

In-betweens: Mónica Alcázar-Duarte at Autograph

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'Mónica Alcázar-Duarte: Digital Clouds Don't Carry Rain', Autograph, London,
16 February – 1 June 2024



'Mónica Alcázar-Duarte: Digital Clouds Don't Carry Rain', exhibition view at Autograph, London, 16 February – 1 June 2024, courtesy of Autograph, photo by Kate Elliott

Curated by Bindi Vora, 'Mónica Alcázar-Duarte: Digital Clouds Don't Carry Rain' at London's Autograph gallery earlier in 2024 showed a constellation of works executed in a range of media, analogue and digital, including photography, film and a multimedia installation. Rather than an isolated instance, the exhibition responded to Alcázar-Duarte's long-term research into the impact of Western science and technology, observed from a decolonial perspective and foregrounding Indigenous worldviews. The artist's focus on lens-based media is consistent with these underlying themes, as she scrutinises an apparatus which has historically contributed not just to the formation of a prevailing corpus of scientific knowledge but also to enhancing its value as truth, shaping perspectives and ways of post-Enlightenment seeing.

Western representational conventions and standards continue to inform decisions made at micro and macro levels, impacting our sense of being in the world. The future of our planet, and our species, Alcázar-Duarte would argue, thus hinges upon a rather limited and limiting understanding of our past, present and potential futures. Consistent with earlier projects such as *The New Colonists* (2017) and *Second Nature* (2021), the work on view at Autograph sought to engage alternative mindsets, to decentre human-made vs nature dichotomies, questioning notions of unhindered progress. The exhibition might thus be read as an iteration, a potential unfolding of a flexible aesthetic structure, a temporary instantiation of a greater project that shifts and transforms in time, an approach that reflects the artist's interest in, and experimentation with, non-linearity. Part lament, part call to arms, 'Digital Clouds Don't Carry Rain' pressed forth some urgent questions concerning our ecological footprint from the start of globalisation to date, from an interspecies perspective.

Entering the upper floor gallery, viewers encountered a dimly lit dark green room, with an installation at its core, flanked by a series of framed photographs. A large-scale mural was positioned at the back of the gallery, facing outwards. To the right, the film *U K'ux Kaj / Heart of sky, Mayan god of storms* (2023–24) was playing on a LCD screen. The film is part of a multi-year project investigating ancestral knowledge systems from the Yucatán peninsula which have historically coincided, co-existed with Western epistemology, resisting its dominance. *Uk'u'x Kaj*, which literally translates to 'Heart of Sky', is a Maya deity who, according to the Popol Vuh, *thought* the world into being. Hence, the film tells a story of creation and endurance, of transformation, the making and unmaking of worlds, reflecting on the legacy of colonialism and humankind's position in the universe. It begins with a diagrammatic rendering of an arm, the viewer's eye scanning its geometrical surface inside-out, encountering its double in the flesh within the next scene. Fingers move in gentle motion, exploring the mobility of this tactile apparatus, the skin's texture, the topography of bones, ligaments, veins, glowing in UV light. The camera's proximity to the body – a measure of sorts – provides an opportunity to open up the view towards the sky, whereupon a narrator tells a story of origins in Spanish: '*para entender el mapa del universo hay que empezar por el principio*', 'to understand a map of this Universe, one needs to start from the beginning'. Note that the conjunction *del* is deliberately translated as 'this', instead of 'the' in accompanying the word 'Universe', as a means to emphasise, perhaps, that this is just one of many possible worlds, one of multiple possibilities of how it could have all played out. Fire is highlighted as the key element for understanding this story of origins: '*es con fuego que la belleza es posible*', 'because it is only with fire that beauty becomes possible'.

Throughout its duration, the film juxtaposes scarred and damaged landscapes, intimations of disaster, with lush bodies of water, forests, plants, beaming with life, engulfed in birdsong. 'This is where it all started, where it all started with fire, when all that mattered was burned, we were almost erased', a second narrator intercedes in Yucatec Maya, a Maya language spoken in the peninsula. 'The bees kept everything alive and saved us all', she explains.



