



Galleria Giampaolo Abbondio

Elyla | Press



Elyla (Chontales, 1989) is a performance artist and activist from Central America, Nicaragua. Their work deals with creating resistance to colonial, imperialist, and western ideologies around the construction of identity politics and nation-state cultural narratives, specifically as it relates to mestizaje, queerness (cochoneidad), and indigenous ancestry. Elyla has presented their work at the IX/X Biennial of Nicaragua, IX/X Central American Biennials, and the XII Biennial of Havana, Cuba and will be part of the 60th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia curated by Adriano Pedrosa.

Elyla is committed to research how decolonial reflections can lead to a community based anti-colonial artistic praxis in Central America. The artist coined the term barro-mestiza to take distance from the traditional and colonial understanding of mestizaje during their ongoing process of decolonization. Elyla is an Artist Protection Fund Fellow by the Institute of International Education (IIE) at Bucknell University supported by the Samek Art Museum and 2020 EmergenNYC Fellow. They are a 2021 Seed Awardee and currently part of the 2024 Moving Narratives Mentorship Award Cohort by the Prince Claus Fund.

The artist's early work dealt with contesting the patriarchal and repressive narratives upheld by the Latin American left and its effect on gender and sexually diverse people. In 2013, Elyla co-founded the Operación Queer/Cochona collective that blurred the limits between academia, art, and activism creating interventions in Mesoamerica. Their project Machete Dress was a grant recipient of the Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation (CIFO) 16th annual Grants & Commissions Program. Their work is part of the permanent collection at the Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation, the Ortiz-Gurdian Art Foundation, KADIST videoart collection and private collectors around the world. Their work has been shown through-out Latin America, North America, Canada, Europe, Asia. They currently live and work in Masaya, Nicaragua.

Education

2011-2013 Contemporary Art Workshops and Academic Residencies, Espira Espora, Managua, Nicaragua

2009-2015 Social Anthropology, Nicaraguan National Autonomous University, UNAN Managua, Nicaragua

2010-2012 Theater, Justo Rufino Garay Theatre School, Managua, Nicaragua



Solo Exhibitions

2024 The rebels were waltzin' on air, Playlist by Galleria Giampaolo Abbondio, Milan, Italy

2022 Barro Mestiza, Artist Protection Fund Fellow (APF-IIE)

Biennials

2024 60th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia “Stranieri Ovunque - Foreigners Everywhere”, curated by Adriano Pedrosa, Venice, Italy

2016 X Central American Biennial, curated by Tamara Díaz Bringas, Costa Rica

2016 X Nicaraguan Biennial, curated by Oliver Martínez Kandt, Managua, Nicaragua

2015 XII Twelfth Biennial of Havana, Between the Idea and the Experience, Habana, Cuba

2014 BAVIC Biennial of the Central American Isthmus, Guatemala City, Guatemala

2014 IX Nicaraguan Biennial, curated by Omar Lopez-Chahoud, Managua, Nicaragua

Awards

2022 The Prince Claus Fund (PCF) - Seed Award Recipient, Amsterdam, Netherlands

2021 The Foundation for Arts Initiatives (FFAI) – Research Grant

2019 Artist Protection Fund Fellow (IIE) @ Bucknell University supported by the Ekard Residency PA, USA

2018 Emerging Artist Award, CIFO - Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation

Group Exhibitions

2022 AUTOPOIESIS: Recognizing Kin Across Antipodal Topologies @Oyoun - Amsterdam, Netherlands

2022 CARK-Through The Window (TTW), @Koli Art Space - Istanbul, Turkey

2020 “Believing Yo” curated by Risa Puleo @ SVA Chelsea Gallery NYC, USA

2019 “Estados Alterados” videoperformance showcase ARTERial Performance Lab, APLAB curated by Hector Canonge @ Itinerant exhibition

2019 “Under Construction” Relatos desde Latinoamérica en la Colección CIFO @CASA FUGAZ Callao, Perú

