

Waterweavers: The River in Contemporary Colombian Visual and Material Culture

On View April 11–August 10, 2014



Waterweavers: The River in Contemporary Colombian Visual and Material Culture

Using the trope of the river as a conceptual device to explore the intersections in Colombian contemporary culture between art, craft, and design, *Waterweavers* reveals the intricate ways in which culture and nature can intertwine across disciplines. Curated by José Roca, Estrellita B. Brodsky Adjunct Curator of Latin American Art at Tate Modern and Artistic Director of FLORA ars+natura in Bogotá, with the assistance of independent writer and editor Alejandro Martín, the exhibition presents textiles, ceramics, graphic design, furniture, video, and installations to address a concept informed by social, political, and ecological strife in Colombia: the river.

Background

In Colombia, a country whose complex topography has historically meant that waterways were often the sole means of transportation between communities, rivers have both united and separated. The works in this exhibition reference seven rivers: Amazon, Bogotá, Cahuinarí, Cauca, Magdalena, Putumayo, and Ranchería.

Today, when a majority of the population lives in cities, rivers continue to serve as the sole access to remote areas and to play a new role as the axis for a different type of economics: the black market that fuels the armed conflict that has plagued Colombia for decades.

Waterweavers addresses these issues from very different points of view, presenting a territory laden with conflict while showing the creative output that nevertheless thrives in the midst of—or in response to—hardship. Rather than isolating objects from their domestic or ritual contexts and then re-contextualizing them in the gallery space using photographs, maps, and other media, as is conventionally done in ethnographic or design museums, this exhibition allows the visual and material force of the objects to provide their own contextual information. Thus, for example, video installations show the rivers and violence-afflicted territories of Colombia, while furniture, textiles, and other objects provide the materiality of specific places in various forms: fibers dyed with pigments using traditional production techniques

On View
April 11–August 10, 2014



Alberto Baraya (b. 1968).
Rio (River), 2005. Video
installation. Courtesy
of the artist.

and motifs, textiles that mix industrial and natural materials, lamps woven from discarded plastic bottles, chairs constructed with bamboo roots, and piled clay rolls resembling a riverbed, among others.

The distinctive and intimate spaces of the Bard Graduate Center (BGC) Gallery will provide the backdrop for a series of displays that emerge from a curatorial strategy Roca calls “figure/ground,” with immersive environments presented on the wall framing more sculptural pieces at the center of each room. Unexpected juxtapositions will create a critical and conceptual friction between works and practices that are seldom shown together.

Nina Stritzler-Levine, Director of the BGC Gallery, explains: “We chose to work with José Roca in conjunction with the BGC’s twentieth anniversary as a way to expand our exhibition program in the contemporary field. José brings great insights into contemporary Colombian visual and material culture.” *Waterweavers* will be on view with *Carrying Coca*, a Focus Gallery exhibition about *chuspas*, woven bags used in Andean communities to carry coca leaves.

The Exhibition

Visitors entering *Waterweavers* will first encounter a large textile by Olga de Amaral, a pioneer of fiber art in Latin America. Entitled *Luz blanca (White Light, 1969)*, it is an early piece made with shimmering plastic that evokes a waterfall. Amaral, who has long referenced pre-Hispanic weaving traditions, myths, and motifs, presents another work, *Nudo azul XIII (Blue Knot XIII, 2012)*, a thick strand of fibers joined together by a single symbolic knot. Adjacent to this work will be *Color Amazonia* (2006–13), an installation that resulted from seven years of ethno-botanical research on natural pigments in the Colombian Amazon jungle by an interdisciplinary team led by artist Susana Mejía. Consisting of papers and fibers dyed with natural pigments and monotypes using the plants themselves, this installation will cover two walls and the ceiling of the first-floor gallery. Tinted fibers made of *fique* (a plant native to the Andean regions) will hang from the ceiling, mimicking the way they were originally left to dry in the jungle. *Color Amazonia* will be placed at the beginning of the exhibition in part because of its vivid handling of three basic aspects of design: color, texture, and material. It will also introduce the theme of the natural environment of the Amazon river, particularly the plants that grow along its riverbanks and the natural fibers and pigments that are used by communities alongside it. Through these fibers, visitors will see the first video in the exhibition, a striking floor-to-ceiling projection by Alberto Baraya called *Río (River, 2005)*. Created while Baraya accompanied an army patrol ship on the Amazon and Putumayo rivers, the video captures the troubling world of contrasts that is the river environment of Colombia. A work of great poetic and political resonance, *Río* depicts the



Susana Mejía (b. 1978).
Tinted *fique* fibers drying
in the Amazon, from
Color Amazonia, 2006–2013.
Courtesy of the artist.

