Antonio PICHILLÁ

The Offering

This offering is also for you. Revisiting, imagining and recreating the past is a way of honouring our ancestors while giving deeper meaning to our own existence.

Sharing an offering with others means invoking a dialogue of knowledge that can ensure our survival in the future.

The exhibition by Guatemalan artist Antonio Pichillá is an offering in itself. The exhibition space transitions between the Maya understanding of the division of the world and the idea of the present as something we will leave to future generations.

Antonio Pichillá: The Offering as a Tradition of the Past in Contemporary Art

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We cannot just start out of nothing,
we must first ask for permission.
— Antonio Pichillá

Antonio Pichillá Quiacaín (1982, San Pedro La Laguna, Sololá) is a representative of a new generation of Guatemalan artists who have consciously chosen to use the strategies acquired during their formal training to subvert the order established by the Eurocentric understanding of Maya art and reveal contemporary insights into the wisdom of their ancestors. In his practice, the artist not only transcends seemingly naturalised aesthetic boundaries, but also uses his skills as a creator, healer, cultural mediator and respected figure within his community in an effort to re-establish connections that go beyond the conventional and currently predictable parameters of contemporary art.

Although heterogenisation and the abandonment of specific contexts are common approaches in the exhibition field to fulfil the current decolonising agenda, it is essential to contextualise this exhibition in order to avoid arbitrary interpretations. The works presented in the exhibition *The Offering* were created in a town on Lake Atitlán in Guatemala. They unveil the dimensions of what is often unknown to us and at the same time show new ways in which their revelation can contribute to our existential perception.

INTRODUCTION

The Maya believed that Lake Atitlán was a living and sacred being, at the centre of which was an umbilical cord connecting the sky and the earth. Perhaps this is why many people today are convinced that there is an energy vortex in the centre of the lake.

Lake Atitlán, the deepest lake in Central America and the second largest in Guatemala, lies at an altitude of 1,562 metres and covers an area of 130 km².

It is considered to be the region of the country where the Maya culture is most deeply rooted. Located in the highlands of the Sierra Madre de Chiapas mountain range, it stretches across seven of the twenty-two departments in the northwestern part of Guatemala. A varied landscape is typical of this region, with lush vegetation in the valleys, bordered by a chain of active volcanoes in the south and massive mountains with steep slopes and deep gorges in the north. These high mountains are also home to sixteen protected municipal regional parks, which are of great importance for the preservation of Guatemala's biological and cultural diversity, making up the habitat of many species of flora and fauna endemic to the area, as well as many archaeological ruins and ceremonial centres used by the Maya since ancient times. In 1955, the area around Lake Atitlán was declared a national park. Given the remoteness of this highland region and the historical development of the local communities, it is understandable why many scholars of Central American culture believe that their ability to survive and preserve their cultural heritage in the context of American colonisation is quite remarkable.

Despite acknowledging a shared ancestry, the majority of Maya typically identify with a specific ethnic and linguistic group distinguished by location, language and unique social and cultural traits. There are three main ethno-linguistic groups of the Maya who call this region[1] home: the Kaqchikel, Quiché and Tz'utujil. The Tz'utujil, who speak the language of the same name, live south of Lake Atitlán in the highlands of the Sololá department and in some lowland municipalities of the Suchitepéquez department of Guatemala. Their origins date back to pre-Hispanic times when they settled in this area and belonged to the central Maya peoples. During the Spanish conquest of the Americas (1524), the Kaqchikel initially allied themselves with the invaders to defeat their historical enemies, the Tz'utujil and Quiché, but were eventually conquered and subjugated when they refused to pay tribute to the Spanish. In contrast to the unfortunate and bloody fate of the Kaqchikel and Quiché rulers, the Tz'utujil came to an agreement with the conquistadors. In return for not resisting, they were not only able to live in one of the most peaceful regions of the time, but also retained a certain degree of autonomy,[2] which allowed them to preserve their traditions, customs, language and belief system. As a result, the Tz'utujil are still seen today as somewhat different from other Maya communities.

Throughout his career, artist Antonio Pichillá has carried out meticulous anthropological research, analysing and reinterpreting various aspects of his cultural heritage. In this way, he transforms artistic creation into a ritual act that honours his ancestors and ensures the continuity of this inherited knowledge.

The works of the Tz'utujil artist are defined by a language enriched with symbolic content. They are based on myths and legends, rituals and Maya iconography, thereby drawing new narratives on the Maya cultural horizon that revise and respectfully value the Maya cosmogony, creating new spaces for reflection, dialogue and resistance.

The Maya myths of the pre-Hispanic era were recorded in their monuments and codices and have survived to this day, mainly through oral tradition. The Maya book of creation, the *Popol Vuh*,[3] has been preserved thanks to this tradition and is undoubtedly the most important Maya text. It is distinguished not only by its extraordinary historical and mythological content, but also by its literary qualities, which are comparable to other classic epic works. The *Popol Vuh*, also known as *The Book of the Council*, is the title of a bilingual collection of myths, legends and historical tales of the Quiché Maya people. Due to its great historical and spiritual value, it is considered the sacred book of the Maya, defined as a universal statement about the nature of the world and the role

1 The 2018 census for this area records 256,039 inhabitants, most of whom are indigenous (96 percent), belonging to the Tz'utujil, Kaqchikel and Quiché ethnic groups. Guatemala is a multi-ethnic, multicultural and multilingual country (with over 18 million inhabitants), home to 25 ethnic groups, 22 of which are of Maya origin, while the others are Ladino, Xinka and Garifuna. Each ethnic group has its own language: there are 22 Maya languages, as well as Xinka, Garifuna and Spanish (spoken by the Ladino ethnic group).

2 Tz'utujil King Joo No'j K'iq'ab' became a chieftain and, as a direct vassal of the Spanish Crown, he had a special status whereby he was not subject to the orders of local governors or the administrative army.

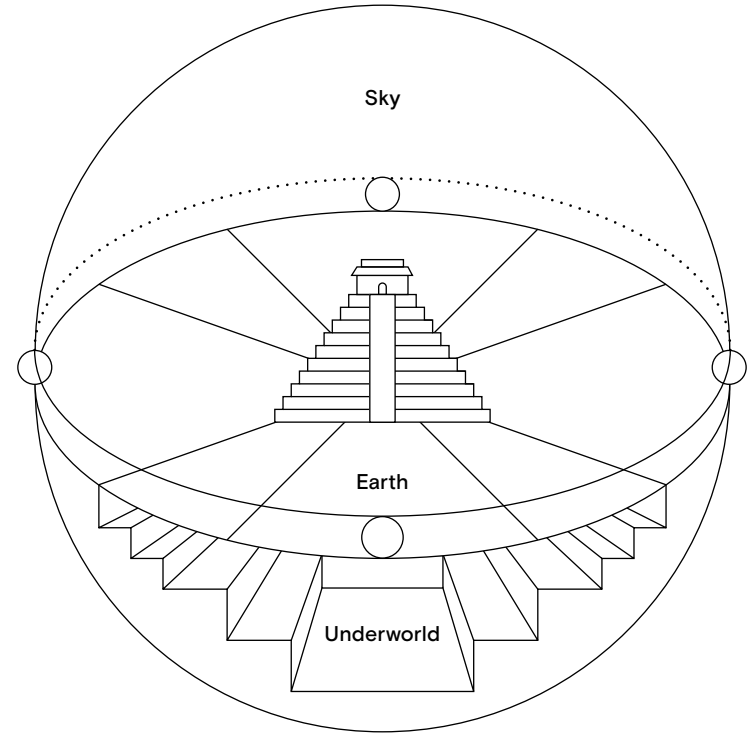
of humanity in it. It interweaves religion, astrology, mythology, customs, history and legends to tell the story of the origins of the world and civilisation, as well as the many phenomena that occur in nature.

