The first major US solo exhibition of the influential Chilean-born artist, Cecilia Vicuña: About to Happen presents performance, sculpture, drawing, video, text, and site-specific installation from the artist’s practice since the late 1960s. The work on view reframes dematerialization as more than a formal consequence of 1960s conceptualism, as it is commonly understood, but as a formal consequence of radical climate change as well—and in both cases—as a process that shapes public memory and responsibility. Working within the overlapping discourses of conceptual art, land art, poetry, and feminist art practices, Vicuña has long refused categorical distinctions, operating fluidly between concept and craft, text and textile. The exhibition features a large selection of Vicuña’s prequero sculptures produced over the last four decades that feature found objects in lyrical juxtaposition, as well as a monumental structure created out of collectively scavenged materials from the ever-diminishing Louisiana coast. Cecilia Vicuña’s About to Happen traces the artist’s long practice to stage a conversation about discarded and displaced materials, people, and landscapes in a time of global climate change.

March 16–June 18, 2017

Cecilia Vicuña: About to Happen
Contemporary Arts Center
3401 Caroline Street
New Orleans, LA 70130

The first precarious works were not documented, they existed only for the memories of a few citizens.

History, as a fabric of inclusion and exclusion, did not embrace them.

(The history of the north excludes that of the south, and the history of the south excludes itself, enclosing only the north’s reflections.)

In the void between the two, the precarious and its non-documentation established their non-place as another reality.

Balsa Snake Raft to Escape the Flood, 2017

This large balsa, or raft, was made out of scavenged materials from around the New Orleans area, both natural and manufactured—including twigs, leaves, beads, bird feathers, and nautical rope found at the shoreline. Loosely woven into a monumental structure that is suspended from the ground, the raft snakes its way through the galleries to suggest that wreckage and refuse might be turned into a monumental structure that is suspended in the New Orleans area, both natural and physical. It could be “read.” Inspired by the quipu’s sophisticated system of tactile knowledge, Vicuña began creating quipus in the late 1960s. Here she reimagines and re-invents these knotted forms using a mix of organic and industrial materials, including telephone cables, string, and insect wings, to suggest a paradoxical continuity between indigenous modes of “writing” and contemporary art-making.

Guipus

A quipu is an ancient method of record-keeping that involved knotted cords. It was used by the Incas and other Andean cultures throughout South America; the arrangement of knots and the number of cords held complex information and could be “read.” Inspired by the quipu’s sophisticated system of tactile knowledge, Vicuña began creating quipus in the late 1960s. Here she reimagines and re-invents these knotted forms using a mix of organic and industrial materials, including telephone cables, string, and insect wings, to suggest a paradoxical continuity between indigenous modes of “writing” and contemporary art-making.

Precarios, 1966–2017

Vicuña began this series in 1966 when she was still a teenager living at her seaside home in northern Chile. She would assemble bits of wood, thread, and other found objects into temporary small sculptures that despite their modest scale have a surprising dynamism and energy. She has continued making these precarious works, which she calls precarios, throughout her practice, including when she lived in exile during the brutal dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet, who ruled Chile from 1973–1990. In that time, they functioned for her as a comment on the way that Pinochet treated people like rubbish; simultaneously, the fragile, beautiful sculptures were also like charms or amulets for resisting his rule.

Caracol Azul (Blue Snail), 2017

In the Andes unspun wool stands for the cosmic gas and interstellar dust that gave birth to galaxies and water. The soul trail is associated to the mythical origin of writing. For the artist the Blue Snail’s trail symbolically “writes” a new story, where humanity is able to create a new culture that treasures all life forms.

from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved. Charles Darwin, On the Origin of Species (1859)

Caracol Azul also references the locals’ close relationship with the snail, including the name of a popular children’s dance and song. In the ancient language, it is a command to never return: "To smash it in your skull; to open the door and let in a deadly song that will make you cry, that will make you break..."

La Noche de las Especies, 2009

Vicuña’s practice begins at the water’s edge with her first ephemeral artworks in Concón Chile in 1966—where the Aconcagua River meets the Pacific Ocean. Sustaining a conversation about impermanence and disappeared peoples and landscapes, this film invites us into the depths of the ocean. In this short animation, begun as pencil drawings by the artist and digitally rendered by filmmaker Robert Kolodny, Vicuña realizes the fragility of sea life. The Night of the Species refers to the extinction of oceanic species and the death of the sea. In this visual poem, the artist transforms the ocean bacteria, which were the first forms of life in our planet, into poems, a language for the renewal of life.

Artist’s books

In this series of artist’s books, the line refers both to poetry and to thread: they illustrate how Vicuña’s practice serves as an inquiry into the relationship between text and textile. Vicuña’s exploration and play with memory and responsibility. Working within the overlapping discourses of conceptual art, land art, poetry, and feminist art practices, Vicuña has long refused categorical distinctions, operating fluidly between concept and craft, text and textile. The exhibition features a large selection of Vicuña’s prequero sculptures produced over the last four decades that feature found objects in lyrical juxtaposition, as well as a monumental structure created out of collectively scavenged materials from the ever-diminishing Louisiana coast. Cecilia Vicuña’s About to Happen traces the artist’s long practice to stage a conversation about discarded and displaced materials, people, and landscapes in a time of global climate change.

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