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A River Runs Through It: The Amazon as Inspiration 'Waterweavers,' and 'Carrying Coca' at Bard Graduate Center

By HOLLAND COTTER JULY 10, 2014



"Waterweavers": Lamps created by Indians from recycled plastic bottles in a workshop established by Alvaro Catalán de Ocón, shown at the Bard Graduate Center. Credit Bruce White/Bard Graduate Center Gallery

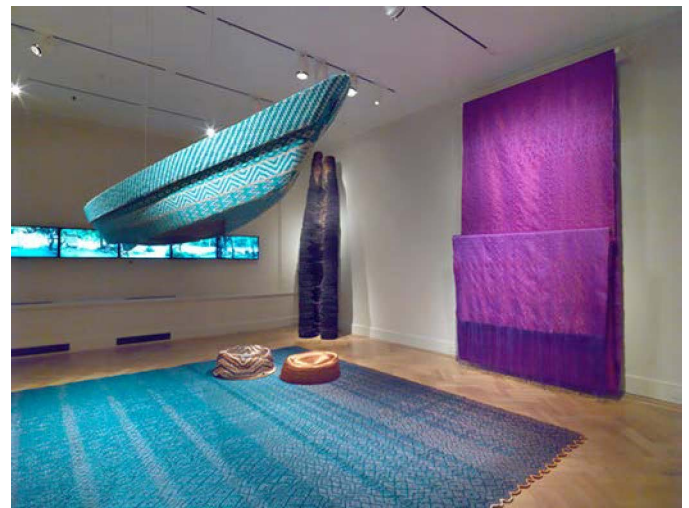
"Waterweavers: The River in Contemporary Colombian Visual Arts and Material Culture" at the Bard Graduate Center is the most unassumingly beautiful show I've seen in New York this summer. And with its glades of abstract patterning, eddying pools of woven fiber, and projected images of water sluicing through galleries, it's visually the coolest.

It's the first exhibition of contemporary art in eight years at an institution known for its scholarly examinations of historical, often Western, decorative arts and design. (A second, smaller show on view now, "Carrying Coca: 1,500 Years of Andean Chuspas," is closer to that model.)

And it was assembled fast, in less than a year, after an unexpected change in schedule. Winging it can produce magic; it did here.

Organized by José Roca, artistic director of Flora ars+natura in Bogotá, and the Colombian writer Alejandro Martín and atmospherically installed on three floors of the center's townhouse, the show has a distinctive texture and tone. Its mix of poetry, politics and everyday

recalls the "magical realist" style attributed to the novels of Gabriel García Márquez, that great lover and traveler of Colombia's waterways.



Jorge Lizarazo's "Walking Jade" area rug; "Wouna and Woun" stools; "Tree Surgeon"; "Jade Textile," on wall; and a wood-carved canoe covered with glass beads that was built by the Inga people for Mr. Lizarazo; at the back, a video installation by Nicolás Consuegra. Credit Bruce White/Bard Graduate Center Gallery

"Florentino Ariza was surprised by the changes, and would be even more surprised the following day, when navigation became more difficult, and he realized that the Magdalena, father of waters, one of the great rivers of the world, was only an illusion of memory."

The words are from García Márquez's 1985 novel, "Love in the Time of Cholera," in which a character revisits, by boat, a grand waterway that had enchanted him decades earlier but was now unrecognizable, its forests leveled, its wildlife gone, its waters choked with trash.

In "Waterweavers," nature is seen as vulnerable but also infused with hallucinatory vitality. The show opens with a kind of apparition, a layered white weaving by the Bogotá artist Olga de Amaral that foams down a wall like a cataract. Titled "Luz Blanca (White Light)," its laciness

is both fine and plain: The piece is woven entirely from hundreds of plastic bags, of a kind that García Márquez envisioned littering his riverine vistas.



Susana Mejia's "Color Amazonia." Credit Bruce White/Bard Graduate Center Gallery

The gallery beyond is contrastingly dark. Sheets of paper, tinted in rich earth tones, cover three walls; a suspended overhead rack hung with dried plant fiber forms a low ceiling. In the context of the show, the installation, titled "Color Amazonia," is art. In the mind of its creator, the painter turned ethnobotanist Susana Mejia, it's material evidence of the seven years she spent with indigenous communities along the Amazon studying their use of brilliant vegetable dyes.

The river itself — in this case an Amazon tributary, the Rio Putumayo — is the subject of a floor-to-ceiling video projected onto the gallery's fourth wall. It was shot by Alberto Baraya while he was on a research trip down the Putumayo in 2004. Mostly, we see almost unchanging stretches of slow-moving water, its surface suddenly broken by little explosions. Mr. Baraya was a paying passenger on a military patrol boat sent by the Colombian government to hunt down guerrillas in rural areas accessible only by water. In documenting the terrain, he was coincidentally documenting a country's long and continuing history of armed conflict. As he filmed the Putumayo, soldiers used it for rifle practice.