Susana Mejía (b. 1978).
Tinted paper, from
Color Amazonia, 2006–2013.
Courtesy of the artist.



massive rivers that serve as the primary tributaries for drug trafficking and, in the absence of a strong state, as home for the guerrilla groups that control the turbulent outlying territories.

Connections and distinctions between indigenous, traditional, and contemporary practices are revealed on the second floor of the exhibition. The landing gallery will be devoted to a series of works on paper by one of Colombia's foremost graphic designers, David Consuegra, who in the late 1960s conducted research on graphic motifs in pre-Hispanic artifacts and indigenous communities that resulted in a new typographical vocabulary with references to water, weaving, fauna, and flora. Consuegra's drawings, prints, and books will be shown together with the work of Tangrama, one of Colombia's most successful graphic design studios and the collective endeavor of artists Mónica Páez, Margarita García, and Nicolás Consuegra. Tangrama will produce wallpaper designs and an interactive application based on David Consuegra's pioneering research.

Video installations of rivers continue on the second floor with *Weaving Time* (2014) by Monika Bravo, a work consisting of several synchronized floor-to-ceiling projections that will show the digital weaving of a traditional pattern of the Arhuaco people, a cultural group native to the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta region along the Caribbean coast of Colombia. Bravo's work underlines the analogy between programming and weaving. She bases her work in part on the well-known fact that both the traditional weaving loom and Joseph Marie Jacquard's original automated loom, which used punched cards to store information on patterns, served as inspirations for the first computer, Charles Babbage's 1837 Analytical Machine. Working from a mathematical analysis of how Arhuaco women create their patterns, Bravo replicates their designs by constructing the textile



David Consuegra (1939–2004). Freehand drawing with logo of the Museum of Modern Art, Bogotá, 1966. Ink on paper. Courtesy of the David Consuegra Archive.

digitally, using pixels as her “threads.” The resulting pattern eventually morphs into the landscape of the Sierra.

In the center of this space will be a series of *Corocora* stools (1993) designed by Ceci Arango and handwoven by women of the Guacamayas community in Colombia, who use a traditional spiral-basket-weaving technique whereby a core of *esparto* fibers (a plant that grows in lakes and lagoons) is wrapped in fine *fique* threads. What results are highly sculptural seating forms, which will be used as stools in the gallery.

Shared references to indigenous flora and fauna, manifestations of the connection between local identities and contemporary practices, are also prominent in the exhibition. Hanging on two opposite walls of the second-floor north gallery will be two series of “botanical plates,” one devoted to Alberto Baraya’s ongoing project *Herbario de plantas artificiales* (*Herbarium of Artificial Plants*, 2002–present), and the other to Abel Rodríguez’s drawings of the cycles of the rainforest. Baraya’s project consists of collecting artificial flowers and plants from all over the world and classifying them in the manner of a botanist. The meticulously detailed botanical drawings by Rodríguez, a member of the Nonuya people in the Caquetá river region, were produced in collaboration with Tropenbos International, a Dutch NGO concerned with the preservation of tropical ecosystems worldwide. Rodríguez’s drawings, all of which are from 2009–10, depict the monthly cycle of the flooded rainforest and include a large tree that symbolizes the origin of life for the peoples in the Amazon jungle. The drawings both visualize and preserve ancestral knowledge that is otherwise handed down via oral tradition. The works that occupy the center of this space by Rodríguez and Baraya respectively suggest contrasting interpretations of nature. A fish trap with a complex structure woven by Rodríguez from *yaré*

fibers in 2013 captures the beauty of natural materials and evokes the functional logic of a traditional form, while Baraya’s shroud-like latex cast of a tree historically tapped for rubber conveys how the relentless search for natural resources has ravaged the country’s landscape. Made in the Amazon as part of Baraya’s *Proyecto del árbol de caucho* (*Rubber Tree Project*, 2005) with the aid of former rubber tappers, the tree cast features scars that both recall the herringbone pattern widely used in Western textile design and suggest those left on the social fabric by decades of exploitation of land and peoples during the rubber booms of the late-nineteenth century and World War II.