One of the most important aspects of Maya culture is its cosmogony. Cosmogony encompasses the knowledge or perception of the world and the meanings attributed to individual elements or phenomena, therefore a philosophy of life and a particular way of understanding the world. Far from being considered something that belongs to the past or is no longer used, Maya cosmogony is a fundamental element of the culture of indigenous communities in Guatemala. It is ever-present and serves as a guide for achieving harmony in everyday life.

Maya cosmogony reflects a holistic view of reality, a balance between the whole of creation, the universe, nature and humanity. From the beginning of their existence, the Maya developed the concept of a world divided into three overlapping and interconnected planes: the earth, the sky and the underworld, with the centre or origin. Each of these

3 The *Popol Vuh* recounts the heroic story of the twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque, who fought against the giant Vucub Caquix, his children Zipacna and Cabracan, and the rulers of the underworld Xibalbá. It begins with the creation and origin of human beings, who were created from maize after several unsuccessful attempts by the gods. Then Hunahpu and Xbalanque enter the epic of the demigods and, having fulfilled their task, become the Sun and Moon. The Quiché people later expanded and subjugated their neighbours. These are tales with moral lessons that punish the vain, arrogant and wicked. The third part provides a description of dynasties and gods, along with a historical chronicle of the origin and structure of the indigenous peoples of Guatemala. Events that influenced them are also mentioned, including the height of the Spanish conquests around 1524, although these details may not have been part of the original text. The *Popol Vuh* undeniably holds literary value, not only for the vivid imagery of its legends, but also for its reflection on a pre-existing culture subjected to colonisation. The *Popol Vuh*, as we know it today, was written in the Quiché language in Castilian script by the Christianised natives after the conquest. Some researchers suggest that one possible author of the *Popol Vuh* is Diego Reinoso. It is believed that the book was written between 1554 and 1558 in the old capital of Quiché, Gumarkaaj (Utatlán), today's Santa Cruz del Quiché, or in the town of Chuwilá (Chichicastenango), where the Quiché nobility resided after their defeat by Pedro de Alvarado. In 1701, the Dominican priest Francisco Ximénez arrived in Chichicastenango, learnt several indigenous languages and transcribed the *Popol Vuh* into Spanish. In 1829, during the liberal government of Francisco Morazán, the Dominicans were expelled from the country and their archives were handed over to the University of San Carlos. In 1854, the Austrian doctor Carl Scherzer, who lived in Guatemala, gained access to Ximénez's manuscript and published it in Vienna in 1857. In the same year, the French abbot Charles Étienne Brasseur de Bourbourg (1814–1874) brought the manuscript to Paris and published it in French in 1861. After Brasseur's death, the manuscript came into the possession of the linguist Alphonse Pinart, who later sold it for 10,000 francs. In 1887, it was purchased at auction by Edward E. Ayer, who donated it to the Newberry Library at the University of Chicago, where it remains to this day. The first modern edition of the *Popol Vuh* goes back to 1947 in a translation by Adrian Recinos.

Maya Cosmic Model



The cosmogony of the Maya contains the idea of a cosmic trinity and quaternity, which is reflected both in the spheres of the universe and in the four supreme beings that inhabit it. The Maya believe that the universe is a harmonious structure consisting of three great horizontal planes: the sky, the earth and the underworld. Each of these planes is divided horizontally into four sections that correspond more or less to the cardinal points and are inhabited by different sacred beings: four ceiba trees planted in the earth that support the sky, four birds that sit on the ceibas and four types of maize, turkey and beans. Each section is associated with a sacred colour derived from a type of maize. The north is white, the south is yellow, the east is red and the west is black. The symbolic beings of the four sections have these colours in common. The supreme gods are one and four at the same time and are located in the indicated directions. According to Quiché mythology, the first humans were also four.

planes extends in four directions, and at each end, there are four ceiba trees, four birds, four types of maize and four colours (red, yellow, black and white). There are four gods, but they are regarded as one. This fourfold nature is the basis of the cosmic balance that makes life possible. The Ceiba, the sacred tree of the Maya, stands like the axis of the universe that crosses the three planes and connects the material and spiritual worlds. It is a symbol of life and communication between people and everything that surrounds them.

THE EARTH

In the earthly world, plants, animals, humans and supernatural beings exist side by side. When the world was created, the gods decided that, besides nature, they had to create beings by whom they would be worshipped in order to preserve their legacy. Three gods took some mud and shaped it into the first human, but he could not perform the simplest tasks and easily fell apart. Then they summoned four other gods and created a human being from wood, but he possessed neither soul nor memory. Finally, thirteen gods succeeded in creating a perfect human being, this time from maize.

The idea that humans are an integral part of nature and enter into a dialogue with it in order to use its resources responsibly is a central element of Maya thought. This is in subtle contrast to the Judeo-Christian belief in which human beings are understood as the owners of all creation. For the Maya, animals, plants, landscapes and climatic phenomena are endowed with spirit and meaning, which provides humans with fundamental answers about their reality.

The cultivation of maize became fundamental to the survival of Central American civilisations, and this grain continues to be a major source of food for the populations of countries such as Mexico, Guatemala, other Latin American nations and some regions of Africa. Although maize planting is marked by ritual acts of worship performed by men with their families before, during and after planting, contemporary ethnography confirms that it is the women who take care of the maize seed and ensure its preservation.

In the works, *The Woman in the Portrait* (*La mujer del retrato*, 2009) and *She, Who is Full of Grace* (*Llena eres de gracia*, 2010), artist Antonio Pichillá appropriates Catholic iconography and reveals a devoted relationship to the deity of maize. Nature is portrayed as the central female figure that ensures the continuity of life and thus undermines the indoctrinating role that Western religious images played as an instrument of dominance during the colonisation process.

In Maya culture, religious practices are always directly linked to the calendar and the human concern about the impact of the seasons on agriculture. Their ritual calendar consists of a 260-day cycle and is linked to the agricultural calendar, the zenith passage of the sun and the time needed for the maize to ripen.

