

VIAULT™

Australasian Art & Culture

ISSUE 47 · NOVEMBER 2024 to JANUARY 2025

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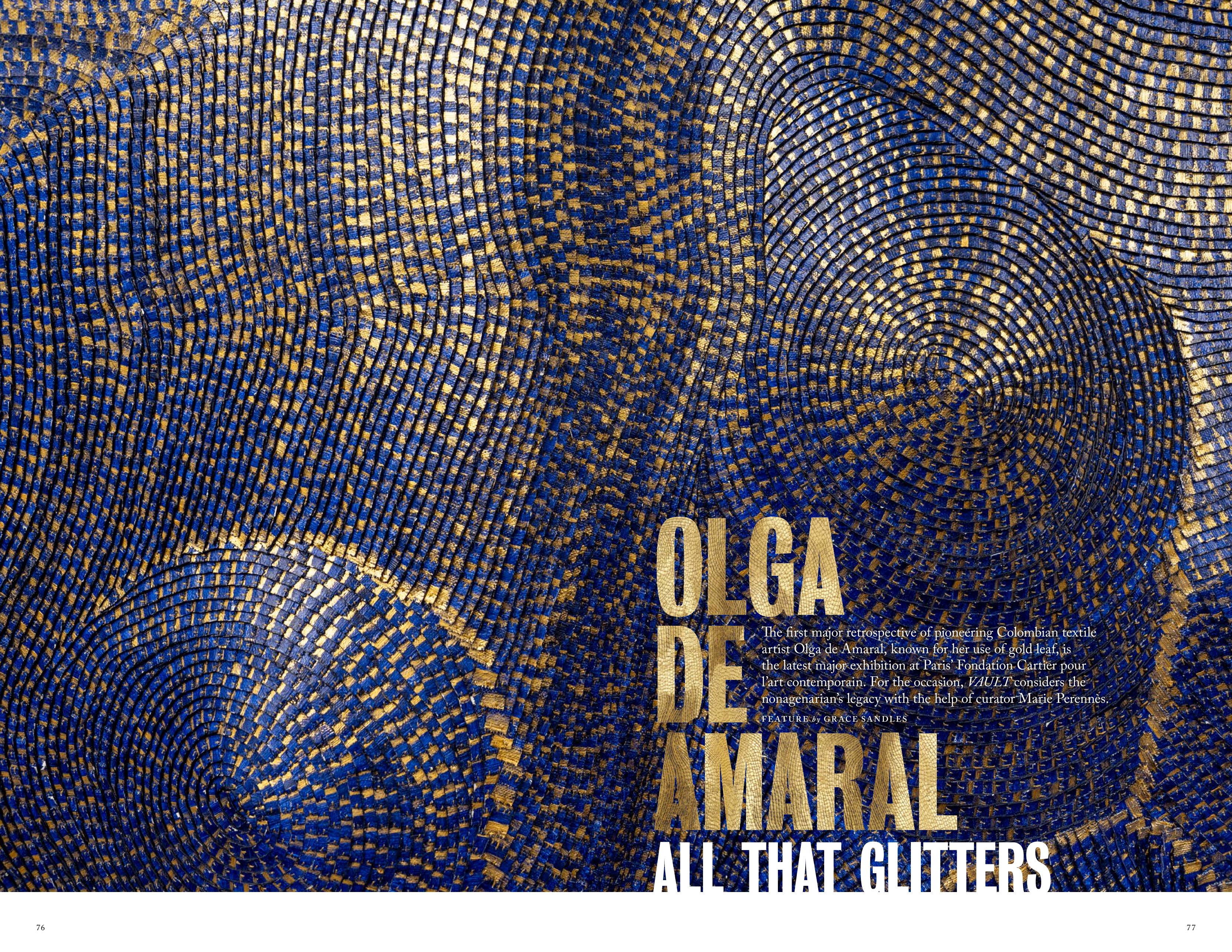
AUS \$24.95 NZ \$29.95