Clemencia Echeverri’s *Treno* (2007), a two-channel video installation depicting a tumultuous river, will be displayed in the third-floor south gallery. The title of the work is an ancient expression for “funeral chant” and refers to mythical associations regarding the role of the river as the threshold between life and death and as the vessel for the last voyage. This metaphorical reference finds new meaning when one is confronted with the reality of the political situation in the Colombian countryside, where bodies of the casualties of war are dumped in rivers, eliminating for their relatives any possibility of achieving closure. Chairs by Marcelo Villegas made over the past twenty years will be placed in the center of the gallery as a resting place for visitors. Villegas is an architect from Manizales in central Colombia who is known for his large-scale buildings and bridges constructed of bamboo. These highly expressionistic chairs are made with the

Alberto Baraya (b. 1968). *Proyecto del árbol de caucho* (*Rubber Tree Project*), 2005. Rubber. Courtesy of the artist.



Alvaro Catalán de Ocón (b. 1975).
PET Lamps, 2013. Recycled plastic,
metal. Courtesy of the artist.



roots of *guadua*, a local variety of bamboo that can grow to considerable heights, and the Nato tree. Bamboo's rhizomatic growth expands in territory and mimics rivers in its endless bifurcations and connections.

On the third-floor landing, connections between craft and contemporary ethical design will be featured in the work of Lucy Salamanca and Alvaro Catalán de Ocón. Salamanca is a Colombian designer based in Italy whose involvement in several rural communities in Colombia has led her to help them to archive, preserve, and enhance local craft techniques. Working worldwide for fair trade and sustainable design, Salamanca is committed to an ethical attitude where a fair price is paid for practices that do not use child or forced labor, pay decent wages, and are environmentally sustainable. Products are made using traditional methods and fair-trade certified materials and processes. Salamanca goes beyond formal design by working with communities to establish sustainable business models for craft-production. The exhibition includes furniture utilizing *guadua* bamboo and *fique* fiber first made in 2010–11 in collaboration with the community of Curití in northeast Colombia.

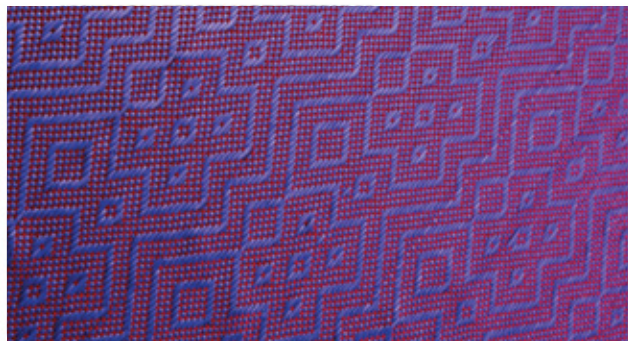
A group of lamps from the *PET Lamp* project woven in 2013 by the Guambiano community hangs from the ceiling of this space. *PET Lamp* grew out of an initiative of Spanish designer Alvaro Catalán de Ocón, who was invited to Colombia to provide a model for recycling the plastic bottles that pollute rivers worldwide. Relying on weaving techniques and patterns traditionally used by the Guambiano and Eperara-Siapidara communities to create baskets and textiles, Catalán devised a system whereby the discarded bottles are slit vertically and the resulting threads are woven into unique lamps, extending the use cycle of this ubiquitous object by linking it to tradition.

Works that evoke materiality and the persistence of traditional craft methods will be juxtaposed in the third-floor north gallery. Jorge Lizarazo, who created the workshop Hechizoo in 2000, seeks to reinterpret indigenous Colombian weaving methods, materials, and techniques. Lizarazo has established himself as one of the foremost creators of contemporary textiles, deftly incorporating tradition and modernity. The installation

consists of textiles, a large rug, and a freestanding rubber and copper tree, along with a canoe from the Putumayo region, clad in glass beads (all from 2013–14). Normally used to create necklaces and bracelets, the beads are composed in traditional patterns representing water, sky, and animals. The canoe, which was formerly used by a local community to carry their coca crop, will hang from the ceiling.

