

Edgar Calel

Ni Musmut (It's Breezing)

30 August 2024 — 5 January 2025

Bergen Kunsthall is proud to present an extensive exhibition by artist Edgar Calel, based in Comalapa, Guatemala. Calel is widely regarded as a leading figure in the current generation of Latin American artists. Working in a variety of media, Calel's work celebrates the traditions and spirituality of his Mayan Kaqchikel heritage. His artistic approach is grounded in attentive relationships with the earth and its elements, playfully challenging Western conventions and perspectives of permanence. The works in the exhibition "Ni Musmut (It's Breezing)", made specifically for the spaces of Bergen Kunsthall, continue Calel's engagement with the Mayan Kaqchikel cosmivision and the connections of its concepts and practices to other cultural contexts. The artist's use of the Kaqchikel language and reflexivity of his presence in the places he travels belong to a practice that is celebratory of the daily role of spirituality among his people and vigilant of daily threats of exclusion and cultural erasure.

The title, "Ni Musmut", refers to a mountain breeze close to the village Pa mumus in Guatemala. The breeze often brings a light rain that magically blurs the air – it creates a filter that diffuses vision, but creates a sense that something will happen.

The exhibition at Bergen Kunsthall presents several large-scale installations made with soil, rocks and fire that connect essential elements for *jun k'obomanik*, or giving thanks through offering rituals. Within these references to a geological and agricultural landscape, we find a series of hanging stones and a group of 76 ceramic pots filled with water, flower petals and accompanied by wooden sticks, titled *Oyonik paruwi Juyu'* (Invocation over the mountains) that allude to traditional cultural practices, but also open up to new readings in a changed context. The works are presented both as material and ritual – the artist and the team of Bergen Kunsthall will light candles under the rocks and take care of the altar-like pots each day upon opening the exhibition space. Calel's works require entrusting devotional forms to an institution, and the artist views such collaboration as a means of opening these traditions while remaining in dialogue with ancestral practitioners. At the same time, the works challenge established notions of a work and its ownership and highlight the artistic contributions Calel's community make to contemporary notions of ritual, performativity and ecological thinking.

Three large embroidery works depict scenes from the home of Calel's family. The works, made in collaboration with members of his family, create a direct connection between the home – as a place for gathering and shared rituals – and the exhibition spaces, which are also spaces for social interaction and reflection. A selection of artworks by Calel's artistic community and his family are presented in the smallest, most intimate gallery space, with a common theme of the garden, including intricate paintings of flowers and plants by his mother.

The exhibition is the first solo presentation by the artist in Europe.

About the artist

Edgar Calel (born in Chi Xot – San Juan Comalapa, Guatemala, 1987) is a Maya-Kaqchikel visual artist and poet whose practice delves into the complexities of indigenous experiences. His work engages with the Maya-Kaqchikel cosmic worldview, traditions, and rituals, introducing these cultural elements to new international audiences, where they expand in relation to other cultures. Calel is part of a vibrant artistic scene in Guatemala formed around the gallery Proyectos Ultravioleta, a platform for contemporary art in Guatemala City that has played a significant role in raising the visibility of a generation of Indigenous Guatemalan artists on the international stage while also articulating a specific language of institutional critique responding to power dynamics and historical changes. Calel always works collectively, inviting family, friends and colleagues to collaborate. Calel's work has been presented and collected internationally, with the most prominently discussed acquisition by Tate Modern in 2021. For the installation *Ru k'ox k'ob'el jun ojer etemab'el* (The Echo of an Ancient Form of Knowledge), Calel collaborated with Tate to establish a unique custodial agreement. Recognising that the installation, which incorporates Maya-Kaqchikel ritual blessings, cannot be reduced to its physical form, Tate acquired the installation, without taking full ownership, for a period of 13 years – a number corresponding to the 13 joints of the human body in the Mayan cosmic worldview.