THE SKY

The sky, both by day and by night, was ruled by the creator of the universe, Itzamná, the lord of the heavens. The universe was divided into thirteen ascending levels in which Oxlahuntikú, the thirteen lords of the celestial world, resided. As a symbol of the fourfold nature, the basis of cosmic balance, the Bacabs, four brother gods, were placed at the four corners of the sky to support it and prevent its collapse. The sky is the abode of the gods identified with the Sun, the Moon and the stars, as well as the spiritual forces of the ancestors who left their bodies after death.

The systematic observation of the sun enabled the Maya to make precise calculations that determined the length of the year and the changing of the seasons. They understood time as cyclical and repetitive. Events therefore had a tangible cause that could be explained through the observation of nature and its connection to the divine. This determined the cosmic order.

It is believed that Maya astronomers invented the concept of zero to mark the end of one cycle and the beginning of another, to determine the cycles of the sun and the moon, and to predict solar and lunar eclipses, solstices and equinoxes. In the cosmogony of the Maya, zero stands abstractly for abundance or completeness and not for absence, lack or nothingness. It symbolises the completeness of the universe

and consists of two complementary categories: the immaterial or spiritual, and the material.

This notion of completeness also appears in the Maya understanding of nature, which is structured as a whole with its own order, with humans at its centre. All the elements that make it up complement each other and are imbued with a soul, which makes them sacred.

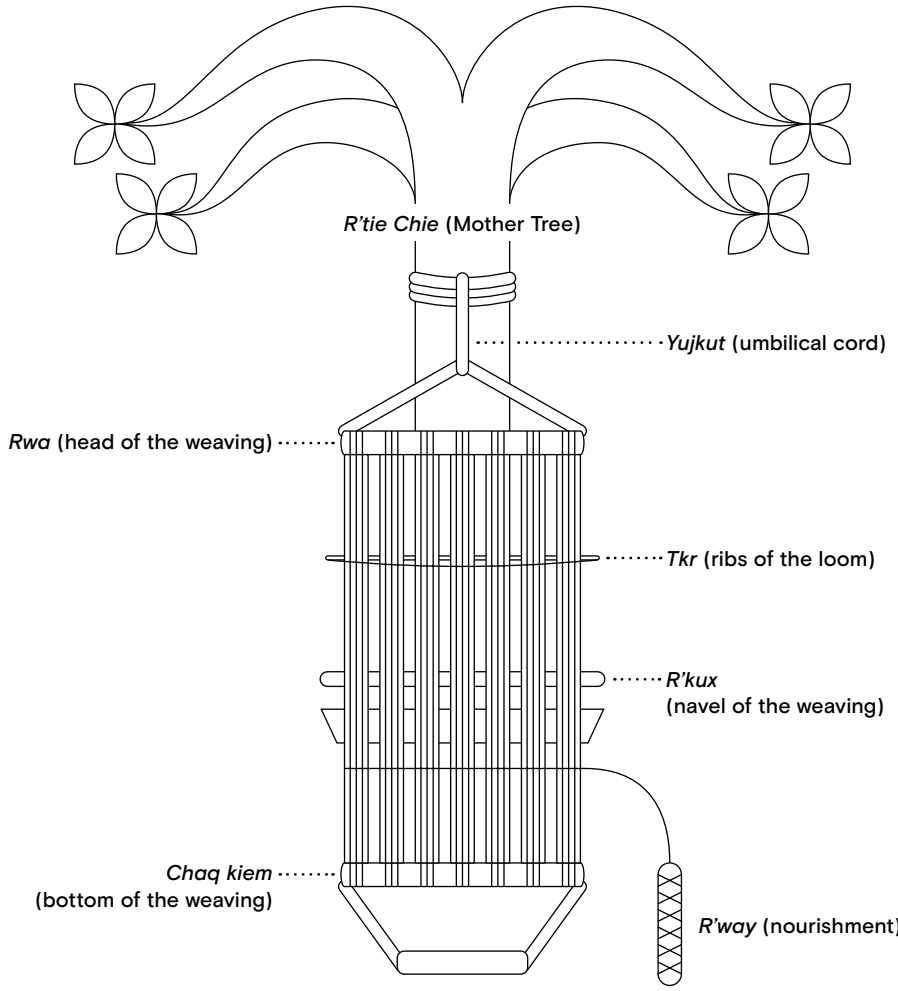
A recurring element in the works of Antonio Pichillá is stone, which holds special significance for the Maya, as they believed it to be full of life. Ancient civilisations used stone to build temples, create sculptures and forge defence tools. Stone symbolises the union between earth and sky. Stones carry messages from the past, whether through engraved glyphs or as preserved, priceless pieces of ancestral heritage. In this sense, they are witnesses to history, bearing the imprints of ancestors, grandparents,[4] and, ultimately, the collective memory of the Maya people. They represent strength, survival and resistance.

In works such as the installation *Contemporary Archeology* (*Arqueología contemporánea*, 2024) and the video *Blows and Healing* (*Golpes y sanación*, 2018), the artist enters into an intersubjective relationship with stones that is imbued with a unique tenderness and a deep poetic charge. Through gestures that symbolise devotion (covering the stones with textiles) and protection (performing healing rituals on them), the artist shares with the viewer the intimate connection he has with nature, which is revered as a sacred entity on which all life depends.

Because of their emotional and interdependent relationship with nature, the Maya regard her as Mother Earth and feel an intrinsic connection to her. In his artistic interventions *Umbilical Cord* (*Cordón umbilical*, 2021) and *Weaving the Landscape* (*Tejer el paisaje*, 2020), Antonio Pichillá refers to two essential elements in the production of Maya textiles: the backstrap loom (*telar de cintura*) and the warping

4 In Maya culture, the term "grandparents" has two essential meanings in terms of passing on cultural heritage. Firstly, it refers to the entire elderly population, who are generally the bearers of responsibility in the social and political life of the community. They are entrusted with passing on and interpreting the wisdom of the ancestors and upholding the basic principles of community life, including respecting and recognising the moral and spiritual authority of the elders. Secondly, the term also refers to the ancestors who in the past played a crucial role in preserving Maya culture and maintaining the connection between the community and Mother Nature.

Weaving as Birth



Since pre-Hispanic times, the backstrap loom has been a tool used by Mesoamerican women to make clothing, allowing them to develop their creativity and express it in a variety of fabrics. They mainly consist of two sets of threads: the warp, the vertical threads that determine the length and width of the fabric, and the weft, the threads that intertwine horizontally with the warp. This illustration is inspired by one published in 1988 by Martin Prechtel and Robert S. Carlsen in the paper "Weaving and cosmos among the Tzutujil Maya of Guatemala", in which the connection between childbirth and weaving is described.

board (*urdidora*).[5] In this way, the artist creates visual metaphors within the field of performative documentary film that illustrate the emotional-maternal bond with nature and the symbolic value of textiles in Maya culture.