Mónica Alcázar-Duarte, film still from *U K'ux Kaj / Heart of sky, Mayan god of storms*, 2023–24, 8'00" mins, Mayan with English subtitles, commissioned by The National Geographic Society, courtesy of the artist

Ideas around science and technology come to the fore, whereby myths of Western dominance are undermined through local strategies of survival that are premised upon a profound understanding of the interrelation between all living beings. *Xúnan káab*, or the Royal Lady Bee (*Melipona beecheii*), is brought to the fore as fundamental to understanding this connection, given it has endured for over 3,000 years, safeguarding the continuity of Maya communities within the region. In a subsequent segment from the film, a drone (an unmanned aerial vehicle and not a male bee) descends upon the scene, revealing, maybe scouting out, the scorched terrain. While some traces of habitation are left, walls, enclosures, charred tree stumps and burnt leaves indicate that this is no longer a hospitable space. Some green vegetation is visible along the horizon, however, and grass has begun to grow from the cracked earth.

At the centre of the scene stands a figure clad in pink, completely still. She wears gloves and is covered in a mesh-like textile – not unlike a beekeeper's suit – which wraps around the landscape, extending well beyond the frame like a long train. A conductive thread? This figure reappears at various moments in the film, most tellingly in front of the former Franciscan convent of San Miguel Arcángel at Maní. Here, earlier references to fire are clarified by the Maya narrator: 'From the ashes we tried to rescue what was left, we knew what we needed to rescue, but it had to be in this new language, the only way we kept anything from before the fire.' The passage points to events from around the year 1562 when the Franciscan friar Diego de Landa Calderón (1524–1579) initiated an inquisition in Maní, culminating with an *auto de fe* ceremony during which countless Maya artefacts and codices were destroyed and burned.¹

¹ Some historians give an estimate of around 20,000 items; see John F Chuchiak IV, 'In Servicio Dei: Fray Diego de Landa, the Franciscan Order, and the Return of the Extirpation of Idolatry in the Colonial Diocese of Yucatán, 1573–1579', *The Americas*, vol 61, no 4, April 2005, pp 611–646, p 614.



Mónica Alcázar-Duarte, film still from *U K'ux Kaj / Heart of sky, Mayan god of storms*, 2023–24, 8'00" mins, Mayan with English subtitles, commissioned by The National Geographic Society, courtesy of the artist

De Landa was amongst the first Franciscan missionaries to arrive in 1549 to Nueva España (New Spain), which was governed by the Spanish Crown through secular and clerical representatives in Mexico City. His evangelisation measures were considered so extreme that Francisco de Toral, then bishop of Yucatán, had him investigated for abuse of authority and brought in front of the Council of the Indies in 1563. Eventually exonerated, de Landa returned to Yucatán in 1573 as bishop, replacing the recently deceased Toral and resuming his 'extirpation' campaigns on a larger scale.

The 12 July 1562 *auto de fe* is mentioned in de Landa's well-known account *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* (1566?) – now attributed to multiple authors – which provides detailed information about Indigenous communities living in the region during the early colonial period, while chronicling the Church's concerted, violent efforts to counter 'idolatry'.² Interestingly, despite clear attempts to erase Maya culture and written records, the manuscript included descriptions of Maya script, attempting, albeit incorrectly, to interpret glyphs. This gesture highlights the paradoxical nature of the colonisers' 'civilising mission', which preached salvation and purported to rescue the Indigenous *other*, while seeking to fundamentally alter their very identities.