Edgar Calel studied at the Escuela Nacional de Arte Rafael Rodríguez Padilla. In 2023, his first institutional solo show, *B'alab'äj* (Jaguar Stone), was shown at the SculptureCenter, New York City. He has participated in numerous group exhibitions, including *Choreographies of the Impossible*, 35th São Paulo Biennial, São Paulo, Brazil (2023); *uMoya: The Sacred Return of Lost Things*, 12th Liverpool Biennial, Liverpool (2023); *Soft and Weak Like Water*, 14th Gwangju Biennial, Gwangju (2023); *Is It Morning for You Yet?*, 58th Carnegie International, Pittsburgh (2022); *The Crack Begins Within*, 11th Berlin Biennial, Berlin (2020). His works are part of the permanent collections of Rijkscollectie - National Collection of the Netherlands; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, USA; Tate, UK; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, Spain; the National Gallery of Canada, Ontario; Fundación TEOR/ética, San José, Costa Rica; MADC Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, San José, Costa Rica; and Kadist, San Francisco.

Gallery II

K'obomanik (Gratitude for everything that lights up and turns off before our eyes)

The installation in Gallery II consists of a series of suspended rocks under which artist-made candles are lit throughout the exhibition period. The candles are replaced on a daily basis, leaving traces of stearin in their bed of earth and darkening the bottom of the rocks. Calel has used rocks and candles frequently in his work, pointing to rituals as well as challenging the norms of European art institutions, which usually don't allow lit fire in their exhibition spaces.

The title *K'obomanik* stands in the Mayan language Kaqchikel for gratitude or offerings. But *K'obomanik* is not just a word; it embodies a way of life that is practised through rituals and ceremonies. These rituals, which Calel often transforms into artworks presented in galleries, involve the offering of gifts to thank ancestors and the land for life and the wisdom they have imparted. Calel expresses appreciation for the light of the day, the darkness of night, and the fog that greets each morning, all of which signify the interconnectedness of life and the environment. A key belief in this tradition is the idea that spirits are omnipresent, yet they need a body or a medium through which they can manifest. Stones are such vessels that spirits inhabit to receive offerings, and they might be given fruits, tobacco, flowers, or other items as part of a ritualistic practice, as in a work by Calel acquired by the Tate, London. For Calel, such connections to other spirits are only possible through rituals and art.

On the one hand, Calel brings these practices into the context of an art institution to make the existence of the Mayan people and their millennia-old culture visible. On the other hand, he also emphasises the importance of rewriting practices and ancestral memories, adjusting them to new contexts, especially in relation to the architecture and colonial influences that have left a lasting impact on their territories.

This time, at Bergen Kunsthall, the candle is placed directly under the stone, bringing light to a place where it is usually always dark, also reflecting on the cold and the lack of light during winter in Bergen.

Each colour of the candle used in the installation represents different aspects of life: black signifies the inner organs hidden in darkness, white represents the expressions that bring these inner elements to light, and red symbolises the blood that flows between them, linking the internal and external worlds.

The work also reflects on the limitations of individual capacity versus collective strength. While one person may only carry a stone for a short while, collectively, a community or institution can bear much more. This metaphor extends to the role of institutions and society, which have the structure, strength, and infrastructure to carry a cultural and spiritual weight that may be too heavy for an individual.

Gallery I

Oyonik paruwi Juyu' (Invocation over the mountains)

Gallery I has been transformed into a large-scale earth environment that creates a full-body experience, including smell and humidity. The installation reminds us of artistic practices since the 1960s, such as Land Art or Earth Art, that aim to connect gallery spaces with the outside world, often also on a spectacular scale. Calel's installation infuses the materials with specific meanings and memories, such as the agricultural knowledge of his ancestors. The installation is inspired by the landscape surrounding Bergen, with its encompassing mountains. This setting is also reminiscent of Comalapa, the village in Guatemala where Calel and his family live and work.

The earth landscape is inhabited by a series of 76 ceramic vessels of different sizes and shapes, filled with water and flower petals and with wooden sticks laying over their opening. This body of work centres around the Mayan Kaqchikel ritual known as Oyonik, a healing practice that offers guidance and support to those who have strayed from their path, either spiritually or physically.