If the Ceiba tree in Maya cosmogony represents the *axis mundi*, the axis of the universe, then nature is the centre around which all life in the earthly world revolves. In Maya mythology, where the gods embody elements of nature and abstract concepts, the goddess Ixchel is a female deity closely associated with the Moon. She embodies love, pregnancy, water, textile work and medicine. Ixchel is also associated with the fertility of the earth, as the cycles of the moon determine the times for sowing and harvesting. She is often depicted as an elderly woman pouring water from a jug onto the earth or weaving on a loom.

Looms with a strap around the waist (*telar de cintura*) were used to weave Maya clothing in pre-Hispanic times. These looms, used exclusively by women, have allowed the Maya vision of the world and knowledge to be preserved for centuries, symbolising both memory and the formation of a collective identity. Maya women channelled their creativity into textile patterns, most of which were inspired by nature.

One part of the loom was tied to a tree or, if that was not possible, to a post. The other part was secured by the weavers, who were kneeling, around their waists with a leather strap. They used a belt with two ropes at the ends, which was commonly used for carrying loads on the back, with the belt placed on the forehead and the ropes holding the load. During their study, Martin Prechtel and Robert S. Carlsen, the two leading researchers of Tz'utujil traditions, uncovered the connection between weaving and birth in Tz'utujil culture. In their language, the anchoring of the loom is called the Mother Tree or the World Tree, whereas the rope holding the loom represents the umbilical cord for the Tz'utujil. Various Central American cultures practise the ritual of burying the umbilical cord, which has just been separated from the child's body, under a tree. When the umbilical cord dries, it is planted in the ground. In this way, the newborn is said to connect with life and become part of nature.

The Maya perception of nature as Mother Earth implies a relationship based on respect and harmony, which is reflected in rituals. In addition to giving thanks to nature, it is necessary to ask her permission to carry out daily activities that would prevent her imbalance.

In Maya rituals, an offering contains the four elements of nature: earth, air, water and fire, which symbolise the four manifestations of the human being: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. The sacred fire has a special meaning, as the curling smoke of the incense (typically copal) carries along the prayers and intentions of those present and directs them to the four cardinal points and into the universe.

THE UNDERWORLD

The underworld, called Xibalbá, was ruled by Ah Puch, the lord of death. It consisted of nine descending levels, each ruled over by one of the Bolontikú, the nine lords of the night. They were seen as enemies of humanity since they could occasionally ascend to the world of the living, where they spread misery and disease.

Kukulkán was the creator god who personified the interconnectedness of the underworld, the earth and the sky. In Maya mythology, he embodies duality and harmony, and is often depicted as a feathered serpent, since serpents symbolised life above and below the earth, while winged creatures symbolised the sky.

Many Maya rituals are closely linked to the cycles of life. Death was never seen as something final, but as something that could lead to rebirth. The god of death, darkness and misfortune was also responsible for rebirth, childbirth and beginnings.

The underworld was not seen as a place of punishment, but as a resting place for the souls of the dead, where they must journey to, so as to return to life. It was believed that the soul was immortal and transformed into energy as part of the cyclical renewal of nature in order to eventually return to life.

Pre-Hispanic ideas of the underworld as a place where death and life coexist changed

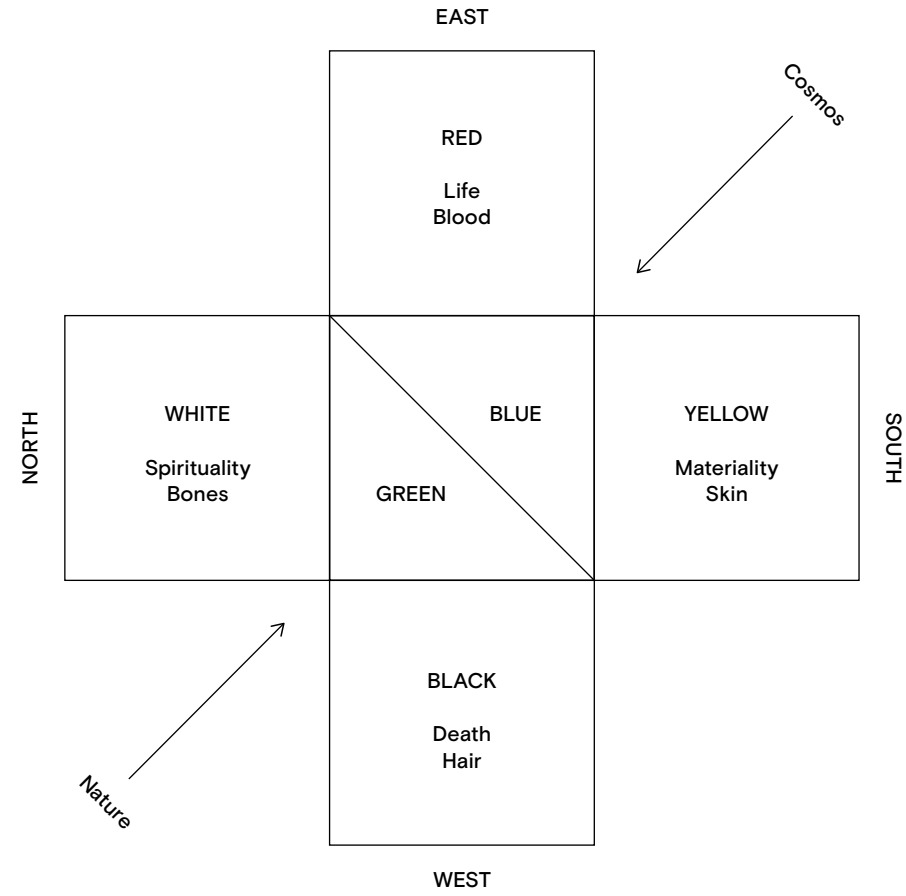
5 The Maya invented a remarkable technology for making textiles. Most of the devices were made of wood, but some were made of other natural materials, such as bone or needles for counting threads. The *urdidora* was a simple wooden device, consisting of a board with vertically inserted sticks or rulers, used to prepare the warp, or vertical structure, of the weaving. The threads were arranged to create a crossed structure on which parts of the loom were placed. The *telar de cintura*, or backstrap loom, was employed in traditional weaving techniques to create intricate fabric patterns. Weavers used looms made of sticks and a strap, which they secured around their waist.

considerably after the Spanish colonisation of the Americas and the penetration of Catholic concepts into Maya religion and society. The underworld became more closely aligned with the Catholic vision of hell and notions such as sin and death – all of which became a constant in their lives.

The establishment of the Spanish colonial empire deprived the indigenous peoples of their land and freedom, and forbade them to express their identity. It meant the destruction of the Maya world as they knew it. To impose their rule, the conquistadors dismantled the Maya political and social system and introduced various institutions to fulfil their imperial ambitions. These included the Congregation. In order to better control the scattered and inaccessible Maya settlements, the Congregation became a means of forcibly resettling the indigenous population and uniting them in communities where evangelisation was then most effective.

