

‘When that first photograph was taken of the world from space and you saw this little ball in blackness... I became aware of what I felt I was. I feel very much that a tree is a relative, a cousin. Everything in this world, I find, I’m related to.’ – Luchita Hurtado, 2018

New York... For more than seventy years, Los Angeles-based artist Luchita Hurtado has merged abstraction and representation with mystical effect, exploring connections between the body and its larger context – nature, the environment, and the cosmos – in an effort to express universality and transcendence. ‘Dark Years,’ Hurtado’s first solo exhibition with Hauser & Wirth, focuses on the artist’s early works from the 1940s to the 1950s, a period defined by prolific experimentation. Comprising of crayon and ink paintings on board and paper, graphite and ink drawings, and oil paintings on canvas, the works on view range stylistically from surrealist figuration and geometric patterning to biomorphic forms executed with expressive acuity. Together, they underscore the vast scope of Hurtado’s early expression and illuminate the origins of an artistic output that would continue to evolve for decades to come.

Hurtado’s multicultural life and career reflect in the eclectic mediums and formal techniques of her oeuvre. Born in Maiquetia, Vargas, Venezuela in 1920, she emigrated to the United States in 1928, settling in New York where she attended classes at the Art Students League. In the mid-forties, Hurtado freelanced as a fashion illustrator for Condé Nast and window designer for Lord & Taylor. She relocated to Mexico City in the late 1940s then moved to San Francisco Bay the following decade, making frequent visits to Taos, and ultimately settling in Los Angeles where she continues to make work today. Although associated with a vast network of internationally renowned artists and intellectuals throughout the decades, including Mexican muralists, Surrealists, and members of Dynaton, Hurtado’s practice always remained an independent – and until recent years, largely private – pursuit.

Hurtado produced her earliest paintings and drawings in spare moments, often at her kitchen table at night or carved out spaces in other artists’ studios. Executed in a variety of mediums with masterful range, Hurtado rendered her work in brightly hued palettes of pinks, blues, and greens that drew inspiration from the landscapes and tropical flora of Mexico, and her native Venezuela. Using colored crayon to push against black ink, Hurtado created intricate compositions akin to primordial landscapes that are comprised of vaguely figurative forms set amidst pulsating, angular patterning.

Hurtado evocatively titled a trio of graphite drawings from 1945 ‘Holly Leaf and Sea’s seeds in Memory of time past,’ ‘Leaves and Trees,’ and ‘Spring Burst.’ More overtly biomorphic and surreal, these delicate works on paper demonstrate Hurtado’s deeply rooted belief in the

interconnectedness of all living organisms. She often emphasizes the mystical and transcendental possibilities of a keen awareness of and close relationship to nature.

In a work titled ‘Woman’s World,’ produced in 1948, Hurtado depicts, in ink and crayon on paper, two ethereal figures with arms stretched overhead, intertwined with a network of roots. The year prior, Hurtado relocated to San Angelin, Mexico City with her two sons and second husband Wolfgang Paalen. While living there, she and Paalen traveled extensively through Southern Mexico in search of pre-Columbian archeology. As Hurtado describes her experience in the region: ‘You go to Mexico City and you realize why this goddess of the earth looks the way she does. She has a skull for a head, a skirt full of rattlesnakes, eagle claws. It’s something in the earth that you know, there’s something special here. You feel that it goes beyond just being beautiful. You see, it has power. It has something very strange. If you’d have touched the right stone or touched the right tree, you could possibly go into another dimension.’

Throughout the 1950s, Hurtado continued producing paintings and drawings of surreal landscapes and totemic figures entranced in ritualistic dance with arms to the sky. She later rediscovered the form of these dancing figures both in nature and archaeology, seeing its shape on the back of a butterfly in Venezuela and in prehistoric cave paintings.

The exhibition borrows its eponymous title from one of the paintings on view: ‘Luchita – Dark Years’ (ca. 1954), a self-portrait in which the artist’s piercing gaze advances from a shadowy ground. This striking rendering marks a significant shift towards Hurtado’s investigation of self-affirmation, which emerges as a pervasive theme across her body of work.

‘Dark Years’ will be followed by Hurtado’s first solo institutional exhibition at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London, in May 2019.

Hurtado’s work continued to dramatically evolve throughout the 1960s and 1970s, demonstrating a marked shift toward naturalistic representation and figuration leading her contemplative self-portraits known as the

‘I am’ paintings, which she largely produced in a closet at her home in Santiago, Chile. Asserting her presence through a personal perspective of the body – rendered from above at skewed angles – Hurtado coalesces our gaze with hers, creating a depth of field activated by the unexpected position of the floor as a backdrop, juxtaposing soft corporeal lines against the hard-edged geometric patterns of a Southwestern rug.

In Hurtado's surrealist Body Landscapes, the human figure assumes the form of mountains and desert sand dunes. Functioning as a symbolic proxy and an intimate meditation on the Earth as mystic progenitor, these works underscore the interconnection between the body and natural world – a delicate balance now in jeopardy. Hurtado recognizes the urgency of this ecological crisis and her environmental advocacy continues to inform and suffuse the language of her work.

Hurtado's work has been featured in institutions including the Long-Beach Museum of Art, Long-Beach CA (1972), and Carnegie-Art Museum, Oxnard CA (1994). Recent exhibitions include 'Summer Nocturne: Works on Paper from the 1970s,' Santa Barbara CA (2018), and 'Made in L.A. 2018' at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles CA (2018), which organized a conversation between Hurtado and art historian Andrianna Campbell. Subsequently, the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery CA, held 'Luchita Hurtado in Conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist' (2018).

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