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“SANGRE DE NOPAL/BLOOD OF THE NOPAL: TANYA AGUIÑIGA AND PORFIRIO GUTIÉRREZ EN CONVERSACION/IN CONVERSATION”

PST ART: “Art & Science Collide”

Fowler Museum at UCLA

By April Baca



Ritty Burchfield performance inside the Mirror Dome of the Pepsi-Cola Pavilion organized by Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) at Expo '70, Osaka, Japan, 1970. Photo: János Kender and Harry Shunk. From “Sensing the Future: Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.),” 2024–25, Getty Center, Los Angeles.

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Tanya Aguiñiga, *Somos mujeres (We Are Women)*, 2024, terra-cotta, nickel, epoxy, cochineal dye, cochineal insects, cotton rope, 83 × 64". From "Sangre de Nopal/Blood of the Nopal: Tanya Aguiñiga and Porfirio Gutiérrez en Conversacion/in Conversation," 2024–25, Fowler Museum at UCLA, Los Angeles.

AS AN INSECT long cultivated for the brilliant red dye it produces, the cochineal has occupied a fraught position between Indigenous textile practices and modern globalization. Mexican cochineal has been prized for its durability and hyper-pigmentation since its introduction to European consumers in the sixteenth century, and at one point was the most expensive dye in the world. Expanding on the insect’s role within and just beyond Indigenous Oaxacan craft, Tanya Aguiñiga and Porfirio Gutiérrez’s exhibition “*Sangre de Nopal/Blood of the Nopal*” at UCLA’s Fowler Museum considers how the dye remains tied to forms of labor exploitation, gendered violence, and migration, and yet also might serve as a conduit for communal memory and ancestral knowledge. The multi-site collaboration between these two artists marks the culmination of a joint residency in Mexico. The exhibition’s

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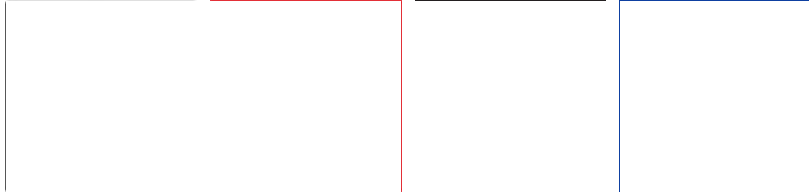


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Contemporary Art, a group exhibit emphasizing the relationship between physical ecologies and diaspora, is at the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara and on view through April 27.

Together, these exhibitions emphasize the use of cochineal in diasporic histories, and equal attention is given to artistic experimentation with the insect and the political realities related to the science of cochineal harvesting. For example, Aguiñiga's woven installation *Ejercicios en Entendimiento* (Exercises in Understanding), 2020, uses pulverized fragments of the US-Mexico border wall to create a pigment visually (and chemically) akin to cochineal. Works created by Gutiérrez, such as *Unseen*, 2023, a multimedia installation combining photography and a large, rotating steel wheel filled in with taut, cochineal-dyed weavings, contrast the industrial production and chromatic intensity of the dye against the precarity of migrant farm labor. As an example, the video *Las Horas que Camine/The hours I Walked*, 2024, documents the artist creating a weaving made from his own clothing, food wrappers, money, and cochineal-dyed yarn while crossing the border: The performance is meant to highlight the tension (and contradictions) between the global trade of commodified goods and US immigration policies.



Aguiñiga's work expands on this further to emphasize the sexed dimensions of cochineal, which is harvested from the shells of pregnant and dried female insects. Analogizing the carmine, or red pigment, of cochineal with the blood of despoiled bodies, Aguiñiga recapitulates the violence

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visualizes harm in the form of impaired cochineal insects, their desiccated bodies fixed atop nickel pins inserted into cactus-shaped terra-cotta. Handpainted letters written in cochineal dye on each nopal spell out the work’s title, the gesture not-so-subtly linking the trajectory of the insects to diverse forms of gender exploitation.

The exhibition’s staging as a dialogue between the two artists foregrounds collaboration as an integral way of understanding how certain communities are “woven” into these histories. Rather than romanticize the insect’s pre-Columbian cultivation or trace its modern commercialization, Aguiñiga and Gutiérrez frame cochineal as a connective tissue connecting traditional Zapotec practices and histories. Within the context of this year’s PST ART: “Art & Science Collide,” the exhibition visualizes the collision of Indigenous agricultural science and contemporary weaving. In the meeting of these two forms, both artists emphasize how the industrialization of the dye coopted centuries of Indigenous technological experimentation while violently erasing the communities and livelihoods tied to such practices.

“Sangre de Nopal/Blood of the Nopal: Tanya Aguiñiga and Porfirio Gutiérrez en Conversacion/in Conversation” is on view through January 12.

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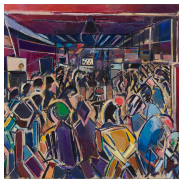
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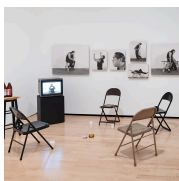
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