The colonisers did not exploit the resources in the areas near the Guatemalan highlands and were unfamiliar with the Maya social system, which was mainly based on kinship and ancestry. This gave the Maya greater autonomy to preserve their land, their language, the administration of their community and their customs. They achieved what George Lovell describes as "a culture of refuge, in which Spanish characteristics and institutions were absorbed and merged with indigenous ones". Examples of this phenomenon are the brotherhoods (*cofradías*), also known as religious fraternities or communities. Initially established for the veneration of specific saints, they became the most important religious, civil and political institutions of the Maya after the Spanish conquest, as they retained ties to their traditional social structure. Even today, brotherhoods remain a complex system and are strongly represented in every municipality. As Nancy Farriss notes, they can be viewed as "community-like corporations that combine civic and religious functions, aimed at promoting the common good and ensuring the survival of the community". They are hierarchically organised according to the pre-Hispanic model, with each member holding a specific position and function that corresponds to the Maya social hierarchy. In *The Brotherhood* (*La cofradía*, 2022), the artist depicts

Maya Cosmic Cross



The Maya cosmic cross is a tool used within Maya knowledge to explain the spiritual and material life of humans as well as time and space. In the Maya worldview, the *ajq'ij* is a person who is born with a mission, calling or ability to easily understand the logic of life. They possess a natural aptitude for understanding and mastering time and space, along with the skill to interpret the manifestations of nature and human behaviour. Today, the *ajq'ij* is a Maya priest or spiritual guide, an interpreter of time and space, who draws this scheme on the ground when making offerings to begin a spiritual ritual by which he reminds us of the creation of the universe.

this institution as a revitalised forest in which its members are personified in the branches wearing their best textile clothing. With the procession of the brotherhood, he reminds us that this social entity, which safeguarded not only the well-being, but also the survival of the Maya culture, has always existed as part of the natural order.

The brotherhood system gave rise to a religious syncretism in which the Catholic doctrine and the ancestral beliefs of the Maya, only seemingly effortlessly, but actually forcibly, converged to create a distinct religious and cultural manifestation of collective fervour. Under Spanish domination, the Maya essence was loosened but never completely dissolved. Syncretism was realised in a community of two opposing cultures. Religion, understood in this context as a common bond uniting formally comparable but essentially opposing beliefs, unpredictably became the stronghold in which much of the identity and traditional culture of the Maya ancestors was preserved.

Antonio Pichillá's *The Stone Dance* (*Bailando con una piedra*, 2022) links the heterodox collective heritage of ceremonial and religious life in brotherhoods with the orthodox ritual introspection of the Maya. It documents the celebration of two diametrically opposed confessional events: the carrying of a saint to the rhythm of a processional march and the worship of a stone by embracing and dancing to the rhythm of the marimba.[6] It captures in image and sound a cultural cacophony full of tension and duality that has undoubtedly contributed not only to the preservation of pre-Hispanic rites and rituals in the present, but also to the creation of a symbol of a secret collective rebellion. This has enabled the historical continuity of the ancestral identity of the Maya.

One of the legacies of Maya religiosity that has been preserved because of the brotherhoods is the cult of the sacred bundle. On the pages of the Madrid Codex,[7] the longest

6 One of the most distinctive and representative sounds of Guatemala is the marimba. Early records show that the instrument was played in Central America by the Maya in as early as 1680. It was used in ritual dances, religious and social celebrations and was usually played by men. The marimba, which was associated with the creativity of the indigenous population, was a forbidden instrument during colonial times. It began to be recognised as a national instrument in 1978, but it was not until 1999 that it was declared a national instrument of cultural and historical value for Guatemalan culture by Decree 31-99.

of the surviving Maya codices, which mainly contains almanacks and horoscopes used by Maya priests in rituals and divination, we find descriptions of spinning and weaving as well as offerings wrapped in textiles called *bultos*. In his work *The Hidden* (*Lo oculto*, 2006), Antonio Pichillá places several bundles in the shape of an upright red triangle on an altar, highlighting the significance of textiles in the ritual. These textiles are not merely decorative, they hold sacred value, as they form an essential part of the offerings they enclose.

CONCLUSION

The guiding thread that runs through the exhibition *The Offering* by Antonio Pichillá is the skill of weaving, which shows that spirituality is inextricably linked to artistic materiality. In fact, in Maya language, there is no direct word for *art* as it is understood in other cultures. Instead, the Tz'utujil language uses the word *x'ajaan*, which means *sacred*. Pichillá draws on the cultural heritage of his ancestors and uses it as a medium. Through strategies of appropriation, performativity and abstraction, he interlinks the Maya rituals and customs that have remained hidden for centuries and reveals the value of ancestral knowledge as a symbol of resistance and dignity of one's own identity.

Like *Kukulkán* (commissioned work, 2024), the feathered serpent of Maya cosmogony, the artist weaves together the past and the present as the foundation of the cycle of life. Remembering, imagining and recreating the past is a way of honouring the ancestors and at the same time finding the meaning for one's own existence. Bestowing this on another invokes a dialogue of knowledge that will ensure the legacy endures into the future.

7 The Codex Tro-Cortesianus or Madrid Codex is one of only three surviving original Maya books, along with the Dresden Codex and the Paris Codex. Two separate fragments were discovered in the second half of the 19th century: the first, called Troano in honour of its discoverer Juan Tro y Ortolano, and the second, Cortesiano, in reference to Hernán Cortés (1485–1547), who led the conquest of Mexico and was the first to read it. Upon examination, both fragments were found to be part of the same book. The codex consists of paper made from the fibres of cacti (maguey, agave or pita). It is bound with natural rubber, coated with lime and painted. It consists of a single strip, folded like a leaflet and comprising fifty-six sheets or one hundred and twelve pages. The text describes various rituals and contains divinatory formulae used by the priests to predict future events.

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Up Close

Antonio Pichillá

I first came into contact with (Western) art through Piet Mondrian's *Composition* (1929). A few years later, in 1999, I enrolled at the Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas in Guatemala, where I met artist and researcher Roberto Cabrera (Guatemala, 1939–2014). He inspired and encouraged me to undertake my artistic research as a member of the Maya Tz'utujil people – an ethnicity that lives in the southeastern basin of Lake Atitlán, where I myself live and work – that is, to proceed from my roots, not to forget where I come from. To be Tz'utujil and to make art means using language grounded in the collective experience of being in constant motion. It means tapping into a sort of first source and creating on the basis of that common history and anthropology in order to be able to understand our past and present. Through my work, I have connected to my interest in stelae, codices, glyphs and ceramics – sacred elements that attest to important advances like astronomy, the Maya calendar, predictions and textile art. One of the most significant Maya breakthroughs was the discovery of the mathematical concept of zero – a striking intellectual achievement and the gateway to the ideas of nothingness and the end, which contain everything. The calculation was based not only on the number ten for the ten fingers but also on the number twenty, including the ten toes.

