

"Trig Metawe Kura"The Pitcher of Broken Stone

Francisco Huichaqueo Pérez

In February 2022, I inaugurated an exhibition in Santiago de Chile at the Palacio Pereira. The neoclassical mansion is in the city's old town and was consecrated as a national monument in 1974 by the Chilean National Monuments Council. The building had spent decades in ruin after its construction in 1874 by the French architect Lucien Hénault, who had built it on behalf of the politician Luis Pereira. This newly restored palace was also one of the venues for drafting a new Chilean constitution in 2021 and 2022. Some of the debates for the Constitutional Convention were held at this national heritage site, which, in my opinion, is one of the best examples of historic restoration work in Chile.

I have always been fascinated by the sorts of restoration projects Chileans consider essential for their national memory. This thought came to mind when I received the invitation from Chile's undersecretary of cultural heritage to exhibit in one of the rooms of the palace. I was, of course, interested in the invitation because of the site's history, and my first exhibition proposals were, naturally, about cultural heritage. However, my exhibition would not be about the heritage of Chileans but rather of Mapuches. I had previous experiences curating exhibitions around Mapuche heritage in other museums in Chile and the Berlin Biennale in 2020.



Figure 1. Entrance to "Trig Metawe Kura." Photo by author.

For some time now, cultural heritage as a concept and theme has resonated deeply within Indigenous communities. As our minority communities labored to do the difficult work of reconstruction following the end of formal colonialism, we realized that the colonial expansion had also occurred in

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government institutions and the dominant educational structures. In other words, non-Indigenous peoples think and direct what is ours. This provided more than enough reason for me to accept the invitation to use this recently restored palace to create an exhibition about the question of how to restore indigeneity in the Mapuche case. Naturally, my proposal caused tension because I was really asking the very Chilean museums that manage national heritage to exhibit Mapuche artifacts in an installation under the Indigenous gaze and cosmovision. What exactly does this mean? It means to take a moment to distance ourselves from Western science. It means to depart from the cabinets of curiosities of the nineteenth century. It means we take power as a minority over our own treasures for our spiritual use.

It is well-known that Indigenous cultural heritage is not administered by its own *pueblos*. Nation-states and the dominant Western culture command it under the excuse of conservation, protection, and accessible displays. All of this has become very clear to younger generations, so it is strange that museums all over the world still proudly embrace and display this colonial past and house extensive collections without the consent of the Indigenous *pueblos*. Such practices occur in both public and private institutions, including the Musée du Quai Branly–Jacques Chirac in Paris. Recently, however, there have been some attempts at restitution, including the return of Benin Bronzes from the Ethnological Museum of Berlin to Nigeria; the German government has also agreed to offer reparations for its plunder and genocide in Namibia. Chile is quite far behind in these types of actions. Such steps would mean that Chile recognizes past genocides and its militarized advances on Indigenous lands—which meant not only the material theft of land but, by default, Indigenous culture, art, and spirituality.

With all of this as antecedent, I accepted the invitation to craft an exhibition under the Mapuche gaze; I proposed to exhibit our pottery relics without display cases, without a timeline, and without museographic anthropological descriptions. I proposed something reminiscent of what I had experienced in Mapuche ceremonies in the countryside under the careful leadership of a machi (a shaman, as the Westerner puts it). Unsurprisingly, this proposal caused some tension with the undersecretary of cultural heritage; she could not agree to this venture due to the security risks, conservation guidelines, and many other factors just because of a solicitation from an Indigenous curator. In our subsequent discussion, I conveyed that to be decolonial (which is written about so much in the academy) is to engage in praxis and to not just stay in theory. There was so much at stake. It still is not common to see

an exhibition curated by an Indigenous person in an entirely Western place, nor is it common to see a museum exhibition without display cases or cabinets; we only ever see our own possessions created by our ancestors in previous millenniums from behind glass. It is our right to have and to manage those items that were taken from our territory; we have the right to reconstruct our memory and cultural heritage just as the Palacio Pereira was reconstructed.

In this instance, dialogue prevailed—something very uncommon in Chile. I was indeed able to curate the exhibit as aligned with Mapuche rituals. The exhibit was inaugurated and later closed under the spiritual codes of our pueblo. In summation, we had a territorial expansion and recovery under the mechanisms afforded to us by contemporary art. The exhibit's title "*Trig Metawe Kura: Cántaro de Piedra Roto*" ("The Pitcher of Broken Stone") refers to the writings of Mapuche poet Leonel Lienlaf, where he describes the shattering of the broken vessel and how, one day, another potter will rebuild it. In this case, I removed Mapuche pottery from behind museum glass with the goal of activating them using cinematic language from my own dreamlike images. Images from my filmic oeuvre sometimes fell on the ceramic or fell through the cracks at other times.

We, the Mapuche body, are that broken vessel, broken and fissured by the colonial interruption and its governmental apparatuses that remain to this day. Our mission is to call the potter to repair the Mapuche body—the broken pitcher—so it will return to its original function, one far removed from how its kidnappers have used it. But for now, we can also be potters using mechanisms such as art and cinema to repair and reconstruct memory.¹

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Figures 2-6. Photos of the exhibition by the author.

Notes

1 To learn more about the exhibit, please visit: https://www.huichaqueo.cl/mision/trig-metawe-kura.

Francisco Huichaqueo Pérez is a Mapuche visual artist, filmmaker, and faculty member of the Department of Humanities and Visual Arts of the University of Concepción in southern Chile. He is a graduate of the University of Chile. He has an MA in documentary film from the same university and a specialization in optics from the International School of Cinema and Television in San Antonio de los Baños, Cuba.

Expressed in video installation, documentary film, and essay film formats, his visual work is based on themes that concern his Mapuche lineage. He also intervenes in colonial spaces with tangible and intangible heritage, such as archaeological collections in museums within Chile and abroad. Longing for the return of the Indigenous heritage to the hands of his people in the near future, Huichagueo plays with the spectral image of cinema under the codes of the Mapuche worldview to complement and accompany the objects of spiritual and ceremonial use, recording everyday life today. Some of his projects include Wenu Pelon / Portal de luz, MAVI, Santiago de Chile, 2015-2021; Kuifi Ül / Ancient Sound, Gropius Bau Museum, Berlin Biennale, Germany, 2020; Chi Rütran Amulniei Ñi Nütram / Metal Continues to Speak, Pre-Columbian Museum of Santiago, 2016; Malon Wiño / The Silver Serpent, Matta Cultural Center, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 2016; Kalül Trawün / Meeting of The Corps, MNBA, Santiago, 2011-2012. He discussed his work at length in an interview with the ecomedia studies journal Media+Environment (University of California Press).

Huichaqueo has exhibited at international film festivals such as ImagiNative in Canada, the Toulouse Latino Film Festival, the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington DC, and the Human Resources Gallery in Los Angeles, amongst others. He has completed film and art residencies in Taiwan, France, and Colombia and has lectured on Indigenous cinema at NY University and Bernard Columbia in New York. Some of his most critically acclaimed film work includes *Mencer ñi pewma*, 2012; *Ilwen / The Earth Smells of Father*, 2013; *Mujeres Espíritu*, 2020.