

VAVULTTM

Australasian Art & Culture



SURREALISM ISSUE 47 · AUGUST to OCTOBER 2024

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AUS \$24.95 NZ \$29.95



CATALYST

CECILIA VICUÑA

The 59th Venice Biennale in 2022, curated by Cecilia Alemani, was titled *The Milk of Dreams*, drawing its name from British-Mexican Surrealist Leonora Carrington's eponymous book. The Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement went to Cecilia Vicuña, whose 1977 *Bendígame Mamita* was quite literally the poster work for the world's oldest and most prestigious art festival. *VAULT* looks at the life and art of the groundbreaking, multi-disciplinary artist.

WRITTEN *by* GRACE SANDLES



CECILIA VICUÑA
Obstructing the Doors is Dangerous and Causes Delays, 1972/2023
oil on canvas
101.6 x 76.2 cm
© Cecilia Vicuña. ARS/
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Courtesy the artist and
Xavier Hufkens, Brussels

Entering her late 70s, Cecilia Vicuña was born as Surrealism reached its zenith – roughly at its midpoint, if we take the dates generally accepted to define the movement. Indeed, she was born at a time when the social activist spirit of the avant-garde in general, and Surrealism in particular, was at its most energised – between the world wars and during the rise of authoritarianism in Europe. The decade of her birth, the 1940s, was the decade Surrealism looked outside its traditional epicentres of Paris and New York and embraced Latin America and pre-Columbian mythologies, or vice versa. In 1940, the fourth International Exhibition of Surrealism was staged in Mexico City, featuring the work of both Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. By halfway through the decade, the city was home to an active circle of European emigrés fleeing the Nazis, including Antonin Artaud, Benjamin Péret and the ‘three witches’ – Leonora Carrington, Kati Horna and Remedios Varo.

Further south, Vicuña was born in 1948 into a family of artists and writers in Santiago de Chile. After the military coup against then-President Salvador Allende in 1973, she went into self-exile. Initially going to London and cofounding Artists for Democracy in 1974, she now splits her time between New York and her homeland. A surrealist in the most fundamental senses – literary, imaginative, nostalgic, socially engaged – Vicuña is a poet, artist, activist and filmmaker.

Her work is noted for its efforts to decolonise the oil tradition and reclaim the ancient, Indigenous knowledges of her homeland. In the mid-1960s, she coined the term ‘Arte Precario’ in reference to a new, independent, non-colonised category of art. This included her small-scale, found-object sculptures and debris-composed *basuritas*, somewhat in the dadaist vein, as well as her *quipus*, which reinvent the ancient Andean system of ‘non-writing’ using knots. These works

Even when she paints, she does so with the revolutionary spirit of the textile tradition and its many feminist and anticolonial histories.



CECILIA VICUÑA
Leopardo de Ojitos, 1977
oil on canvas
141 x 90 cm
Private collection
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Courtesy the artist and
Lehmann Maupin, New
York, Hong Kong, Seoul
and London

bridge her written and visual practices, existing as poems in space.

But it's in her paintings that her surrealist stylings are most recognisable. Eluding easy categorisation within the traditional media hierarchy, her compositions are often reminiscent of South American folk art *arpilleras*, collaborative patchwork wall hangings created to disseminate information and denounce dictatorship. Even when she paints, she does so with the revolutionary spirit of the textile tradition and its many feminist and anticolonial histories.

Familiar with surrealist writings and poetry since childhood, Vicuña's painting is most directly related to the movement's practitioners. She describes walking down the street in New York in about 1969 and visualising a painting in her mind – somewhat akin to a decalcomania, a favourite technique of the surrealists and from which she derived the term ‘calcomanía’. Vicuña was taught to transfer her visualised images to the canvas by Leonora Carrington, with whom she stayed for some time in Mexico City. The naïve style she developed – often dismissed as ‘folkloric’ early on – was surrealist, not by intention but in its mining of mythology and rejection of a ‘high art versus popular art’ mentality. Consider, for instance, the work of Frida Kahlo.

Vicuña's marvellous *pinturas* – which deal with memory, language, ecological disaster and human rights – are populated by political, personal and literary figures, *cadavre exquis*-esque part-human hybrids and giant pumas. These ubiquitous icons and the many

uncanny details of her works stand in place of the angels and saints marauding across the 16th-century paintings Latin American Indigenous artists were forced to paint for the Catholic Church after Spanish conquest.

For a long time, Vicuña stopped the painting practice she picked up during her time in exile, and many of her works from the 1970s have been lost or forgotten. Luckily, since 2017 she has once again begun weaving fantastical, confectionary-coloured creations and bringing many pieces of her lost oeuvre back from memory. **V**

Asir la vida. Mujeres artistas en Chile 1965–1990 continues at Museo Nacional Bellas Artes in Santiago, Chile, until September 29, 2024.
mnba.gob.cl
Cecilia Vicuña is represented by Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York and Galería Patricia Ready, Santiago.
ceciliavicuna.com
lehmannmaupin.com
galeriapready.cl