I decided to look to the image of the Maya glyphs currently frozen in time, caged in display cases and colonially exhibited on white tables like plinths as part of history in archaeology museums. The Maya have never enjoyed any such protection; they are banished from their land for the sake of hydroelectric and mining companies. That is why, to create with the image of the glyph, I work stones cut in the shape of letter-sized blocks, which I then wrap in artisanal textiles and other stones with remains of burnt candles that mix with the stones' strange texture. These are natural ancestral abstractions, which change shape and proliferate to create a series of contemporary glyphs that are brought to holy spaces to take part in spiritual ceremonies. The works have been exhibited on wooden tables like live sculptures, with art and spirituality blending together since, for the ancient Maya, stone was sacred; the Maya today still use large caves as cathedrals to maintain their spiritual connection. These works attempt to materialise, if only partially, the energy present

in abstract cultural codes such as fire, stone and the geometric figures on the textiles that are specific to each community.

In the series *Grandparents* (*Abuelos*), I use the pattern for trousers worn by men in San Pedro La Laguna, Sololá department, Maya Tz'utujil people, to reclaim textile art and to address my relationship with my mother, who is a weaver. The series is based on a pattern of black vertical and horizontal blotches against a white background that I alter and intervene in by, for instance, mounting it on canvas stretchers. The series evidences the social, economic and political changes that have taken place over the years. While from a Western perspective, these works are part of the history of abstraction that began in the early twentieth century, they could be envisioned as "intercultural abstraction" because they incorporate or dialogue with the cultural codes bound to the ancient Maya traditions.

In the series *Knot* (*Nudo*), I placed knotted fabric on geometric canvases representing some of the twenty days in the Maya calendar in reference to the meaning of the acts of knotting and unknotting. Similarly, one of my videos shows a knotted candle slowly burning, being unknotted, like life's duality. In these works, the knot refers to life's problems, to that which must be unknotted or worked out.

Today the originality of the Maya garments is questioned; schools teach that they were imposed during the colonial period – which is not true. While, because of climate conditions, there is no surviving material evidence of textile art from the ancient Maya period, the existing monuments provide ample proof that ancient weavers were highly skilled. At the initiative of Museo Ixkik' del Traje Maya in Quetzaltenango, a study was carried out on the oldest legible Maya manuscript, which is kept in the Sächsische Landesbibliothek in Dresden, Germany. The thirty-nine leaves of the codex, which measures $9\,^{7}/_{16} \times 3\,^{9}/_{16}$ in. (24.4 × 9 cm), are protected by deer hides that fold up like an accordion; there is writing on both sides of the pages. A comparative study of the Dresden Codex and the Maya textiles used for the garments worn today by Maya men, women and children found twenty elements of current Maya dress for women in the codex, elements like the *tocoyal* and hair knots. Similarly, a sculpture dated 600–859 BCE on exhibit at the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico shows an old Maya woman weaving – further proof of the importance of that activity for the Maya people. The loom has been a tool for this ethnic group for millennia. Maya textiles today consist of mathematical and geometric compositions with colours and symbols designed using the jaspe technique – a tie-dye method in which thick threads are used to bind smaller bundles of threads so tightly that the tied portions do not absorb the colour when immersed in the dye. When the threads are loosened, strange, diffuse and one-of-a-kind geometric figures are revealed. This technique is used in only three places in the world: Rajputana (Central India), Bali and Guatemala.

These experiences and history take me back to when, as a boy, I would watch my mother at the loom weaving strange figures. It was that enveloping memory that led me to investigate ancient, modern and contemporary textiles, to abstract what I had seen as a boy, to take its colours and forms deeper into abstraction. That, briefly, is the world of my ancestors, the one I bring to bear on the set of rules and structures at stake in art.

The article, which has been slightly modified for this publication, was first published in Cecilia Fajardo-Hill (ed.), *Remains – Tomorrow: Themes in Contemporary Latin American Abstraction*, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Berlin, 2022, pp. 435–436.

A. Pichillá, *Grandmother*.
Photo: René De Carufel. Courtesy of the artist.

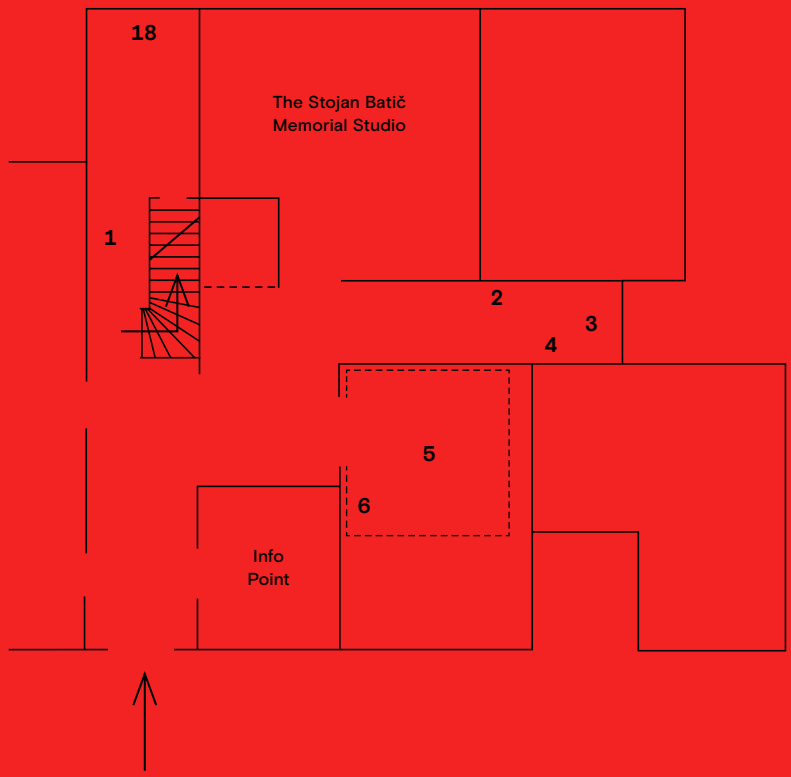
A. Pichillá, *Grandfather*, 2014.
Photo: René De Carufel. Courtesy of the artist.

A. Pichillá, *Knot*.
Photo: René De Carufel. Courtesy of the artist.

A. Pichillá, *Knotting and Unknotting*, 2019.
Photo: René De Carufel. Courtesy of the artist.

Exhibited Artworks

Ground Floor
The Earth



1 Four Cardinal Points
Cuatro puntos cardinales
chemically dyed wool, 2022

The artist learnt to weave from his mother, thus contributing to the tradition of preserving the knowledge of weaving passed down through generations of Tz'utujil Maya women. The contrast between the natural colour of the wool threads and the ink represents the cardinal directions and symbolises the universe as the Maya understood it. The work was inspired by the famous Maya Codex, which is kept in Madrid, although the viewer might initially associate its form and motif with geometric abstraction.

