

Sicardi |
Ayers
Bacino

Sandra Monterroso:
Threads of Memory

June 25 to August 29, 2020



Vida azul. From the series "Wounds can also be dyed blue.", 2019
Sculpture, yarn dyed with indigo, and *Tocooyales* [headdresses made of textiles, part of Mayan clothing in western Guatemala]. Assembled in steel. 23 9/16 × 23 9/16 × 15 3/4 in.

Sandra Monterroso
Threads of Memory

The German social psychologist Heiner Keupp introduced, a couple of years ago, a new term to the discourse on identity: *patchworking as a metaphor for identity construction*. According to Keupp, identity ceases to be a youth issue and becomes an endless, biographically open process. This conceptual framework can be aptly applied to comprehend the oeuvre of Sandra Monterroso, the Guatemalan contemporary artist, who over the course of decades has created an array of complex and thought-provoking artworks that integrate a profound reflection of her identity formation while at the same time reversing that narrative of colonization.

Monterroso was born in the middle of an exceptionally violent civil war that ravaged Guatemala, and devastated the Central American country's indigenous Maya communities. The artist is part of the postwar generation that took control of discourses of both social commitment and artistic production. Monterroso studied graphic design, and while at university she started working in performance and ventured into using her body as a medium to make social critiques, focusing on the vulnerability of women and of the indigenous communities. Since then the multi-disciplinary artist has been exploring historical memory, cultural heritage and the traces of identity that have been transferred or imposed since colonial times.

For over two decades Monterroso has been investigating, recognizing and immersing herself in her Maya *Q'eqchi'* ancestry. She has been producing a steady body of work that researches and scrutinizes the role of the indigenous in Guatemalan heritage and its contemporaneity, gender roles in the face of traditions, and the process of conversion and subjugation.

For her exhibition at Sicardi Ayers Bacino, the Guatemalan artist is presenting an array of works whose leitmotiv is the ancient Mesoamerican dye or pigment used to embellish them. *Achote* (annatto) and Indigo were two of the indigenous materials used by the Maya civilization to dye fabrics, baskets, feathers, leathers and even to paint their pottery, codices and murals. Monterroso uses several techniques to work with these materials: she submerges cloths in them, experiments by mixing them with acrylic paint in order to create new effects on canvas, and dips yarn and later dissolves them with water to achieve a degradation effect, among other methods.



Expliada III. From the series "Wounds can also be dyed blue.", 2016
Yarn dyed with indigo and wood.
70 13/16 x 31 1/2 x 4 11/16 in.

One can grasp the influence that her graphic design studies left in Monterroso; it is obvious in the careful composition and spacing she applies to her artworks. Nonetheless, it is relevant to note that the artist is consciously avoiding accuracy or perfection in the formality of her works, she has no interest in the rigor of modern aesthetics –this of course since modernity and colonialism are two sides of the same coin– and Monterroso is openly trying to challenge and subvert the hegemony of modern/colonial aesthetics.

Worth mentioning is how the theme of rituality is pivotal to the artistic process of this Guatemalan artist. For example the *Vida Azul* sculpture in the exhibition was made with yarns dyed by the artist in indigo, but also with an array of historical *tocoyales* (ribbons and bands used as headdresses by Maya women). There is a belief that textiles carry the energy of the person who wore them, and the *tocoyales* that Monterroso used were worn in the 1970s (during the civil war) by *Chajul Quiché* women from the northwest part of Guatemala. Since there was profound grief and suffering attached to these items, the artist felt the need to perform two different rituals to cleanse and release the material.

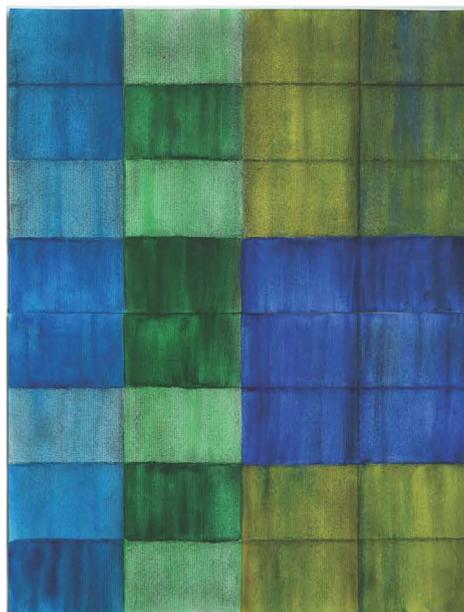
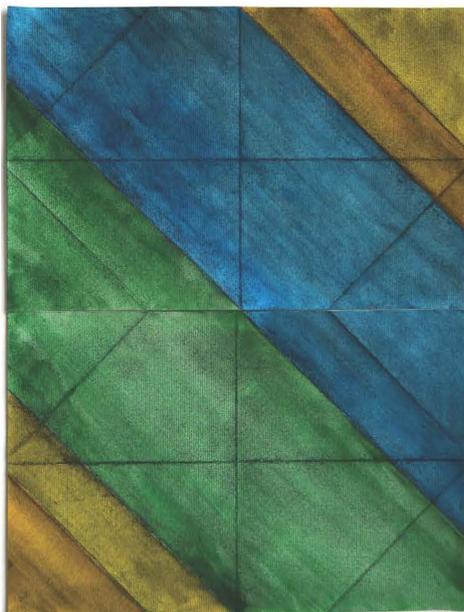
The first ceremony took place at the Guatemalan Academy of Mayan Languages and the second at an altar at a Maya archaeological site; only after a