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Upstairs, in an immersive video installation by Clemencia Echeverri, the river itself is violent, surging and roping around us as it swallows up the bodies of people killed in turf battles and drug wars or otherwise "disappeared."

Here, landscape is incidental; water is all, overwhelming. It is also, everywhere, versatile as a symbol. In yet another video, by Monika Bravo, water is a life force, whether found in cosmological images in native weaving, photographs of the Amazon, or in abstract digital, all of which Ms. Bravo folds together.



Marcelo Villegas's "Doble Curva" chairs, around 1990, and Clemencia Echeverri's "Treno" video installation (2007). Credit Bruce White/Bard Graduate Center Gallery

This interdependency of nature and culture is one of the exhibition's overarching themes. Sometimes the merger is clear cut. Bentwood chairs made from native bamboo tree roots by the architect Marcelo Villegas have the ornamental heft of Byzantine thrones, yet carry unmistakable marks of their forest origins. The artist Abel Rodriguez, a member of the Nonuya indigenous group, does ink-and-watercolor drawings of rivers and rain forests for a Dutch conservation group, Tropenbos International. Commissioned as scientific studies, the pictures are phenomenal. From afar they look like Pointillist fantasies. But they prove to be thick with concrete details so minutely observed and nuanced that photographs could not capture them.

In Mr. Rodriguez's art, the line between traditional and contemporary is fluid. This is also true of the hanging lamps created by Indian basket weavers from recycled plastic bottles in a workshop established by the Spanish designer Alvaro Catalán de Ocón, incorporating traditional designs. Textiles produced by Jorge Lizarazo combine conventional fibers like jute, linen and silk with copper wire, glass rods and other industrial materials, to scintillating effect.

A few years ago, Mr. Lizarazo hired members of the rural Inga community to integrate colored beadwork, their

cialty, into his designs. The transfer of an old art form into a new setting was a success. But no culture has a corner on innovation. When he wanted to buy a traditional wood-carved Inga canoe, the owners agreed but insisted on covering the boat's exterior with beading. The unheard-of project took six months of steady labor to complete; the boat, with its resplendent surface, is in the show.



Two works by Olga de Amaral, “Nudo Azul XIII (Blue Knot XIII),” from 2012; and “Luz Blanca (White Light),” from 1969. Credit Bruce White/Bard Graduate Center Gallery

David Consuegra (1939-2004), one of Colombia's best-known graphic artists, had a Western Modernist art training in the United States. (He went to Yale.) But after returning to Bogotá, he turned his attention to local history and developed abstract designs derived from decorative patterns on pre-Hispanic metalwork. Using this hybrid visual language, he created logos for some of Colombia's leading cultural institutions and, in a steady flow over several decades, established a national graphic identity.

His career was highly influential; his influence is still current; his work is being retooled and rethought by younger artists. Three of them — Mónica Páez, Margarita García and Nicolás Consuegra, David's son — make up the Bogotá collective called Tangrama. At Bard's invitation, they cooked up some snazzy wallpaper as backdrop to a selection of David Consuegra's books and posters. But their real homage is web-based and interactive: a digital application that lets you reconfigure his designs in endless new combinations.

The retooling of old forms to new times and new uses is the fundamental subject of “Carrying Coca,” a small exhibition on the fourth floor. Organized by Nicola Sharratt, a

type of object: purselike woven bags called chuspas used in Andean regions to hold coca, a chewable, sociable stimulant made from crushed leaves. You won't want to miss the show. It's tightly argued, engagingly illustrated and has a scholarly depth and density that the larger exhibition doesn't try for.

But “Waterweavers” is where I lingered, caught up in its rhythms, its porous textures and its mood swings. Unusually for an exhibition, this one ends on a downbeat note, in a video piece by Nicolás Consuegra. The setting is García Márquez's beloved Rio Magdalena; the subject is a town called Honda built on its banks. A century ago, when this waterway was the single transport route between the Caribbean and Bogotá, Honda was a boom town, a bustling port. Its faith in the river's beneficence was deep. Then roads were built; air travel kicked in; the economy tanked; wars scrambled the geography. The city became a backwater, leaving its citizens with little to do but watch the river roll by. It's a sad piece, for sure, but there's a compensating grace. By the time you get to it, you've had evidence of tremendous currents of energy flowing elsewhere.

“Waterweavers” runs to Aug. 10 and “Carrying Coca” to Aug. 3 at Bard Graduate Center, 18 West 86th Street, Manhattan; 212-501-3000; bgc.bard.edu.

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