Yet even within destruction, even on such scale, Mesoamerican Indigenous cultures endured, resisting colonial structures. Indeed, historians have noted that the terror unleashed by de Landa over the course of his tenure – first as friar, later as bishop of Yucatán – had an unforeseen effect. Instead of being uprooted, Indigenous beliefs persisted and even amplified. From the

² 'Hallámosles gran número de libros de estas sus letras, y porque no tenían cosa en que no hubiese superstición y falsedades del demonio, se los quemamos todos, lo cual sentían a maravilla y les daba pena.' [We found a great number of books in their letters, and because they contained nothing but superstition and falsehoods of the devil, we burned them all, which shocked them and caused them sorrow.] See Diego de Landa Calderón, *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, Linkgua, Barcelona, 2011, p 80.

perspective of the colonised, syncretism signals the strategic infiltration of local cultures within Catholicism, hence undoing the mission of evangelisation.

‘The new language did not have words, for these ideas that make us alive today. The new language made us sound dead. Made us always in the past tense. Like ghosts that live only in myths,’ the Maya narrator laments. ‘But we have always been here’, she continues, ‘amongst, bees, flowers and ashes. We live through our language. A language made of Nature.’ Alcázar-Duarte’s film thus locates Nature as the centre of Indigenous resistance, essential for the perpetuation of life, the guardian of ancestral knowledge. This notion informed the exhibition as a whole, as the artist explores its manifold manifestations through adjacent bodies of work. The case of Maní, capital of the Tutul-Xiu chiefdom before the Spanish conquest, is paradigmatic and provides an anchor for a story of colonisation and epistemicide that is otherwise too wide and too deep to comprehend within the span of a short film and a one-room exhibition.

Strategically, these fragments of history are grounded in time and space, making the claims specific, while also mobilising them towards greater associations, mapping out wider terrain within Alcázar-Duarte’s oeuvre. Take, for instance, the film *Nepantla*, currently in progress, which reflects upon the history of Maní while observing local community life at present, and draws parallels with the mission of NASA’s James T Webb Space Telescope to uncover the origins of the universe.³ It represents the final chapter of a trilogy focusing on space exploration, beginning with the project *The New Colonists* (2017), which sought to bring eco-critical and decolonial considerations to bear upon a field that has tended to disregard such concerns in the name of rapid technological advance. *U K’ux K’aj / Heart of sky, Mayan god of storms* ends with an explosion, a Big Bang, contemplating that which came before and that which is about to begin.⁴ In an email exchange with the artist, she explained that all of these projects, regardless of form – photobook, film, multimedia installation, exhibition – are interconnected and address a common theme. They ‘...*giran alrededor de la pregunta de* [revolve around the question of] “bearers of knowledge”. Who claims it? Who “owns” it? And by doing this has a claim on being bearers for “the future”.’⁵

While these questions linger, other sentient beings come to the fore as potential candidates. The stingless *Xúnan káab* bee returns, centred conceptually and also in physical terms, as part of the largest installation in the room, *T’aabal chukChuuk / Embers* (2024). This ‘garden of technology’, as expressed by the artist, connects various themes and motifs from the exhibition. Through an app accessible via a tablet, visitors could activate an Augmented Reality (AR)

