

LUCHITA HURTADO (1920-2020)
AN OBITUARY BY MARIE HEILICH



Luchita Hurtado in front of *Vertigo*, 1973
Photo by Matt Mullican courtesy Hauser and Wirth

In the winter of 2016, after lunches and lattes at her favorite Santa Monica delicatessen (where everyone knew her name before everyone knew her name), Luchita Hurtado and I would converse in her living room surrounded by her collection of pre-Columbian artifacts, rocks, animal hides, masks, clay dolls, feathers, and crucifixes. A red and blue patterned tapestry, which covered a table stacked with family photographs, rang familiar from her 1969 downward gazing portrait in which the tapestry covered the floor below her dune-like breasts, belly, knees, and feet.

While we talked about the past, we were thinking about the future. Her lifetime of work was recently uncovered amidst her late husband's inventory and she had just opened her second solo exhibition — a selection of works from the 1940's and 50's. Playful,

stylish, and candid, Luchita had a clairvoyant knowing to her eyes and punctuated stories with a hearty laugh that emphasized their cosmic absurdity. An ocean breeze came through an open sliding door toward the bookshelf stretching the opposite wall which was full of thick monographs bearing the surnames of famous artists that would wander in and out of her anecdotes. We were looking forward to ‘Hurtado’ at long last joining the ranks, which was just around the corner.

‘I’ve always used my art like a diary’

Witness to nearly a century of art, adventure, and life, the Venezuelan-American painter’s final years were spent sharing her story with the world through her deeply personal lifetime of work. Often attesting to have lived many lives, Hurtado’s core magnetism remained a powerful pull throughout her 99 years, drawing countless artists, writers, and thinkers into her orbit. Luchita was a force of nature. Hyper in-tune with her senses and unflinchingly forward-thinking, she was a mystic among mortals. She forged close relationships with figures who defined modern and post-modern art — Isamu Noguchi, Rufino Tamayo, Frida Kahlo, Leonora Carrington, Agnes Martin, Ken Price, Charles and Ray Eames, Vija Celmins, and Mike Kelley, to only name a small sampling. Hurtado’s affinity for positioning herself between the center and periphery describes not only the social aesthetic that composed her life’s relation to art but is echoed in the radial compositions found throughout her oeuvre. While Hurtado deftly experimented with styles, mediums, and techniques over eight decades, conceptually she returned over and over to self-portraiture — affirming and reaffirming her place with and of the world. Luchita traveled widely, employing ideas that served her along the way including Abstract Expressionism in New York, Magical Realism in Mexico, Light Space in Los Angeles, and other nodes of influence, while always returning to her unique introspective symbolism. Ranging between abstraction, figuration, landscapes, and language, her distinct and developed series — intimately informed by the artistic discourses of their time — build on one another to form interlocking meaning that accumulates into a singular, inspired vision.

Born Luisa Amelia Garcia Rodriguez in the coastal town of Maiquetía, Venezuela, her mother went into labor during an evening bath in the Caribbean Sea. Raised by two great-aunts, she spent her formative years exploring the lush nature surrounding Caracas before immigrating to New York City with her mother at age eight. While Living in a bustling household with her mother's two sisters and their children she taught herself English. As a teenager her curiosity for culture led her to take the hour long commute to attend an all-girls vocational high school, only revealing to her family after graduation that she was studying art, not garment making.

Hurtado furthered her studies at the New York Art Student League before her interest pivoted to aiding the Spanish anti-fascist movement by volunteering at the New York Spanish-language newspaper, La Prensa where she met her first husband, journalist Daniel Del Solar. To distinguish herself as a young artist she chose to take her mother's maiden name, Hurtado — less common than her given surname, and paired it with “Luchita” — a nickname meaning “little fighter” given by her then husband. After a stint living in the Dominican Republic they returned to New York where Luchita gives birth to her first son, Daniel Jr., followed by her second son, Pablo, two years later. Dissatisfied with the available style of maternity clothes and still equipped with the sewing skills she reluctantly learned as a young girl Hurtado started to design and create clothes to her own taste, becoming a lifelong practice itself worthy of exhibition and scholarship.