2018 “Chimbombazo Actos de Reparación” @CRACart CCEN-CCECR, Costa Rica

2018 “Under Construction” Exhibición Programa de Becas y Comisiones CIFO @ Centro Cultural Metropolitano Quito, Ecuador
2018 “Al dictado” curated by Juan Jose Santos/Isabella Villanueva @ Museo de Arte Moderno Medellin, Colombia
2018 “Video sur” Espira collective exhibit @ Palais de Tokio Paris, France
2017 Naked Fish Festival curated by Sandino Scheidegger (Random Institute) @ Despacio, San Jose, Costa Rica
2017 “Agua que me quemo” curated by Malagana @ Macula, Managua, Nicaragua
2017 “Multitud Marica” curated by Felipe San Martin Rivas & Francisco Godoy @ Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende, Santiago, Chile
2015 “Jugo del Cuerpo” NY-MNG @ (Harbor) Gallery, New York, NY, USA
2015 “VanguardISTHMUS” curated by Omar López Chahoud @ Inter-American Development Bank, Art Gallery, Washington, D.C. USA
2015 “Reglas del Juego” curated by Tamara Díaz @Equilatero Gallery, Escazu Costa Rica
2015 “JustResidence” curated by Andrea Pacheco @ COAM, Madrid, Spain
2014 “Simulácos” curated by adrede-espira.com @ Spanish Cultural Center (CCEN), Managua, Nicaragua
2014 Fredman Barahona/Christian Dietkus collaboration @ North American Cultural Center (CCNN), IX Nicaraguan Biennial, Managua, Nicaragua
2013 “Reflexión y Acción” TACON Workshops, Espira-Espora @ National Palace of Culture, Managua, Nicaragua
2012 “Open Studio” RAPACES/TRACES, Espira-Espora @ Cultural Palace, Granada, Nicaragua

Projects and Residencies

2020 EmergeNYC, Hemispheric New York Emerging Performers Program. Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics @ NYU, USA
2019 Countering Colonialism: A Queer Ritual of Healing, Performance @ PEN World Voices Festival co-presented with BAAD! Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance and the Artists at Risk Connection (ARC), NYC USA
2016 China Residencies/Crystal Ruth Bell Residency Re:search @ Red Gate Gallery, Beijing, China
2016 New York University, eXcéntrico: dissidence, sovereignties, performance, Santiago, Chile
2014 New York University, MANIFEST!: Choreographing Social Movements in the Americas, Montreal, Canada
2012 “Forma y Sustancia” International Festival of Performance, Guatemala
2012 RAPACES -Traces, Collaboration with Frostic National School of Art, Kalamazoo, USA and Espira-Espora, Managua, Nicaragua



60TH VENICE BIENNALE | TORITA - ENCUETADA

Videoperformance, 2023

9m43s

55th Venice Biennale “Stranieri Ovunque - Foreigners Everywhere”

curated by Adriano Pedrosa

April 20 - November 24, 2024

Text in catalogue of Venice Biennale

Based in Masaya, Elyla reinterprets folk traditions to disrupt our relationships with them and the power structures they represent. A dynamic force in performance art and activism from Central America, Elyla coined the term "barro-mestiza" to take distance from the traditional reading of mestizaje during their ongoing process of decolonization. Elyla's self-directed artistic research at the margins of academia manifests itself as a form of experimental auto-ethnography that spans into video performance, installations, photo-performance, theater, and community-based activism. Their work questions the hegemonic constructions of identity politics and nationalist cultural narratives relating to mestizaje, queerness and ancestral indigenous cosmivision. Actively dismantling entrenched powers within society, they view their own body as collective territory and memory; as a site where imposed systems articulate structural challenges. The artist's early work contested the patriarchal and repressive policies upheld by the Latin American left and its effect on queer existence.

Elyla's video-performance, *Torita-encuetada* (2023), an anti-colonial ceremony, explores liberation from the colonial yoke through a fire ritual rooted in a Nicaraguan cultural practice called “Toro encuetado.” Serving as a poignant act of political remembrance, the ritual dance or mitote calls for a return to earth-honoring practices and for the decolonization of mestizaje of sexual and gender diverse identities in Mesoamerica. Collaborating with Nicaraguan filmmaker Milton Guillen and music by Susy Shock and Luigi Bridges, the filmed ritual delves into the encounter of ancestral corpodivinities from Nicaragua's Pacific region, inviting viewers to witness the intersections of culture, anticolonial artistic praxis and the sacred. Committed to challenging societal norms, Elyla transforms the “cochón” (queer) utopia into a revolutionary artistic practice of the now.

Dedicated in honor of indigenous Mangué-chorotega cultural leaders and guardians of ancestral knowledge, Gustavo Herrera and Cristian Ruiz (1977-2022), the artist's friends, collaborators and guides.