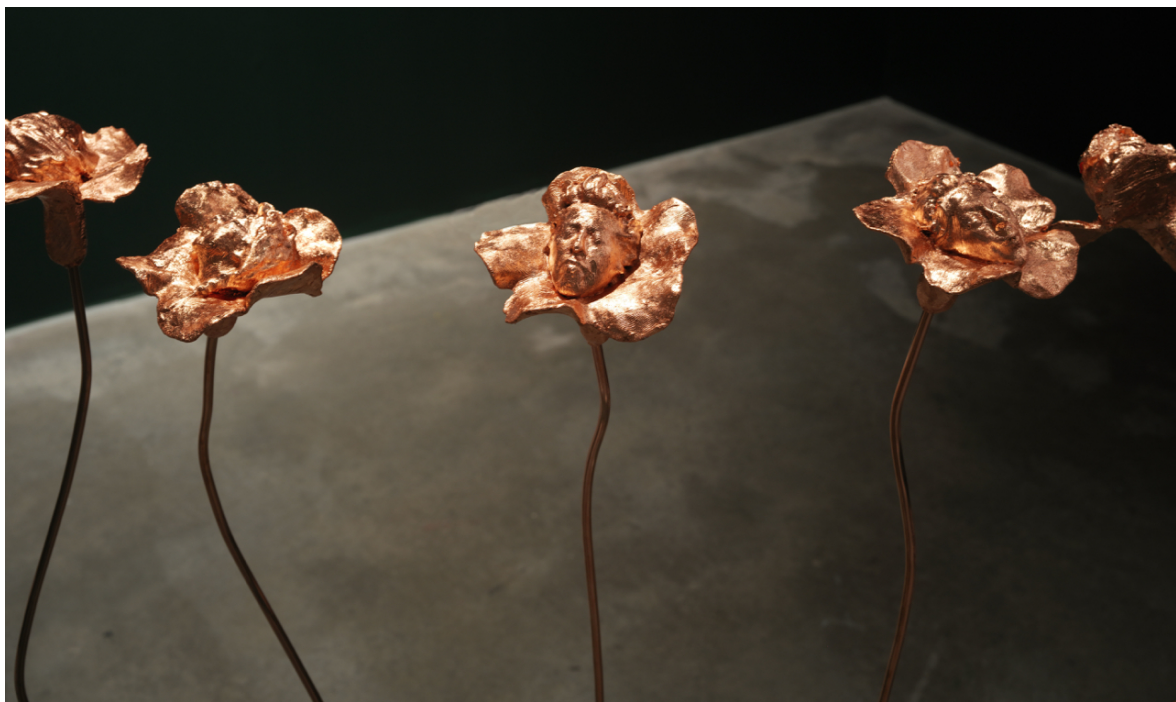
³ The term *nepantla*, from Nahuatl, translated as ‘in-between’, has become central to describing the experience of Chicánx and Latinx individuals. Alcázar-Duarte has noted the influence of writer and scholar Gloria E Anzaldúa who developed this concept at length in her work.

⁴ ‘*En cuanto todo arde, la explosión de un nuevo mundo ocurre. Cuando esta nueva vida surge, es como si lo que existió antes envaneciera...*’ [The explosion opens the door for a new world, it is as if that which was there before just fades away...].

⁵ I note that like many citizens from the global diaspora, Alcázar-Duarte employs both her native tongue, Spanish and her second language, English, in conversation.

sculpture, allowing a tree to sprout forth. This vegetal ‘apparition’ could be observed from multiple angles, as one moved within the hexagonal space delimited by a light wooden structure upon which fifty-six 3D printed lilies ‘grow’. The software employed to construct the various elements of the installation is based on a ‘bee algorithm’ developed by scientists from the University of Birmingham, which ‘mimics the foraging behaviour of honey bees’.⁶

Approaching the 3D printed flowers, one notices rather delicate heads and hands emerging onto their surfaces. These are, in fact, self-portraits, with the artist assuming expressions and poses that reference *casta* paintings, a genre that became popular during the eighteenth century in viceregal Mexico (only one set survives from the viceroyalty of Peru). To design the flowers, Alcázar-Duarte employed aspects of Pham and Castellani’s ‘bee algorithm’,⁷ generating a GAN simulation that combines the fleur-de-lis – a traditional royal symbol – and 3D scans of her face. The outcome is certainly uncanny, recalling the Surrealists’ exaltation of the Comte de Lautréamont’s now famous line, ‘the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing machine and an umbrella’. Yet, while the procedure might be similar, Alcázar-Duarte’s project taps into another lineage altogether.