proper healing were the *tocoyales* ready to be used in a work of art and exhibited. The final result is a sculpture that acknowledges the indigenous traditions and artisanal practices, and demonstrates the merge that produced the indigenous mestizo identity, all while trying to heal through art.

Another interesting aspect to consider is the use of knots in Monterroso's works; there are several pieces from the artist's 2011 series *Efectos cruzados*, as well as the installation *Puntos en resistencia azul* presented in the exhibition that feature these joints. Of course knots are not only important to the artist because she is interested in the manual labor of making artworks, but also because they were quite present in Maya culture (just to name one use: the pre-Hispanic civilization had an ingenious way of using a knotted cord to form right angles in the buildings and temples.) Furthermore, the artist is using the knot as a metaphor for cultural resistance.

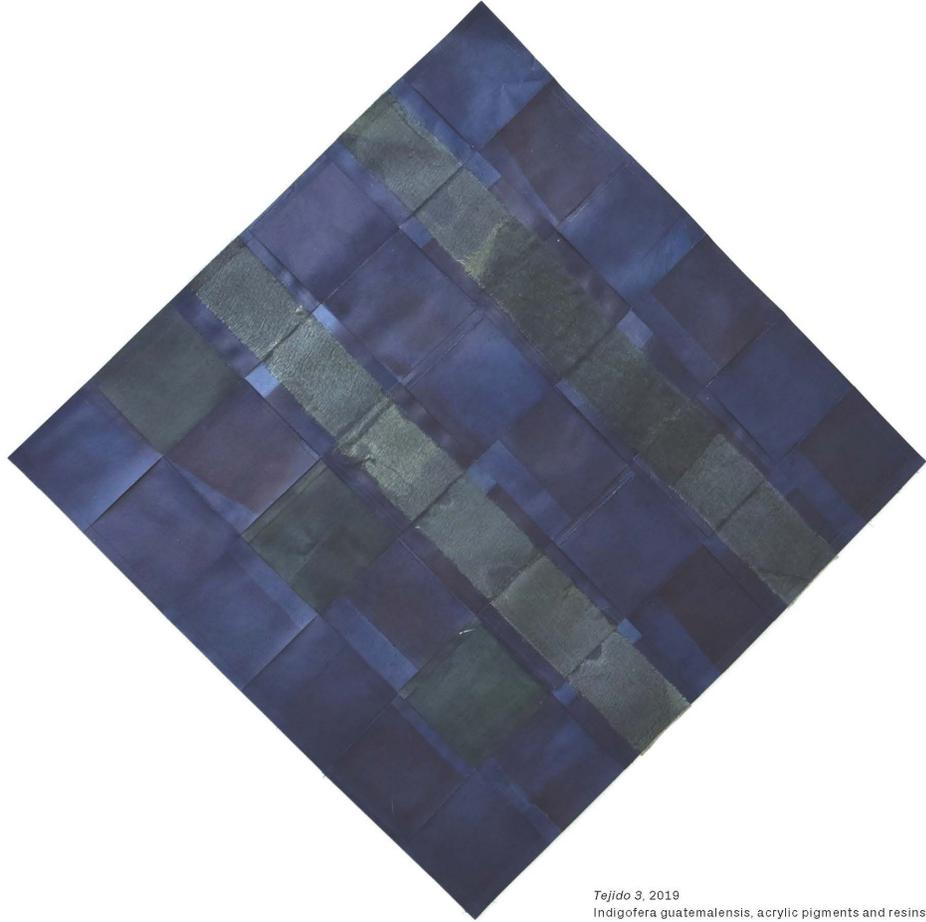
With her thought-provoking and beautiful artworks, Monterroso is trying to unravel the threads or knots that the colonial and patriarchal tradition have left in Guatemala's contemporary social fabric.

Isabela Villanueva
Art Historian



Cuarentena, Composición del día #32, 2020
Watercolor, charcoal on paper
12 15/16 × 17 5/16 in.

Cuarentena, Composición del día #28, 2020
Watercolor, charcoal on paper
12 15/16 × 17 5/16 in.



Tejido 3, 2019
Indigofera guatemalensis, acrylic pigments and resins on
paper
47 3/16 × 47 3/16 in.



Efectos Cruzados 12, 2020
Yarn dyed with indigofera guatemalensis, and wood
24 3/4 × 7 13/16 × 5 1/16 in.