In the early 1940's Hurtado befriended Isamu Noguchi who remained 'like a brother' until his death in 1988. Noguchi introduced Hurtado to his social circle including painter Rufino Tamayo who became an informal mentor. Family life largely demanded Hurtado maintained the livelihood of others during the day leading her to resourcefully devise time for herself painting late into the evening while her family slept, a strategy she continued for years to come. She invented a technique of applying ink over crayon which formed a droplet pattern on the waxy surface and soaked into the negative spaces. These 'Resists' depict biomorphic clusters of dancing totemic figures with arms raised to the sky which

she recognizes later on a butterfly's wings in Venezuela and on the Lascaux cave walls.

After her first husband abruptly leaves she supports herself and two children designing and producing window displays and murals for Lord and Taylor and fashion illustrations for Condé Nast. To prepare her portfolio she studied what magazines were doing and 'did the opposite'. At the invitation of Austrian Surrealist Wolfgang Paalen, Hurtado went on an expedition to locate the Olmec colossal heads of La Venta after which she collected her sons and moved to San Ángel, Mexico where Paalen and Hurtado married. In Mexico Hurtado worked in a corner of Paalen's studio, turning her canvases to face the wall when she left. After the sudden death of her younger son from polio they moved to Mill Valley, California where Paalen established the Dynaton group alongside Lee Mullican and Gordon Onslow Ford until the group disbanded in 1951, the same year Hurtado and Paalen ended their marriage. Lee Mullican, Luchita's husband of forty-seven years who passed away in 1998, had a cosmological vision that complimented Hurtado's more terrestrial focus. The two settled in Santa Monica where they had two sons, Matt and John Mullican. Lee and Luchita traveled every chance they could — spending a year in Rome, camping through Europe, visiting Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Chile, and India.

In tandem with finding solidarity in a cohort of Los Angeles women artists, Hurtado enjoyed her most prolific years from the mid-60's to mid-70's leading to her first solo exhibition, participation in group shows, securing her first studio, and holding residencies. She described her earliest canvases from this time as "corporeal female nudes looking down at themselves, feet planted solidly on the ground and breasts like mountains. They seem to be saying 'this is what I am'." From her metaphysical down-gazing 'I Am' series, Hurtado swiftly connects the personal to the universal as she lifts her gaze upward in paintings of skies punctuated by the moon or floating feathers. Framed by rolling landscapes to give the silhouette of stretched animal hides, Hurtado's 'Sky Skins' recall her time spent in Taos New Mexico where her and Mullican designed a curving adobe second home in 1973. While conceptually consistent, Hurtado's medium and style shifted completely in a series of

abstracted word paintings for which she engineered brushes with bottled bases to quickly paint repetitive lines forming words before cutting, rearranging, sewing, and stretching the canvas to dizzying effects. One canvas, for example, weaves the words ‘SKY ABOVE EARTH BELOW’ subliminally signaling her ‘I Am’ and ‘Sky Skin’ series — while the buzzing yellow, red, black and silver lines of *Self Portrait*, 1973 can be decoded to read ‘I LIVE I DIE I WILL BE REBORN’.

In the midst of resounding recognition during the last four years of her life Hurtado made paintings akin to omniscient environmental protest signs, stating — ‘WE ARE JUST A SPECIES’ and ‘NO PLACE TO HIDE’ in addition to paintings of birth that use her downward ‘I Am’ perspective to reveal a newborn’s head as the sun on the horizon of a belly.

As we celebrate Hurtado’s centennial birthday, the light of her influence is only just beginning to illuminate her legacy. Her embodied unity with nature makes it challenging to consider her spirit in the past tense — palpable in a full moon, an apple, a butterfly, a leaf, a feather, a tree, the sky — her legacy and lessons will assure we’re together forever.

Marie Heilich is a writer based in Los Angeles.