Mónica Alcázar-Duarte, *T'aabal chukChuuk / Embers*, 2024, installation view, courtesy of Autograph, photo by Kate Elliott

Casta paintings were generally painted as a series of sixteen, depicting interracial families as racial types with a goal to represent the increasingly mixed population of viceregal Mexico to the Spanish Crown. The first painting from the series usually represented a Spanish man alongside an Amerindian woman and their *mestizo* child, while the rest of the series would be constructed

⁶ See D T Pham and Marco Castellani, ‘The Bees Algorithm’, accessed 14 August 2024, <http://beesalgorithmwebsite.altervista.org/>

⁷ See *ibid*

sequentially, in strict order, on the basis of this unit. Afro-descendants were included as well, and the complexities of *mestizaje* were thus reduced to being illustrated as a purportedly logical (while biased) progression along strictly demarcated racial lines. *Casta* paintings represent a taxonomy of race, a system for classifying individuals based on their appearance and were meant to reinforce the *sistema de castas* or lineage that became the norm throughout the Spanish Empire.⁸ It is important to note here that while the term *casta* shares certain similarities with ‘caste’, the two are not synonymous, the main distinction being that the categories established by these paintings were not legally enforced. An interesting parallel emerges between Alcázar-Duarte’s take on the genre, and Leah Gordon’s *Caste Portraits* (2012), which reference another, equally absurd, taxonomic system for racial classification concocted in eighteenth-century colonial Haiti by the French public officer and slave-owner Médéric Moreau de St Mery.⁹

While presenting as factual, *casta* paintings reflected the Spanish colonial imaginary. Hence, the distinctions they sought to illustrate remained but fictional accounts and ultimately failed to manifest in real life. The typological approach that is seen here could be later identified in ‘type’ photographs, which were produced from the mid-nineteenth to well into the twentieth century for scientific study in fields such as anthropology and medicine, as well as for commercial purposes, since they were ‘consumed’ by eager elites in the West and even in then current or former colonies.¹⁰ They would become instrumental for promoting pseudo-scientific theories concerning race and ethnicity with profound, long-term impact through to the present day. Indeed, Alcázar-Duarte shifts the discussion from these early modern ‘archetypes’ represented in *casta* paintings to the socio-political implications of allegedly neutral software algorithms and AI. Her series *Second Nature* (2021) – not included in the exhibition – explored this topic in depth, by relation to the representation and misrepresentation of racialised bodies via a range of policing, bureaucratic, and even mundane digital technologies. The artist’s body becomes a means to performatively upturn, destabilise and confuse the surveillance apparatus, diverting its capacity to synthesise information and recognise patterns towards a more playful, even nonsensical purpose.

In *T’aabal chukChuuk / Embers* (2024), Alcázar-Duarte’s hybrid autobiographical figures appear trapped within their material identities. Nevertheless, demonstrative gestures derived from the *casta* paintings seem eager to drive the story forward, guiding the viewer. An exchange of gestures ensued throughout the exhibition as the sculptural movements were transferred onto the photographic picture plane, creating a dynamic surround. Hung along the walls of the gallery were medium-sized photographic prints, each showing an individual figure captured within a natural setting. Some of the images are shot from the distance, others up-close, and

⁸ Such taxonomies parallel those applied to other species of plants and animals, within hierarchic systems of classification.

⁹ See ‘Caste/Cast’ on artist Leah Gordon’s website: <https://leahgordon.co.uk/Caste-Cast>, accessed 8 December 2024

¹⁰ For a discussion of ‘type’ photography, see Elizabeth Edwards, ‘Photographic “types”: The pursuit of method’, *Visual Anthropology*, vol 3, nos 2–3, pp 235–258.

we learn that these too are self-portraits. Clad in colourful and rather elegant outfits, the protagonist gestures towards the viewer, striking poses that imitate *casta* paintings. The titles reveal that instead of generic ‘types’, these pictures invoke Maya deities. Powerful and self-possessed, they embody elemental forces (thunder), celestial bodies (the Moon), the forest, animal and plant life (bees, a serpent, cacao), existence (birth, death), and even time itself. Immersed in verdant landscapes, they signal to the viewer to approach cautiously, or stop in their tracks. The figures’ movements are highlighted in ink by the artist’s hand, which extends, protracts, highlights and punctuates, as if guided by an external force. A form of automated drawing ensues, producing diagrams of movement, inspired yet again by the ‘bee algorithm’, kinetic photographs about to come to life.