Calel draws on the cultural wisdom that, when walking on a mountain, it is crucial to pause and rest and to ask the mountain for permission to ascend or descend, acknowledging its power and presence. In Kaqchikel culture, becoming lost can also signify a separation of the body from the spirit. *Oyonik paruwi Juyu'* seeks to reunite the body and spirit by invoking the heart of the sky and the heart of the earth, calling for the person's spirit to return so they can be found again. This ritual represented by the ceramic vessels is not only a form of spiritual healing but also serves as a means of communication. Through the ritual and the work, messages can be sent to individuals who are far away, received through dreams, signs, nature, and animals (a practice jokingly described by Calel as "WhatsApp of the ancestors").

The pathways through the gallery space and the mountains of soil are designed to reflect the main lines on Calel's palm, symbolising personal journeys and connections to the land. According to Guatemalan palmistry, everyone has a path in life, and while some see this path by reading their future in their palm, for Calel, his hands are also what he uses to shape his own future as an artist.

Gallery III

Calel comes from an artistic family background, and many of Calel's works are made together with members of his family, who also travel together with him to install and create works on site. This communal notion of work and life is depicted directly in a series of embroideries presented in Gallery III, which are produced collectively with his family. The works depict everyday spaces, built in traditional techniques common in Chi Xot, San Juan Comalapa, with walls made from adobe, a mixture of mudbrick, earth, and organic material. As a result, the walls carry a sense of history, merging the past with contemporary times.

The largest embroidery in the exhibition, titled *Nimajay Kaqchikel* (Big Kaqchikel House), shows a home seen from a bird's-eye perspective in an almost diagrammatical way. It vividly captures years of gatherings, ceremonies and activities in a single image. The embroidery features an altarpiece and a fireplace where meals are shared, as well as sleeping babies, dancing, and music. Above the altar, there are patterns of a jaguar, symbolising protection, alongside a two-headed bird that represents vision and the ability to see both the past and the present. The embroidery is surrounded by smaller embroideries of corncobs, like a ray of sun.

The second embroidery, titled *Ru te'e Q'aq'* (Mother of Fire), portrays the kitchen of Edgar Calel's grandmother, which today serves as the studio of several members of

the Calel family. This image details the everyday life and traditions of a typical Mayan kitchen. It includes a mortar used for grinding corn, a ceramic pot for cooking tortillas, and sandals hanging on the wall. A sign on the wall reads, "Tortillas are eaten at all times", reflecting on the long history and importance of corn in the Mayan culture, as well as giving a sense of ironic humour towards stereotypes.

The third embroidery, titled *Xin chajij wi* (Protecting Me with the Essence of Fire), depicts a ritual involving Edgar Calel and his parents. In this piece, Calel is shown in the centre, with his mother and father applying ashes on his naked body. The ritual is performed as a protection before long travels. It can only be performed by his closest relatives and takes place in the grandmother's house, the same house depicted in *Ru te'e Q'aq'*. Here, the ash symbolises the transition between the material (wood) and the immaterial (fire). Following the ritual, Calel is shown falling asleep on a stone pillow. This work exists also as a video, a performance, and a drawing.

Gallery IV

Jardin, Juyu' KitKit (Garden, mountain of chants)

Gallery IV features the recurring sound of "kit kit kit," an echo that brings the presence of Edgar Calel's grandmother into the space. After his grandmother, María Luisa López Cujcuy passed away in 2014 at the age of 92, Calel inherited her language, Kaqchikel, and began to reflect on all the stories and wisdom that had passed away with her. In an effort to preserve her memory, he started a journal to document the words, advice, and knowledge he associated with her. Among all these memories, the sound "kit kit" stood out most vividly, reminding him of how she called the wild birds she loved to her garden.

