

Press Release

Pedro Reyes *Tlali*

May 6 – June 18, 2021
504 West 24th Street, New York

Internationally acclaimed artist Pedro Reyes returns to Lisson Gallery New York with *Tlali*, an exhibition featuring a new series of sculptures and works on paper drawn from the language and symbols of Pre-Columbian civilizations. Derived from the Aztec language Nahuatl, *Tlali* (translated as ‘Earth’), cites the perilous predicament of the continent’s name. In addition to the confusion between the United States of America and the larger hemisphere it occupies, the tainted name originates from conquistador Amerigo Vespucci, responsible for the enslavement and death of countless indigenous communities. The artist offers *Tlali* as an alternative, untainted, allegorical name for the continent. Featuring fourteen carved stone sculptures along with eleven drawings on amate, the presentation engages with Mayan, Olmec, Toltec and Mexica heritage and serves as a reminder of the very foundations of the American continent.

“It is imperative for a Mexican artist to learn Nahuatl,” says Reyes. “Proportionate to the use of Latin in the United States, many places in Mexico have a name in Nahuatl, so learning the language is vital to understanding the region’s geography and anthropology”. The artist echoes this sentiment in *Tlali*, allotting each work a Nahuatl title connected to Pre-Columbian symbolism. Carving directly in stone, the Mexico City-based artist brings an ancient artistic practice to the fore while exalting a discipline that dates over thirty-five centuries. The sculptures displayed throughout the exhibition feature the distinct geometric vocabulary used to depict human figures or architectural models by the Mesoamerican civilizations. Using red tezontle, volcanic stone, jadeite, and white marble Reyes continues his deeply political practice through the creation of new totemic and abstract forms.

Coatl (snake), a volcanic stone work at 157 inches high, resembles the snake’s rattle movement. Where Eastern civilizations elected to meditate sitting, Pre-Columbian cultures opted for a peripatetic practice. Another totemic structure, *Huehuateotl* (the old god of fire), reminds of us of the monumentality of the classic Pre-Columbian sculpture *Los atlantes de Tula*, Toltec warriors that supported temple structures. *Ueueyeyeko* (ancient knowledge) is a series of marble carvings that symbolise the plethora of symbolic objects found at a burial site, serving as a commentary on how this act of detachment likely differs from our experience of offerings today given the importance placed on personal ownership. Mexican poet Carlos Pellicer once remarked that, “Mexican people have two obsessions. A sympathy for death and love for flowers”. In addition to *Ueueyeyeko*, Reyes references this notion in *Xochitl* (flower). The Pre-Columbian ruler and poet Nezahualcōyotl touches on the acute importance of the flower in Mesoamerican philosophy, offering it as a metaphor for the ephemerality of life.

The production and preservation of knowledge is also illustrated in *Tlacuilo* (scribe) – a personification of the painter, historian, poet and librarian – referencing the volume of historic information held in codices through pictograms. Reyes’ own obsession with knowledge can be seen in his extensive personal library in his studio in Mexico City, as well as through his recent social practice project where the artist activates libraries that are not yet set up to lend books. In the spirit of another work in the show, *Olin* (to move, earthquake), Reyes believes knowledge can only be attained if it is set in motion (through the movement of books, records and artworks).

The sculptural gathering is flanked on either end by eleven vertical drawings that continue the artist’s dialogue with Mesoamerican typology. The monumental works on handmade Mexican amate paper, bearing resemblance to political banners,

serve as an index of language, an arrangement of symbols and patterns that mirror Pre-Columbian ethnology.

Accompanying the exhibition is a catalogue featuring an essay by Thomas B.F. Cummins, Harvard professor of Pre-Columbian and Colonial Art.

About the artist

Pedro Reyes has won international attention for large-scale projects that address current social and political issues. Through a varied practice utilising sculpture, performance, video, and activism, Reyes explores the power of individual and collective organisation to incite change through communication, creativity, happiness, and humour. A socio-political critique of contemporary gun culture is addressed in Reyes's *Palas por Pistolas* (2008), in which the artist worked with local authorities in Culiacán, Mexico, to melt down guns into shovels, intended to plant trees in cities elsewhere in the world. Similarly, in *Disarm* (2013) the Mexican government donated over 6,700 confiscated firearms for Reyes to transform into mechanical musical instruments, which are automated to play a delightful, if surreal loop, retaining the raw emotion of their origination. Issues of community and compassion are addressed in *Sanatorium*, activated at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2011, dOCUMENTA (13) in Germany in 2012, and in 2014 at The Power Plant in Toronto and The Institute of Contemporary Art in Miami. In this work, visitors are invited to sign up for a 'temporary clinic,' with the mission of treating various kinds of urban malaise. His immersive exhibition *Doomocracy*, organised by Creative Time at the Brooklyn Army Terminal, was a 'political house of horrors' marking the confluence of two events haunting the American cultural imagination at the time: Halloween and the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Reyes (b. 1972, Mexico City) lives and works in Mexico City. He studied architecture at the Ibero-American University in Mexico City. Solo exhibitions have been held with Museum Tinguely, Basel, Switzerland (2020); SCAD, Georgia, USA (2019); Creative Time, New York, USA (2016); Dallas Contemporary, TX, USA (2016); La Tallera, Cuernavaca, Mexico (2016); Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA, USA (2015); ICA, Miami, FL, USA (2014); The Power Plant, Toronto, Canada (2014); Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN, USA (2011); Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY, USA (2011); CCA Kitakyushu, Japan (2009); Bass Museum, Miami, FL, USA (2008); and San Francisco Art Institute, CA, USA (2008). Reyes has participated in group exhibitions at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Japan (2015); The National Museum of XXI Century Arts (MAXXI), Rome (2015); Beijing Biennale, China (2014); Whitechapel Gallery, London, UK (2013); dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, Germany (2012); Liverpool Biennial, UK (2012); Gwangju Biennial, South Korea (2012); Lyon Biennale, France (2009); and the 50th Venice Biennale, Italy (2003). In Fall 2016, Reyes served as the inaugural Dasha Zhukova Distinguished Visiting Artist at MIT Center for Art, Science & Technology (CAST) at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

About Lisson Gallery

Lisson Gallery is one of the most influential and longest-running international contemporary art galleries in the world. Today the gallery supports and promotes the work of more than 60 international artists across two spaces in London, two in New York, one in Shanghai, as well as temporary spaces opened in 2020 in East Hampton and London's Mayfair district. Established in 1967 by Nicholas Logsdail, Lisson Gallery pioneered the early careers of important Minimal and Conceptual artists, such as Art & Language, Carl Andre, Daniel Buren, Donald Judd, John Latham, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long and Robert Ryman among many others. It still works with many of these artists as well as others of that generation from Carmen Herrera to the renowned estates of Leon Polk Smith, Ted Stamm and Roy Colmer. In its second decade the gallery introduced significant British sculptors to the public for the first time, including Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor, Shirazeh Houshiary and Julian Opie. Since 2000, the gallery has gone on to represent many more leading international artists such as Marina Abramović, Ai Weiwei, John Akomfrah, Susan Hiller, Tatsuo Miyajima and Sean Scully. It is also responsible for raising the international profile of a younger generation of artists led by Cory Arcangel, Nathalie Djurberg & Hans Berg, Ryan Gander, Haroon Mirza, Laure Prouvost, Pedro Reyes and Wael Shawky.

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