ISSN 2208-3057

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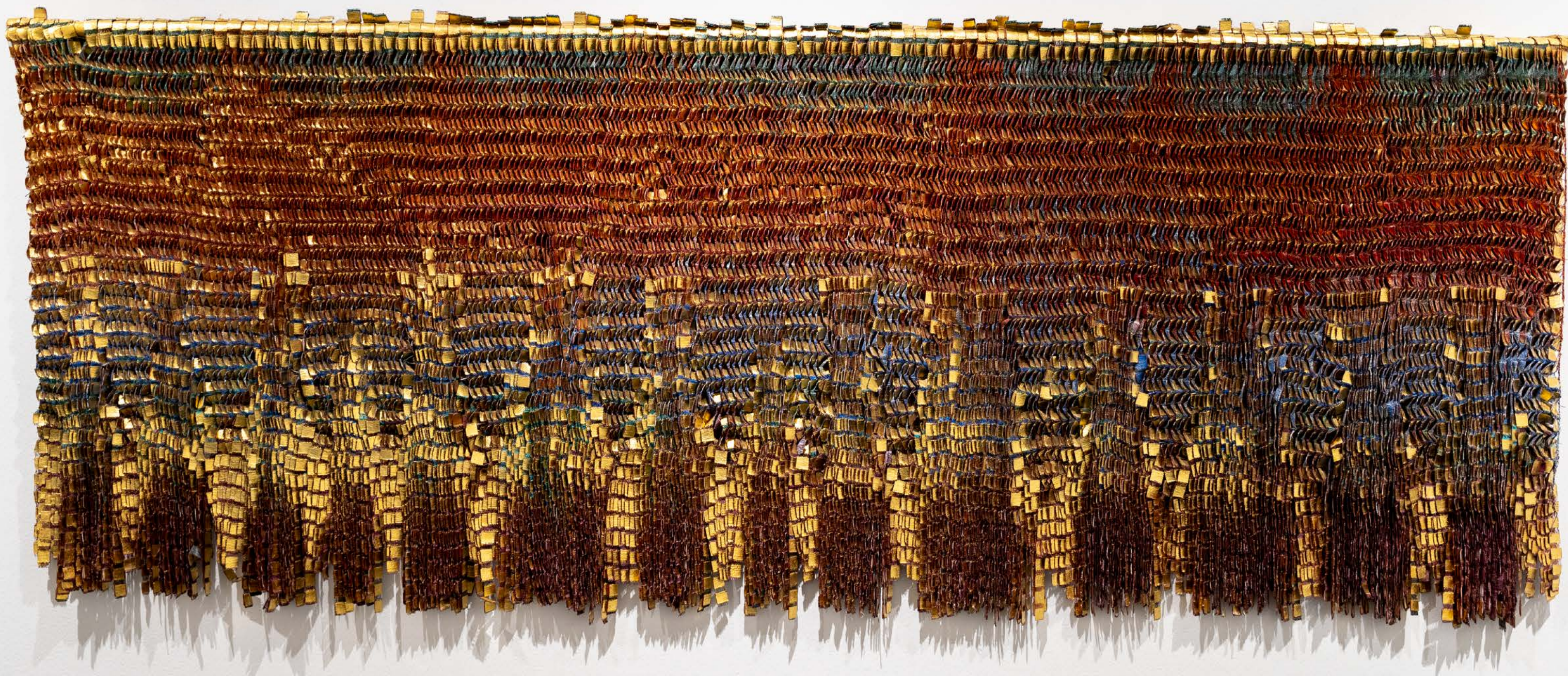


OLGA DE AMARAL

The first major retrospective of pioneering Colombian textile artist Olga de Amaral, known for her use of gold leaf, is the latest major exhibition at Paris' Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain. For the occasion, *VAULT* considers the nonagenarian's legacy with the help of curator Marie Perennès.

FEATURE *by* GRACE SANDLES

ALL THAT GLITTERS



“She travelled a lot,” explains Perennès, “but she was always based in Bogotá because she was so influenced by the craft of the Indigenous community of the country – by the pre-Colombian art, obviously, but also by the landscape, the elements and the structure of Bogotá.”



Olga de Amaral is an alchemist; she paints shapes in space with thread. Her art is a triumph of geometry, spiritualism and the phenomenology of colour, rooted in the centuries-old Andean traditions of weaving and handicrafts dating back to the pre-Columbian era. A pioneer among textile and Latin American artists, de Amaral has enjoyed a cosmopolitan existence, living at various times in the United States and Paris before returning to live and work in her native Bogotá.

Born in 1932 in Bogotá, de Amaral grew up in the tradition-rich central district of Teusaquillo. She first studied architectural drawing in Bogotá and then, in the 1950s, relocated to the United States to study at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan just “as The Violence [*La Violencia*, a ten-year conflict between the Liberal and Conservative political parties of Colombia] increased in Bogotá and in Colombia.” This early education had a lasting effect on the young artist’s

life both personally – it was in Michigan that she met the Portuguese-American artist Jim Amaral, who she would go on to marry – and professionally. “Cranbrook is very close to the Black Mountain College,” explains curator Marie Perennès, “where there is a very strong Bauhaus philosophy. She studied their textile design for industrial purposes; her career started in textile design practice for furniture and automobiles, and when she returned to Bogotá that practice allowed her to live and start a studio.”

What Olga de Amaral calls her “basic units” are strips of interwoven linen (one of her favourite materials) and cotton (materially ‘pure’, a concept that arises at many points in her practice.) In the 1960s she began experimenting with techniques while working vertically with a high warp loom, appropriating the modernist grid and introducing the geometric elements that became a signature of her practice. She began experimenting in earnest with

Above
OLGA DE AMARAL
Memorias 3, 2011
Photo: Juan Daniel Caro
© Olga de Amaral
Courtesy Galeria La Cometa,
Bogotá

Opposite
Olga de Amaral
Casa Amaral, Bogotá 2024
Photo: Juan Daniel Caro

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OLGA DE AMARAL
Cenit (detail), 2019
Photo: Juan Daniel Caro
© Olga de Amaral