Calel sought a way to capture the ephemeral essence of his grandmother and decided to paint the chant, "kit kit," using mud, symbolising the connection to the earth, time and its spirit. He first painted these words on the street-facing wall of her house, marking it as a space for community gatherings, conversations, and celebrations. At Bergen Kunsthall, this gesture is echoed, with the chant painted in shapes reminiscent of mountains, connecting the landscapes of Bergen and Calel's hometown of Comalapa. These mountains give rise to a garden filled with flowers created by his friends and closest kin, made through a large selection of drawings, paintings and photographs, representing a collective work of love and memory. Calel reflects that, much like the flowers whose shapes find you, one does not choose their closest kin; rather, they appear naturally, just as family and friends do. And one thing that art can do is freeze time; this garden at Bergen Kunsthall will neither wither nor die. Over the garden and mountain of chants, three clouds appear, made out of the paper that was used to pack and protect the ceramic vessels on their way to Bergen Kunsthall,

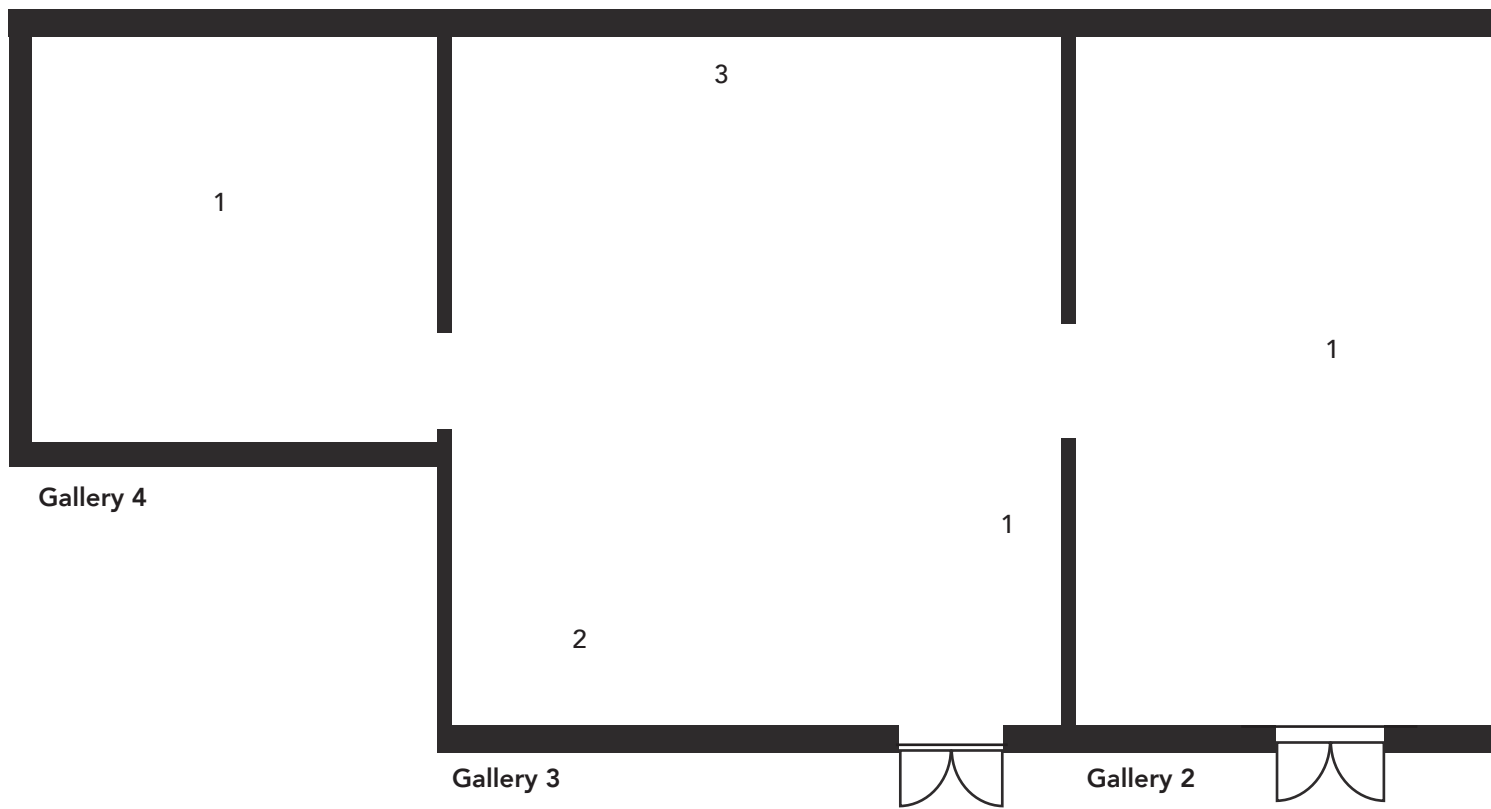
In his grandmother's home, now his studio, Calel's mother plays a central role in fostering community and connection, much like her mother before her. She is a vital force in bringing people together, often cooking