2 The Woman in the Portrait
La mujer del retrato
metal, plastic and textile, 2009

In Maya culture, maize had great spiritual and religious significance. According to Maya mythology, people were created from it: white maize was used for bones, yellow for muscles, black for eyes and hair, and red for blood. The *Popol Vuh*, the sacred book of the Maya civilisation, describes how the gods created the first human beings. At the beginning of the harvest, the maize god was beheaded and reborn during the sowing season as a symbol of the changing seasons and the associated growth of crops.

3 The Hidden
Lo oculto
wood and textile, 2006

The heritage, science and beliefs of the Tz'utujil Maya are an integral part of the artist's life. Religious offerings were often decorated and covered with textiles, which were an integral part of the sacred offering. The artist depicted this ritual as a composition of a triangle in which an offering is hidden. The geometry of the triangle also symbolises the Maya division of the universe into the underworld, the earth and the sky. It evokes the memory of ancient temples built in accordance with Maya astronomy, in which the sun's rays create a play of light and shadow on certain dates, symbolising the cyclical repetition of time and determining the rhythm of life.

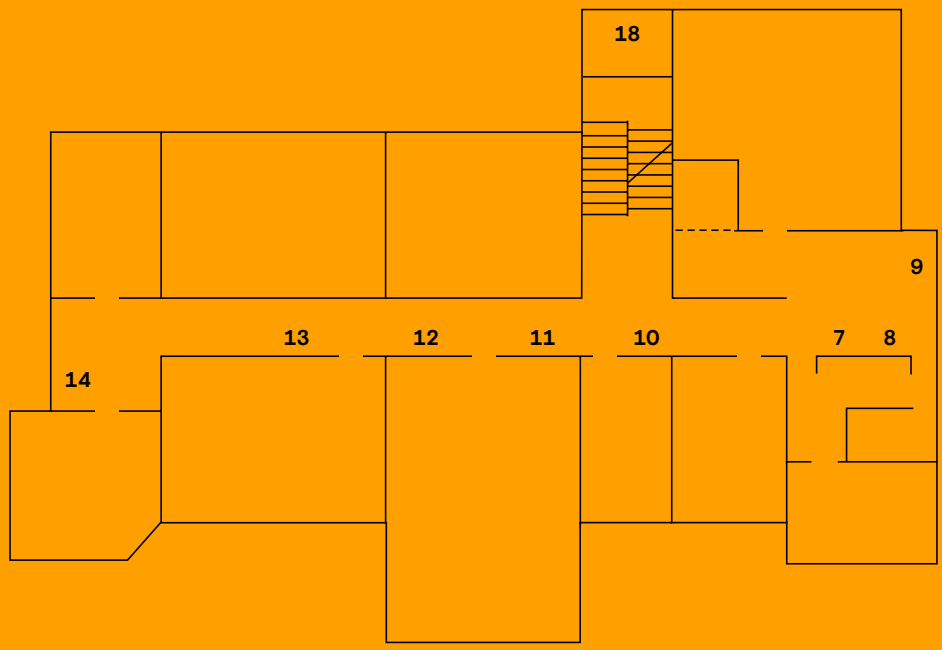
4 She, Who is Full of Grace
Llena eres de gracia
metal and plastic, 2010

In the colonial art of Central America during Spanish rule, there was no room for free interpretation. Through the worship of religious images in the safety of the home, society was effectively controlled by Christianisation. Religious paintings, sculptures and prints suppressed the spread of heretical ideas, individualistic concepts and indigenous beliefs that could undermine the Catholic faith. Creativity and imagination could only be expressed in works that had nothing to do with the sacred. *She, Who is Full of Grace* transcends this division and uses art to confront both the Maya tradition and Christianity.

5 Contemporary Archeology
Arqueología contemporánea
stone and textile installation, 2024

Stones hold sacred meaning in ancient Maya rituals. The Maya believe that stones are alive, that they feel, have a soul and carry inherited energy. In museums, Maya stones have been transformed into lifeless and immovable archaeological artefacts. *Contemporary Archeology* brings them back to life and transforms them into a community of individuals connected by family and ancestry. They become a textile-covered offering that preserves the stories of the Maya tradition and the memory of ancestors. According to the artist, the work was inspired by

First Floor
The Sky



a verse by Guatemalan poet Humberto Ak'abal: "Stones are not mute, they are simply silent."

6 **Blows and Healing**
Golpes y sanación
video, 2018, duration: 3:39

The blows are part of a healing ritual known as the restoration and regeneration of the soul or energy. Using a rope, the artist, who acts as a spiritual guide, strikes branches, leaf-covered earth, rocks and water, thus healing the soul of wounded nature.

7 **Grandfather**
Abuelo
handmade textile, 2019
(from the *Grandparents* series)

8 **Grandmother**
Abuela
wool and agave yarn, 2024
(from the *Grandparents* series)

The *Grandparents* series is one of the most extensive in Antonio Pichillá's creative oeuvre. In it, he explores the importance of grandparents in the culture of the Tz'utujil Maya people, for whom they represent the origin, creators and ancestors of entire generations. Pichillá based the series on traditional textile patterns and the four maize colours: red, yellow, black and white. He presents knitting and weaving as creative processes and media to represent the Maya cosmogony.

Grandfather takes as its starting point the traditional trousers worn by Maya men, which are typically white and decorated with a black pattern. With this work, the artist pays tribute to his father, but also to his mother, who wove his father's trousers. *Grandmother* honours the women and mothers who spin and weave threads and pass on their knowledge from one generation to the next. As the youngest child in a family without daughters, Pichillá was the only one who learnt to weave, and now he preserves his mother's knowledge. The intertwined threads symbolise his mother's braided hair and embody her nature.

9 **Umbilical cord**
Cordón umbilical
video, 2021, duration: 3:22

A video document of a performance in which the artist weaves threads attached to a tree around his waist, restoring an original connection to nature. When he wraps his body in the fabric and leans against the tree, the maternal connection between the human being and nature is re-established. In Maya culture, men were not allowed to use the looms that women attached to their waists (known as *telar de cintura*) since they were seen as an extension of the womb. Weaving is seen as a form of childbirth, the creation of something new.