On the opposite wall in the same gallery, Carol Young's installation *Memoria* (*Memory*, 2014) will be displayed. Made with ceramic sheets that have been rolled and stacked, this work highlights the way in which earth, in this case alluvial deposits, can act as a repository of memory. Young's installation is at the same time a territory, a river, and a library in which time is encapsulated and knowledge is stored. Linking these two works will be Nicolás Consuegra's multichannel video installation *El agua que tocas es la última que ha pasado y la primera que viene* (*The Water That You Touch Is the Last of What Has Passed and the First of That Which Comes*, 2013), which is conceived as a contemporary version of the panorama—a pre-cinematic device intended to provide an expansive view of a given landscape. In Consuegra's work, vignettes taken in different places and times of day in the town of Honda—once the main port on the Magdalena river and currently a downtrodden community where poverty, unemployment, and environmental deterioration prevail—are connected by the impassive river, indifferent to the miseries it links. This epic tale of Colombia's main river is recounted through mute images of idleness and despair.

Jorge Lizarazo/Hechizoo (b. 1968).
Walking Jade area rug, 2013.
Nylon monofilament and metal.
Courtesy of the artist and
Cristina Grajales Gallery, NY.



The final piece in the exhibition, the video *Untitled* (1993) by Juan Fernando Herrán, will serve as a conceptual bridge between *Waterweavers* and *Carrying Coca*, the Focus Gallery exhibition on the fourth floor. Consisting of a close-up of a man sculpting grass into a perfect round ball by chewing it, this troubling representation references the age-old tradition of *mambo*, the chewing of coca leaves in order to gain strength and stamina to work in high altitudes, a ritual practice common to many indigenous cultures along the Andes. Memory, myth, and matter coalesce in Herrán's video and provide a fitting prologue to *Carrying Coca*.

Publication

The exhibition catalogue, *Waterweavers: A Chronicle of Rivers*, will feature a selection of visual and textual narratives about Colombian rivers across time, including an essay by the co-curators addressing the river in contemporary Colombian visual and material culture, illustrations of works by the seventeen artists in the exhibition, and excerpts from literary and historical texts, many published for the first time in English, by such acclaimed Colombian authors as Fernando Zalamea, Tomás Gonzalez, Héctor Abad, and Alfredo Molano. Renowned graphic designer Irma Boom will design the book. Boom's previous work includes two BGC catalogues, *Sheila Hicks: Weaving as Metaphor* (2006), a title honored as "The Most Beautiful Book in the World" at the Leipzig Book Fair, and *Knoll Textiles, 1945–2010* (2011), which also received numerous accolades.

Gallery Guide

A gallery guide in the form of an artist project will feature the work of María Isabel Rueda. She will create a series of drawings based on *La Llorona* (the crying woman), a popular myth in Colombia about the origin of the rivers. The guide will also contain interpretative texts that will follow the curatorial narrative, guiding the public through the exhibition.

Gallery Programs

Lectures, study days, gallery talks, and conversations are offered in conjunction with the exhibition. For more information, please call 212-501-3011 or e-mail programs@bgc.bard.edu.

Exhibition Tours

Group exhibition tours for adult and school groups are offered Tuesday through Friday between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. and Thursday until 7 p.m. Reservations are required for all groups. To schedule a tour, please call 212-501-3013 or e-mail tours@bgc.bard.edu.

The Bard Graduate Center Gallery is located in New York City at 18 West 86th Street, between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Thursday from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. The admission fee is \$7 general, \$5 senior and students (valid ID); admission is free Thursday evenings after 5 p.m.

For information about the Bard Graduate Center and upcoming exhibitions, please visit bgc.bard.edu.

Support

Waterweavers: The River in Contemporary Colombian Visual and Material Culture has been generously supported by Vivian Haime Barg, Alberto Mugrabi, and Leon Tovar Gallery.

For press information and images, please e-mail press@bgc.bard.edu or call 212.501.3074.