

Manuel Chavajay

Ja qattee ruach'ulew nu tz'ijoni / La Madre Tierra habla

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Nestled amidst towering volcanos, Lake Atitlan in Guatemala is home to numerous towns and villages that carry the cultural heritage of the Maya people. Along its shores, communities like the Tz'utujil have taken over the mission to continue their ancestral legacy, with Manuel Chavajay being one of these descendants. Reflecting on the sacredness of the place through its cosmogony, his work embodies a historic consciousness of indigenous identity, resonating with a resilient pursuit of independence and stability. Addressing spiritual, socio-economic, and environment concerns, his practice focus the urgent need to halt human disputes over the land, advocating for its respect and conservation. Manuel Chavajay's first solo exhibition at Pedro Cera, "Ja qattee ruach'ulew nu tz'ijoni", Tz'utujil for "Mother Earth Speaks", embodies the wellspring for this exploration, approaching the Earth as an entity with a voice speaking through the traditions, customs, and struggles of the indigenous people who inhabit it.

Stemming from ancestral practices rooted in the landscape, Chavajay's paintings, as the ones from the series "Hay días en que las montañas y los volcanes se acercan y se alejan" ("There are days when the mountains and volcanoes get closer and farther away"), portray the shores of Lake Atitlan and its encompassing beauty. Using watercolors infused with burned oil from engines, and embroidered details, Chavajay addresses a consciousness concerning nature and the detrimental impact of human actions on it. Inspired by the phenomenon where mountains and volcanoes seem to recede after a storm, depending on the perception of light and its intensity, the works explore the passage of time as a dance of unique and unrepeatable moments, a mirrored scenery reflecting a connection to the elements and to the Tz'utujil's legacy.

In this creative process, there exists a profound desire to encapsulate the immaterial energy of his customs. Used by the Maya to collect water on the shores of Lake Atitlan, clay pots were historically employed for dual purposes, both in ceremonial applications and burial rituals. Among these, the Kukuu preserved the inherited knowledge transmitted orally and through dreams, embodying the wisdom and richness of its ancestors. With the introduction of plastic in the 1940s and 1950s, contamination spread over the lands and artifacts, as a symbol of contemporary invasion extending to the Tz'utujil dialect. Blending ceramic with disposable materials, the Kukuu (2024) highlight the intersection of tradition with modern challenges, prompting a contemplation on the evolving relationship between heritage and the environmental impact of current habits.

Delving into the intricate wisdom of his patrimonial lineage, Chavajay practice nurtures a communication with the elements as a channel to an intuitive and empiric understanding of the world. The video "Ja jab' nub'an ch'ooj rukiin ja iq" ("The rain fights with the southern air") (2024) follows a boat drifting along the undulations of a quiet shoreline, bearing a neon sign written in Tz'utujil. From dawn to dusk, the work captures the passage of time and the relation of the Maya with nature, spotlighting a primordial adage symbolizing the arrival of the rainy season, urging respect for the mountains and volcanoes. Beckoning us to embark, the boat implies the enduring resilience of Mother Earth, as a contemplation regarding our place within the eternal rhythms of existence.

"Ru sook jab'" ("Rain nest") follows a similar visual vocabulary, resulting from a performance executed by Chavajay on the shores of Lake Atitlan, blending contemporary materials with ancient indigenous practices. The work encapsulates a harmonious convergence of past and

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present, resulting from marine engine oil, sourced from tourism transports, spread by Chavajay over a circular tarp. The title holds a profound significance, rooted in historical wisdom passed down through generations, speaking to the interplay of clouds obscuring the sun and the moon, resulting in the emergence of rainbows and subtle variations of light. Conceptually, this phenomenon is likened to a nest, an ancestral sanctuary where rain is nurtured and celebrated – a vital element to the cycle of life. Beginning with the sun as its center, the composition extends outward to encompass the tranquil waters of the lake, finally culminating in the dark remnants of petroleum oil. This arrangement symbolizes a profound symbiosis between nature’s rejuvenating powers and the enduring marks of human intervention, serving as a poignant commentary on the delicate balance of ecological harmony.

In Tz’utujil language, moments are confirmed through elemental forces, such as the air from the south (“Xoocomeel”) that comes to great and moves from sunrise to sunset. In the starry sky where his ancestors’ dwell, the moon shines over the mountains, protecting the lands, the waters and all the creatures living in them. Speaking through the elements, Mother Earth vibrates in-between the trees, the flowers, the pots, the animals, the fire and the air, spreading its messages through abstract channels. As a gathering of irreplaceable instants, life moves through the organic mysteries it carries, as an ever-moving entity. In a constant dialogue with the cosmos, Tz’utujil identity is deeply rooted in its ancestry, leading Manuel Chavajay to express a poetical force of vindication and preservation of the sacred landscapes and traditions of his culture.

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Manuel Chavajay (b.1982, San Pedro La Laguna, Guatemala) is a Tz’utujil Maya contemporary artist. His practice is influenced by the consequences of post-armed conflicts, addressing nature’s spirituality and energies, as well as indigenous’ wisdom. His work has been shown at the 35 Bienal São Paulo (Brazil); National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa, Canada); Kunsthalle Wien Museumplatz (Vienna, Austria); Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara (USA); Centre Pompidou, Paris; Bienal SIART, La Paz, Bolivia; International Biennial of Contemporary Art of Curitiba (Brazil) or La Bienal de Artes Visuales del Istmo Centroamericano (Guatemala, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, and El Salvador) among others. His works are part of the collections of Museo Ortiz Gudián (León, Nicaragua); Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (Madrid, Spain); Inter-American Development Bank, IBD (Washington DC, USA); National Museum of Ottawa (Canada), among others. “Q’Ab’At por el Lago de Atitlán, la ingeniería Ancestral” (2024) is Chavajay’s most recent solo project, promoted by the Association for the Integral Development of Tz’utujil Environmental Boatment (ASOLAN), consisting of the first floating sculpture on Lake Atitlan.