10 **Water**
Agua
wool and industrial textile, 2024
(from the *Four Elements* series)

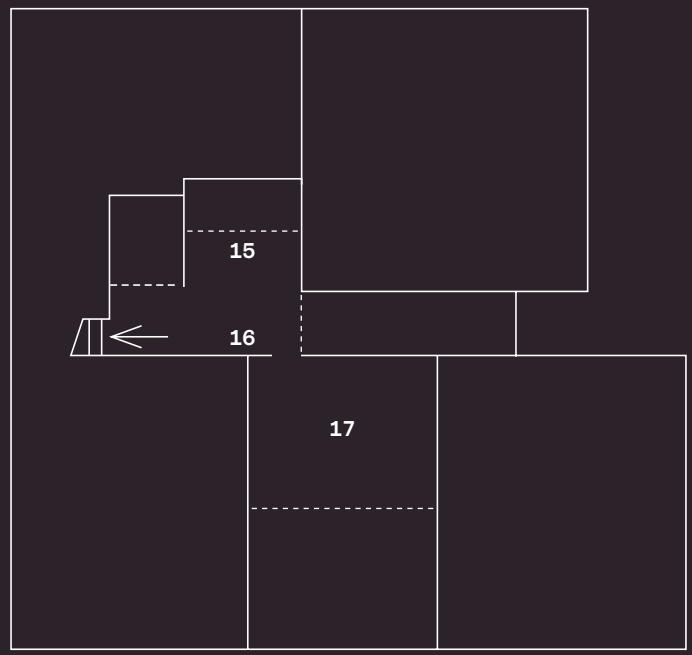
11 **Seed**
Semilla
chemically dyed wool, 2024
(from the *Four Elements* series)

12 **Wind**
Viento
wool and textile, 2023
(from the *Four Elements* series)

13 **Fire**
Fuego
chemically dyed wool, 2024
(from the *Four Elements* series)

Fire, water, air and earth, the four elements of nature, are represented by works made of fabric, interwoven threads and wool. The artist's depiction of air is based on the male costume of the indigenous Maya.

Basement
The Underworld



The geometric figure or letter X stands for both air and wind. The black-dyed threads symbolise a dying fire. A jug stands for water and the colour red symbolises the fluid in the human body or blood. The earth element is represented by Q'anil, the cosmic seed, one of the twenty days of the Maya calendar, which signifies creation and abundance. The sowing season is represented by intertwined dyed wool threads or furrows in which maize seeds are planted.

14 Weaving the Landscape
Tejer el paisaje
video, 2020, duration: 6:00

On the shore of the lake, the trunks of the dead trees defy time. The artist uses them as an *urdidora*, a board with upright sticks that Guatemalan weavers use to determine the length of the threads and the colour pattern of the fabric. Weaving is the most important means of expressing the sense of belonging and connectedness of women in the contemporary Maya community.

15 The Brotherhood
La Cofradía
wood, yarn, wool and textile, 2022

16 Scarecrow
Espantapájaro
photo, 2018

The photo of a rock overgrown with vegetation in the middle of a lake is a symbolic representation of the reverence that ancestors felt for nature. In 2017, it received the Juannio Award and served as the basis for *The Brotherhood*. Religious brotherhoods were founded by Spanish priests in the 16th century and functioned as the most important institutions for the Christianisation of the Maya. Despite their religious role, the village administration gradually became involved in their activities and, due to syncretism, the brotherhoods turned into one of the few remaining sanctuaries of Maya culture.

17 The Stone Dance
Bailando con una piedra
two-channel video, 2022
duration: 3:56 and 5:37

Religious syncretism combined Catholicism with the rituals of indigenous peoples. The first video documents the Catholic brotherhoods and processions, especially in Santiago Atitlán, a village southwest of Lake Atitlán. The rhythmic movements of the faithful are accompanied by the noisy events of the procession. The second video shows an intimate ritual dance with a stone, accompanied by traditional instruments. With his work, the artist honours nature and the traditions of his ancestors.

18 Kukulkán
wool and wood, 2024
commissioned work

In Maya mythology, Kukulkán is a deity who embodies the interconnectedness of earthly life, the underworld and the sky. The Maya worshipped him as a creator god and represented him as a feathered serpent, as serpents symbolised life above and below the earth, while winged creatures symbolised the sky. According to legend, Kukulkán is the link between the world of the gods and humanity. He gave humans maize and is also known as a source of creativity and inspiration. He is featured in numerous stone temples and in the sacred book of the Maya, the *Popol Vuh*. With a stylised sculpture of a feathered serpent, the artist depicts the fragility of life with its ups and downs.

Accompanying programme to the exhibition

OPENING EVENT

Wednesday, 18 September, 18.00
Guided tour of the exhibition with the artist and the curator, in Spanish with simultaneous translation into Slovenian.

CURATORIAL GUIDED TOURS WITH GUESTS

Conducted by: Yasmín Martín Vodopivec, curator of the exhibition, with guests:

Tuesday, 1 October, 17.00
Marija Jenko, Full Professor in the field of textile and clothing design at the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Engineering, University of Ljubljana

Tuesday, 22 October, 17.00
Zala Orel, Head of BIEN – Biennial of Textile Art

Wednesday, 6 November, 17.00
Mojca Marija Terčelj, PhD, Department of Anthropology and Cultural Studies of the Faculty of Humanities, University of Primorska

Tuesday, 19 November, 17.00
Gemma Santiago Alonso, PhD, Assistant Professor of Spanish at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana

Admission.

HUSKING CORN IN CONTEMPORARY ART AS A RITUAL

Saturday, 26 October, 10.00–14.00, MGLC Švicarija
Husking corn used to be one of the most important autumn tasks, often accompanied by song, stories and social gatherings. In Maya culture, maize held exceptional spiritual and religious significance and is still linked to important life ceremonies. What happens when we gather once again as a community, when hands start to touch the husks and transform them into imaginary creatures, when corn kernels slip between the fingers into mysterious patterns, or when corn silk turns into benevolent spirits … The process of community creation will be led by visual artist Mateja Kavčič.

Mateja Kavčič graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts and Design (ALUO) in Ljubljana and works in various fields of visual art. In recent years, she has primarily focused on spatial installations composed of materials found in nature. Her unique creative path is closely intertwined with nature; she is an artist who continuously invites us to engage with new and different experiences.

The workshop, accompanied by socialising over *mošt* and roasted chestnuts, is free of charge and open to all generations.

THIS HAPPY DAY OF CULTURE

Tuesday, 3 December, 10.00–18.00
Exhibition Doors Open Day.

INTERGENERATIONAL WEAVING WORKSHOP WITH SLOVENIAN YARN

Saturday, 11 January, 10.00–13.00, MGLC Švicarija (Stojan Batič Memorial Studio)
Led by Kristi Komel, a textile designer who creates sustainable projects through weaving and other handmade textile techniques and the incorporation of local materials.

Free admission, register at trgovina@mglc-lj.si.

CLOSING GUIDED TOUR WITH REFLECTION

Sunday, 12 January, 11.00
Guided tour with the curator and Prof. Ivan Šprajc, PhD, Principal Research Associate and Head of the Institute of Anthropological and Spatial Studies, ZRC SAZU.

Admission.

VIEWING OF THE EXHIBITION FOR SCHOOL AND OTHER GROUPS

We offer guided tours for groups, with the option to include a Gobelin tapestry workshop upon request.

Duration: 45 min guided tour, 90 min guided tour with workshop.

Admission: 2,50 EUR/person (guided tour), 3,50 EUR/person (guided tour with workshop).

Register at lili.sturm@mglc-lj.si.

Exhibition

ANTONIO PICHILLÁ
The Offering
18. 9. 2024–12. 1. 2025
MGLC Švicarija

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