana Roo, Mexico) lives and works in Quintana Roo, Mexico. Recent solo exhibitions include LLANO, Mexico City, Mexico; INTERSTICIO, Madrid, Spain; and Parque Galería, Mexico City, Mexico. Her work has been included in group exhibitions at palace enterprise, Copenhagen, Denmark; Museo Jumez, Mexico City, Mexico; Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France; kurimanzutto, Mexico City, Mexico; LLANO, Mexico City, Mexico; Torre Américas 1500, Guadalajara, Mexico; Glass Gallery, London, United Kingdom; Fortnight Institute, New York, New York; Lulu, Mexico City, Mexico; and X Bienal de Nicaragua, León, Nicaragua; among others. She has participated in residencies at Casa Wabi, Puerto Escondido, Mexico; Gasworks, London, United Kingdom; Parallel /// Oaxaca, Oaxaca, Mexico; and Komplot, Brussels, Belgium.

Austin D Bowes (b. 1996, Nashville, Tennessee) lives in Brooklyn, New York. They are an arts worker, writer, and baker.