meals with an abundance that reflects the generosity of the garden. This idea of sharing is integral to Calel's practice. Wherever he travels, he brings the rituals and traditions of his heritage with him, such as beginning each morning by sharing dreams. This practice of sharing dreams is an important way of maintaining a connection to one's own ancestors and cultural roots, infusing each space with the spirit of his community and the memory of those who have come before.

"No vengo a sembrar una flor en tu corazón, esta vez traigo un Jardín para tus ojos"
– Edgar Calel

"I do not come to plant a flower in your heart, this time I bring a garden for your eyes."
– Edgar Calel

With support from Norske kunstforeninger.



Gallery 2

1
K'obomanik (Gratitude for everything that lights up and turns off before our eyes), 2024
 Rope, stones, soil, candle, fire

Gallery 1

1
Oyonik paruwi Juyu' (Invocation over the mountains), 2024
 Soil, claypots, water, rose pedals, twigs
 Co-commissioned by Bergen Kunsthall and Museum of Civilizations, Rome

 Claypots produced by Éléonore Griveau at Cone7–Ceramic Workshop.

Gallery 3

1
Xin chajij wi (Protecting me with the essence of fire), 2024
 Embroidery; cotton fabric, thread
 170 x 216 cm

 2
Ru te'e Q'aq' (Mother of fire), 2024
 Embroidery; cotton fabric, thread
 165 x 385 cm

 3
Nimajay Kaqchikel (Big Kaqchikel house), 2024
 Embroidery; cotton fabric, thread
 350 x 710 cm

Gallery 1



Gallery 4

1

Jardin, Juyu' KitKit (Garden, mountain of chants), 2024

KitKit mural with clay, oil and acrylic paintings on canvas, drawings with pencil, markers, chalk and crayon on paper, photographs

List of invited contributors to Edgar Calel's work:

Vidalia Apén
Pedro Calel
Edgar Calel
Elsa Calel
Pedro Lisandro Calel
Henry Calel
Angélica Calel
Bryan Calel
María Calel
Magdalena Calel
Julio Calel
Thiago Calel
Mateo Calel
Brenda Calel
Karma Davis
Jorge De León
Luis Fernando

Regina Galindo
Leonel Juracán
Rodrigo Morán
Paulo Nazareth
Jennifer Paiz
Wilmer Sula
Lydia Tubín
José Wolff

Events

Opening

Fri 30 Aug 20:00

Plattform: Edgar Calel

Artist talk

Sat 31 Aug 14:00

Upstairs

Plattform: Pablo José Ramirez

Talk

Sat 12 Oct 14:00

Upstairs

Plattform: Katya García-Antón

Talk

Sat 9 Nov 14:00

Upstairs

Tours

Every Sunday

13:00 Tour and workshop for families

14:00 Tour

Curated by Silja Leifsdottir and
Axel Wieder

Bergen Kunsthall

Staff

Jonette Vindenes

Head of Administration

Nora-Swantje Almes

Curator of Live Programme

soso brafield

Communication

(on leave)

Sofia Marie Hamnes

Producer

Thea Haug

Members and Reception

Ragna Haugstad

Bookshop

alphie hubbard

Communication

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Program Manager

Silja Leifsdottir

Curator of Exhibitions

Hilde Marie Pedersen

Head of Education

Emilio Sanhueza

Head of Communication

Jonas Skarmark

Technical Producer

Henrik Skauge

AV Technician

Eric Alvin Wangel

Head of Production

Kjersti Solbakken

Director

(From 1 Oct)

Reception and tours

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Andrine Graue-Einarsen

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Fredrik Langevåg

Øystein Larssen

Mari Norddahl

Elise B. R. Petersen

Martin Midtbø Rokkones

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