Above
OLGA DE AMARAL
Bruma T, 2014
linen, gesso, acrylic,
Japanese paper and wood
205 x 90 x 190 cm
Photo: Juan Daniel Caro
© Olga de Amaral
Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Opposite
OLGA DE AMARAL
Círculo V-VI (diptique), 2004
Photo: Juan Daniel Caro
© Olga de Amaral
Courtesy Galería La Cometa,
Bogotá, Colombia



OLGA DE AMARAL
*Bruma T, Bruma Q,
Bruma R*, 2014
linen, gesso, acrylic,
Japanese paper and wood
205 x 90 x 190 cm,
205 x 90 x 190 cm,
205 x 90 x 190 cm
© Olga de Amaral
Courtesy Lisson Gallery



dimensionality and texture, scale and size. “At the same time,” notes Perennès, “she was also playing with materiality and technique. Obviously she used the loom, but she also intertwined braids and knots and then added paint, applied gesso and acrylic, and brought in horsehair and palladium. At the end of the ’60s, she radically used plastic for a beautiful piece titled *Luz Blanca*. It’s as interesting as it is beautiful because plastic was at that time the symbol of modernism, whereas nowadays it’s associated with the pollution of the oceans. But she really used every kind of material she had around.”

In 1968, as Colombia’s representative at the World Crafts Council, de Amaral travelled to Peru, the cradle of ancient Incan civilisation. She visited Machu Picchu, where pre-Columbian trails radiate across the Andes; Cuzco, once the continent’s capital; and Lima, where the Gold Museum of Peru made a deep impression. Soon afterwards, in 1970, she encountered the Japanese *kintsugi* technique – the tradition of repairing cracked pottery with gold – in the studio of a friend, the British ceramicist Lucie Rie. It’s no surprise, then, that in the following decades she began to incorporate gold leaf into her works – one series of such works, collectively titled *Alquimias* (*Alchemies*), was started in 1983 and today numbers nearly 140 pieces. In many ways, her work with gold leaf recalls plundered pre-Columbian gold, medieval icon illuminations and the baroque Catholic altarpieces she encountered attending Mass growing up. In other works, the gold becomes a mode of ritualising personal worship of this pure and precious metal with its simultaneous earthly and celestial profundity – the sun itself shines out of the *Estelas* (*Stelae*) works.

Awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship in 1973, Paris was de Amaral’s next destination, the heart of the avant-garde and the birthplace of Impressionism, a movement she references in the immediacy, fleeting moments and ephemerality of light in works such as *Adherencia Natural* (*Natural Adherence*, 1973) and *Riscos* (*Cliffs*, 1987). Yet even then, it was her native Andean landscape that held her imagination in thrall. “She travelled a lot,” explains Perennès, “but she was always based in Bogotá because she was so influenced by the craft of the Indigenous community of the country – by the pre-Colombian art, obviously, but also by the landscape, the elements and the structure of Bogotá.”

de Amaral has a laudable talent prized among abstract artists of distilling the features of her home – its mountains, the sun, rivers – into simple geometric shapes without compromising the spiritual connection that flows between the landscape and its inhabitants. It would be remiss not to point readers here towards her *Brumas* (*Mists*, 2013). Hanging threads falling like showers of condensation are suspended in space by a wooden support that is navigated from different angles. In this way, you can glimpse the line and the colour field as well as, adds Perennès, the “circle, triangle, square, all the motifs [that] came from the vision of pre-Columbian textile art.”

“I think she participated in the Fibre Art revolution alongside Annie Albers and Sheila Hicks,” notes Perennès. “She was one of the first, along with Magdalena Abakanowicz, for instance, to decide to free the textile from the wall and to put it into space. From a three-dimensional perspective, this allowed people to circle the work; the trajectory of the visitor

changed. That was a real revolution because, at first, textiles were only used as furniture or to decorate walls. So, they had to submit to the dimensionality of the wall. Overthrowing that was one of the most important revolutions in textile art and abstraction at the beginning of the second half of the 20th century.” **V**

Olga de Amaral is showing at Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain, Paris from October 12, 2024 to March 16, 2025; and *Olga de Amaral: Everything is Construction and Colour* continues at the Currier Museum of Art, Manchester, New Hampshire until January 12, 2025. Olga de Amaral is represented by Lisson Gallery, London, New York, Los Angeles, Beijing and Shanghai. lissongallery.com

Above, from left to right in the foreground
OLGA DE AMARAL
Floresta A, 2017
Floresta D, 2017
Poblado G, 2015
Décimo X, 2015
Umbra 59, 2014
Nébulas, 2014–18
Dos columnas móviles, 1985
Dos mitades 7, 2014
Installation view, Casa Amaral, Bogotá
Photo: Juan Daniel Caro
© Olga de Amaral

Opposite
OLGA DE AMARAL
Bruma D1, 2018
linen, gesso, acrylic,
Japanese paper and wood
205 x 90 x 190 cm
Photo: Juan Daniel Caro
© Olga de Amaral
Courtesy Lisson Gallery