Mónica Alcázar-Duarte, *Yum Kaax – Mayan Jungle Deity*, 2023, from the series *Digital Clouds Don't Carry Rain*, courtesy of the artist

In Alcázar-Duarte’s ‘garden of technology’ the flowers are made human, or post-human, while here the human presence becomes symbolic, features rendered anonymous. Heads covered in flowers first appeared in *Second Nature* (2021), although there the disguise could interchangeably be a *lucha libre* mask, a wig, and other vegetal extravaganzas (think Giuseppe Arcimboldo’s cornucopias brought to life in the post-digital age). Such colourful, lush flowers signal abundance, yet the need for anonymity comes back to more immediate concerns related to identification software and racial bias. ‘What I have found through my research is how invisible complex algorithmic structures are’, Alcázar-Duarte has written in relation to

Second Nature, 'I want to make the power structures behind our internet-dependent society visible and examine the impact of the biased thinking they perpetuate.'¹¹ Socio-political implications of training and using algorithms at grand scale have come to the fore in recent art, as seen for instance in Trevor Paglen's collaborative projects with researcher Kate Crawford. The latter's work is especially pertinent, given her emphasis on the materiality of AI and its ecological footprint due to its dependency on extractive industries.¹²

Indeed, digital clouds do not carry rain, and instead are on the verge of leaving behind a world depleted of natural resources. Copper spins yet another thread connecting the various elements from this exhibition, as it provides the material support for the 3D printed flowers, and also for intervening upon the surface of photographs. During the colonial period, Mexico was the main copper producer in New Spain, and the industry remains significant for the country's economy. Extrapolating across such vast spatio-temporal distance, viewers are pressed to



'Mónica Alcázar-Duarte: Digital Clouds Don't Carry Rain', exhibition view, courtesy of Autograph, photo by Kate Elliott

contemplate the urgent need for a shared awareness to prevent ecological collapse. Alcázar-Duarte's photographs were taken in Derbyshire, England, considered the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution, amongst dwindling forests and dying trees. The impact of long-term

¹¹ The artist, quoted in 'Behind the Algorithm: Migration, Mexican Women and Digital Bias, Mónica Alcázar-Duarte's "Second Nature"' on Autograph's Online Gallery, accessed 14 August 2024, <https://autograph.org.uk/online-image-galleries/monica-alcazar-duarte-second-nature>.

¹² See Kate Crawford, *Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence*, Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut, 2022

deforestation and globalisation is deeply felt here, as the area has been greatly affected by ash dieback since the early 2000s. In a way, these pictures bring the legacy of colonialism ‘back home’ and we are urged to consider how the wealth extracted from the colonies fuelled the Industrial Revolution and the extent to which conflicts over resources have accelerated in its aftermath, catalysed by modern life. The only non-anonymised photograph in the exhibition appeared in large format, as a mural, at the back of the gallery. It shows the artist dressed like an English ‘country gentleman’ assuming a commanding pose atop of a sectioned tree trunk, gazing into the distance. Tragically, however, the domain is mostly deserted, devoid of life, while threatening clouds gather above. ‘The coming storm!’ its title reads, a final warning. What more appropriate – or should I say subversive – way to comment on the dangers of enduring grand narratives, on myths around empire and ethnic superiority, than through the body of a migrant *mestiza* woman of Indigenous descent.

At Autograph, within a relatively small gallery devoid of natural light, Alcázar-Duarte created something akin to a time capsule, one that might be placed in a probe and sent out into space. Appropriately, the exhibition unfolded across multiple spatial and temporal scales, contemplating our finitude within the infinity of the universe. Through her work, she unravels and condenses immensely complex histories, yet always reflecting upon these with care. The role of the artist becomes akin to that of the beekeeper, someone who is attuned to nature, and also to history, in practice and spirit, a guardian perhaps.¹³

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¹³ The figure of the beekeeper re-emerges in a recent project by the artist titled *Xuna'an Kaab - Grandma as a beekeeper* (2024), produced as part of a Prix pour la Photographie commission for the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac.