

ART WALL

Luchita Hurtado

August 4, 2021–March 13, 2022

Commissioned for the BAMPFA Art Wall, this site-specific mural by Luchita Hurtado (1920–2020) depicts a striated landscape punctuated by hand-drawn block lettering identifying each layer’s composition. Originally executed in black ink, it has been adapted to the scale of the Art Wall in paint while maintaining the nuances of the artist’s hand, which are especially evident in the specificity of the mark making and its use to label the world as Hurtado saw it. Horizon lines and text, two compositional strategies employed throughout Hurtado’s practice, combine in the installation to map the interconnected cycle of life and death. *I Live Here* (2020), the artist’s first large-scale site-specific work, references the range of her series that merge landscape and language with ecological concerns. The mural celebrates Hurtado’s extremely personal and expansive vision while emphasizing her lifelong commitment to environmentalism.

The diaristic quality of Hurtado’s work connects the personal to the universal and the political, making for a poignant understanding of her life and art. Not driven by external validation, she created continuously and with great focus in private, usually when family members had gone to bed for the evening; it was only after her drawings and paintings were found alongside those of her late husband Lee Mullican (1919–1998) that her talent was celebrated in major exhibitions in the US and abroad. The arc of Hurtado’s career and her late emergence into the spotlight follow a pattern that has become familiar in recent years as institutions have begun to write women artists of color—including Hurtado—into the histories that have long been defined without them. *I Live Here*, presented as part of *New Time: Art and Feminisms in the Twenty-First Century*, functions partially as a historical corrective that reminds us of the monumental contributions of such women.

Artist Andrea Bowers recounted a conversation where “[Hurtado] told me that in the past, people would ask her to tell them about herself,

but she didn’t think there was anything impressive, so she would make it up.”<sup>1</sup> The modesty reflected in this statement denotes Hurtado’s own hesitancy to position herself among her contemporaries. Her response acknowledged the simultaneous presence and absence of recognition in such an inquiry, and is a reflection of the empowerment that came from inventing her own narrative in the face of social forces that were structured to minimize her achievements and experiences.

Belying the humility expressed in her statement above, Hurtado’s life was rich with adventures throughout the world and intimate friendships with many major artists and intellectuals of her time. Born in Maiquetía, Venezuela, in 1920, she grew up in New York and went on to live in Santo Domingo; Washington, DC; Mexico City; Mill Valley; and Los Angeles. Throughout those travels she studied and made art, and also married three times and had four sons, one of whom died at the age of five. Hurtado relocated to Los Angeles in 1951, continued to travel with her family, and secured a studio in Santa Monica Canyon in 1961.

The works created during the years that followed explore themes that underpin the design for *I Live Here*. Hurtado’s *I Am* paintings and drawings, started in the late 1960s, depict the protrusion of the artist’s breasts, stomach, and feet from her vantage point. Just as we now locate Hurtado within the arc of art history, we attempt to situate ourselves in the various layers she identifies within her compositions. Notably, Hurtado said of one’s body: “This is a landscape, this is the world, this is all you have, this is your home, this is where you live. You are what you feel, what you hear, what you know.”<sup>2</sup> She mirrors her position in the *I Am* paintings and the mural by contextualizing human life within her own subjectivity and the natural world, respectively. However, in both the series and *I Live Here*, the figure—whether her own body or the “corpse” layer that forms the bedrock of the landscape—appears at the bottom of the composition so that human experience, and the body itself, constitutes one fleeting part of a much larger whole.

Although her practice was largely private, Hurtado was a founding member of the Los Angeles Council of Women Artists. When she introduced herself as Luchita Mullican during a 1971 meeting organized by Joyce Kozloff, her friend June Wayne called out “Luchita what?” prompting Hurtado to restate her name as Luchita Hurtado.<sup>3</sup> Claiming her own name outside of her family was an empowering act of self-identification that prompted her use of text in the paintings she made during the 1970s. Words such as “SKY,” “EARTH,” and “WATER,” “ME,” “WOMB,” “DEATH,” and “LOVE” broke through her abstractions, ultimately becoming the structural basis of her compositions.

Some of these same words from earlier works reappear here, where the wavering, imperfect quality of her hand-drawn lines denotes the fragility of human life amid the current ecological crisis. It also underscores the role humanity plays in the destruction of the earth. In the last ten years, her bold lines and hand-drawn block lettering became the backbone of written statements and tableaux that boldly address the precarious state of our world. “I have a responsibility to my world, to my planet,” she asserted. Here, Hurtado’s lines make the mural an urgent message that in effect becomes a type of protest sign.

Claire Frost

CURATORIAL ASSISTANT

1. Andrea Bowers, “The Equanimity of Luchita Hurtado,” in *I Live, I Die, I Will Be Reborn*, ed. Rebecca Lewin and Joseph Constable (London: Koenig Books, 2019), 56.  
2. Luchita Hurtado, “Oral history interview with Luchita Hurtado, 1994 May 1–1995 Apr. 13,” interview by Paul Karlstrom, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-luchita-hurtado-13583#transcript>.  
3. Marie Heilich, “Timeline,” in *I Live, I Die, I Will Be Reborn*, 225.

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Luchita Hurtado: *I Live Here*, 2021; acrylic paint on wall; courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Impart Photography.



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SKY

WATER

EARTH

DIRT

MOUNTAIN

LAND

SOIL

CORPSE