Sofia Shaula Reeser-del Rio



ELYLA: TRADIZIONI, PAROLE E AZIONE PERFORMATIVA

a cura di ELISABETTA RONCATI

Per descrivere la pratica del giovane artista nicaraguense, tra i protagonisti dell'attuale 60esima Biennale d'Arte di Venezia, abbiamo deciso di affidargli questo spazio d'espressione. Nelle righe seguenti Fredman Barahona, in arte Elyla, ripercorre le sue origini, illustrandoci poetica e pratica artistica in connessione alla storia della nazione che gli ha dato i natali. Sottolinea, soprattutto, il difficile percorso di ricostruzione delle radici di un popolo che cerca di liberarsi dai fantasmi del colonialismo integrando, al contempo, le diverse sfumature e le cosiddette "minoranze" che lo compongono.

Il mio nome è Elyla e vivo nel dipartimento di Chontales, Nicaragua, in America Centrale. Nasco nel 1989, al termine della guerra contro i Contras, sostenuti dagli Stati Uniti. Durante la mia crescita, ho convissuto con il fantasma della rivoluzione sandinista che gravava sulle mie spalle, allietato, al contempo, dal ricordo delle memorie felici di alcuni momenti trascorsi in famiglia, assieme al dolore di **sentirsi in trappola in un corpo non conforme** vivendo in un villaggio "machista". Ho dunque fatto affidamento soprattutto sulla mia immaginazione per creare uno spazio più accogliente per far riposare il mio spirito. Non a caso, il mio lavoro creativo si basa su quella particolare capacità umana che ci permette di trasmutare la sofferenza vissuta in una pratica liberatoria. Per illustrarvi questo assunto intendo partire dall'appellativo con cui mi auto-definisco: mi chiamo Elyla, un "*cochonx chontalli barro-mestiza*". Spiegare tale definizione è cruciale anche per comprendere la mia arte. "*El-y-la*" significa "*lui-e-lei*" in spagnolo e indica **la convinzione del genere come sovrastruttura** dettata dalla società odierna che permea la vita di ciascuno di noi al di là della politica del sé o del binarismo di matrice coloniale. In Nicaragua "*cochón*" è, invece, un termine usato per riferirsi a sessualità dissidenti: ho deciso di utilizzarlo per supportare l'espressività epistemica radicata nelle culture mesoamericane. "*Chontalli*" deriva dal nome del mio



luogo di nascita, Chontales, terra del popolo indigeno Chontal. È una parola di origine nahuatl, antica lingua della civiltà azteca, che può essere tradotta con "*strano, forestiero, estraneo*". "*Barro*" significa fango e parla del nostro rapporto con la terra e la natura, auspicando un ritorno alle pratiche che le rendono omaggio. Infine "*Mestizaje/mestizo*" potrebbe essere tradotto in italiano con "*meticcio*": una sorta di identità politica che rappresenta un **sincretismo etno-culturale** risultante da uno stupro coloniale. Questi aspetti sono intrecciati nel mio essere e plasmano le lenti attraverso le quali esploro l'arte.

Spesso mi definiscono artista e attivista: a mio avviso tale distinzione non esiste. Noi che cerchiamo di far conoscere le istanze della comunità queer-trans-non binaria grazie ai nostri stessi corpi siamo già nati artisti e attivisti. Nella mia esperienza, essere un "attivista" ha significato **denunciare le ferite, gli attacchi, l'oppressione sistemica e le strutture egemoniche di potere nell'Occidente globalizzato**. L'arte mi ha poi aiutato a dare forma e canalizzare il peso di tutto ciò attraverso diversi mezzi espressivi.

Da questo punto di vista posso quindi definirmi un *attivista*.

La mia pratica artistica si muove tra performance, installazioni, performance fotografiche, teatro sperimentale, scultura performativa e interventi artistici site-specific. Mi impegno ad indagare come le riflessioni decoloniali possano portare a una prassi anticoloniale tarata sulle comunità dell'America Centrale, rimanendo al contempo in

Elyla, *Torita-encuetada*, 2023. Videoperformance, 9'43".
Courtesy Giampaolo Abbondio Gallery

dialogo critico con le reti di solidarietà internazionale. Infatti, all'interno della mia poetica, esploro spesso le tracce coloniali di danze, rituali e carnevali. La maggior parte dei progetti nasce dal riesame di tradizioni popolari. Attualmente sto sviluppando una ricerca che studia il combattimento di galli in Nicaragua e Indonesia assieme ad un incredibile artista di danza tradizionale giavanese chiamato Otniel Tasman.

Invece, alla **Biennale Arte**, presento l'opera di video arte intitolata *Torita-encuetada*: è la riproposizione di una cerimonia anticoloniale che esplora la liberazione dal giogo degli occupanti attraverso un rituale del fuoco radicato in una pratica culturale nicaraguense chiamata *Toro-encuetado*. Ho scelto di dedicare la performance, realizzata in collaborazione con il regista Milton Guillen e con la musica di Susy Shock e Luigi Bridges, a Gustavo Herrera e al suo compagno Cristian Ruiz, leader culturali indigeni Mangue-Chorotega e **custodi della conoscenza ancestrale**. Gustavo e Cristian, ucciso nel 2022 a causa di un crimine d'odio e transfobia, sono stati con me per oltre un decennio. Posso definirli amici, guide, insegnanti e colleghi.

Mi impegno costantemente a creare arte che sia anche una pratica di giustizia sociale e un promemoria della nostra capacità di sognare altri mondi e portare bellezza nella collettività, che ristabilisca gli equilibri e ci ricordi che nessuno sarà mai libero finché non lo saremo tutti.





Selected Press

Artishock, <https://artishockrevista.com/2024/06/11/review-60-bienal-de-venecia>

Zero, <https://zero.eu/it/news/la-biennale-darte-di-venezia-di-oggi-che-e-iniziata-ieri/>

Venezia News, <https://venezianews.it/who/elyla-biennale-arte-2024/>

Alberto Villa - Artribune, <https://www.artribune.com/arti-visive/arte-contemporanea/2024/04/stranieri-ovunque-adriano-pedrosa-biennale-arte-2024/>

Ludovico Pratesi - Artribune, <https://www.artribune.com/arti-visive/2024/04/biennale-venezia-pratesi/>

Stefano Miliani su cultura Tiscali, <https://cultura.tiscali.it/arte/articoli/Biennale-arte-Venezia-Pedrosa-Vaticano-Cattelan/>

Artist at Risk, <https://artistsatrisk.org/resident/elyla/?lang=en>

Kadist, <https://kadist.org/people/elyla/>

Corriere della Sera Living, <https://living.corriere.it/arte/biennale-arte-venezia-2024-stranieri-ovunque/>

The Art Newspaper, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/01/31/a-call-to-action-2024-venice-biennale-to-feature-more-than-300-artists-including-key-indigenous-and-queer-figures>

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Artuu, <https://www.artuu.it/a-milano-the-rebel-s-were-waltzin-on-air-di-elyla/>

Segno online, <https://segnonline.it/events/elyla-the-rebels-were-waltzin-on-air/>

Prince Claus Fund, <https://princeclausfund.org/awardees/elyla>

Cabaret Common, <https://cabaretcommons.org/elyla/interview-with-elyla>

Mousse Magazine, <https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/pies-bajo-fuego-sobre-el-despojo-the-museum-of-contemporary-art-panama-mac-panama-2024/>



THE REBELS WERE WALTZIN' ON AIR

Playlist by Galleria Giampaolo Abbondio

June 6 - July 26, 2024



Critical text by Eugenio Viola, Direttore artistico MAMBO - Museo d'arte moderna di Bogotá

The Rebels Were Waltzing On Air is the first Italian solo show of Nicaraguan-born, internationally-known non-binary performance artist and queer activist Elyla (1989), which follows their presentation at the 60th Venice Art Biennale, *Foreigners Everywhere*, which is still currently on view.

Elyla is part of a group of committed queer artists with localized art practices who are reshaping the landscape of performance art. Their work challenges traditional narratives and recontextualizes ancestral rituals while addressing anti-colonial discourses.

The title of the show is a response to The Clash's song "Rebel Waltz" from their fourth album, "Sandinista!" (1980). It reflects the moment when Elyla was invited to exhibit in Milan while listening to this song on their flight back to Nicaragua. The title also captures the song's nostalgic sentiment and connection to the artist's biography because their father was part of the Sandinista revolution (1).

Elyla works across various mediums, including video performance, installation, photo performance, experimental theater, radical activism, and site-specific political interventions. Their work questions colonial, imperialist, and Western accounts of identity politics related to *mestizaje* (2), queerness, and Indigenous ancestry.

They critically engage with the male heritage of the Sandinista revolution, its related narratives of national identity, and the experience of being a 'cochon' (queer) 'barro-mestiza' in a religious, conservative society. The artist coined the term 'barro-mestiza' to distance themselves from the traditional understanding of *mestizaje* and reclaim their Indigenous ancestry in dialogue with precolonial divinities and the memory of the land and soil.

Their work is a visual exploration and re-examination of visual gestures of folklore through a queer localized lens. This fusion creates a unique and compelling commentary on identity, tradition, and resistance. By combining visual explorations with layered self-led auto-ethnography research and the deep spiritual significance of Indigenous rituals, Elyla redefines performance art within an anti-colonial and queer framework.

(1) Sandinista, one of a Nicaraguan group that overthrew President Anastasio Somoza Debayle in 1979, ending 46 years of dictatorship by the Somoza family. The Sandinistas governed Nicaragua from 1979 to 1990. Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega was reelected as president in 2006, 2011, and 2016. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sandinista> (accessed on 30-05-2024).

(2) *Mestizaje/mestizo* is a political identity that can be understood as an ethno-cultural syncretism that emerges from the colonial wound.



This interplay allows them to critique imposed identities and celebrate self-determined, fluid expressions of Self. Their performances often extend into community-based activism to foster a collective experience of communal healing, inviting participation and engagement from diverse audiences.

The artist's early works are actions in public space that rebelled against authoritarian restrictions and censorship in a regime of persecution and terror. It was, for example, the case of *Solo Fantasia* (2014), Elyla's first public performance, illegally acted for the opening of the 9th Biennial of Nicaragua after their sudden expulsion from the exhibition by direct order of the Nicaraguan Government, an exclusion decided just four hours before the event. The performance was a march along the historical Bolívar Avenue in Managua, the capital of Nicaragua. The artist wore a dazzling costume, heavy makeup, gold platforms, a wand, and a mask, subtly embodying a visual journey of the aesthetics used by governments in power in the country's recent history.

Elyla disrupted the model of the 'Baile de negras' [black dance], an event held in honor of Saint Jerome in the Nicaraguan city of Masaya. It marked the beginning of an ongoing methodology in their work, aimed at subverting the culture and folklore of rural practices originating from their own history, which is re-examined through a queer lens, suggesting a new way of understanding an existence for gender and sexually diverse people's identities that are anchored in the teachings of the elders.

Torita-encuetada (2023) is a video-performance presented at the 60th Venice Art Biennale. It embodies liberation from colonial oppression through a fire ritual rooted in a Nicaraguan cultural practice called "toro-encuetado." The piece emphasizes the ritual's defiant and celebratory nature. During the ritual, Elyla asked their friend and teacher, Gustavo Herrera, to set them on fire, symbolizing a rebirth from the ashes and reconnecting with their grandparents' memories.

This powerful ceremony delves into the encounter of ancestral divinities from Nicaragua's Pacific region. It invites viewers to witness the intersections of culture, anti-colonial artistic praxis, and the sacred while advocating for a return to earth-honoring practices and the decolonization of sexual and gender-diverse identities in Mesoamerica.

Yugo Chontal (2024), one of Elyla's most recent works, was acted in Panama City due to restrictions on public actions in Nicaragua. It addresses the deep erasure of their ancestors' lineage, cosmovision, and culture in Chontales, Nicaragua. 'Chontalli' was a pejorative nickname or insult. It comes from the Nahuatl language, used throughout Mesoamerica for Indigenous peoples who were not Nahuatl speakers. It means "strange," "foreigner," or "out of place."

"After the colonial wound, I was already marked as a "foreigner" as "out of place" from "not belonging" for being a sexually diverse body. So, I bet on taking up the insult, as I have taken up the racial insult 'chontalli', and 'cochon' (faggot) as political lenses for my existence. This artistic proposal seeks to explore the feeling of thinking about 'not belonging' or being a 'barbarian', a 'foreigner', declares the artist."

The Rebels Were Waltzing On Air contextualizes over ten years of Elyla's committed artistic research. It highlights their challenge of oppressive systems and offers new ways of understanding identity, culture, and resistance by intertwining rituals, anti-colonial praxis, and queerness.



Elyla's work exemplifies the transformative power of art in challenging and reshaping cultural narratives. It not only honors their heritage but also pushes the boundaries of contemporary performance art, offering unexplored ways to understand and resist the complex interplay of identity, tradition, and power. Through their innovative practice, Elyla continues to inspire and provoke, carving out spaces for queer voices in the global art scene.

Eugenio Viola





Contatti

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