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In Search of the Cuenca Biennial

by Evan Moffitt

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Finishing School in the Cuenca Biennial. Photo by the author.

The night was black and viscous in Cuenca, though the mountain air was thin. It had been 22 hours since I left New York, via Bogotá and Quito, for the colonial town nestled in the foothills of the Ecuadorian Andes. As my taxi dropped me off on a cobblestoned street, there was no sign of the Cuenca Biennial, whose 14th- edition was set to open in a couple days: just shuttered window hatches and doors with magnificent knockers, a city with a 9 pm bedtime. A loud rap summoned the night porter, who directed me through a darkened atrium and up two flights of creaking stairs.

I had arrived at the invitation of Jesús Fuenmayor, the biennial's curator, who attached a dense week-long program of openings to his email—each, I assumed, part of the sprawling exhibition, titled "Estructuras Vivas" (Living Structures), which would unfold at various locations throughout the city. Cuenca, a UNESCO World Heritage site, has hosted the biennial in its colonial arcades and convents since 1987, making it the second oldest of its kind in South America. A curatorial crucible for the region, its organizers and artists have mostly hailed from Latin America. Painting predominated across a series of national presentations until 2002, when it became a thematic exhibition of a model familiar to the contemporary biennial circuit. Fuenmayor, the director and curator of the Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation (CIFO), promised to bring a breadth of expertise to the project. In a curatorial statement (also attached to his email), he acknowledged the importance of art as "plural experience: aesthetic, sensory, intellectual, emotional, affective, but also psychological, political, sociological, anthropological."

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The morning sun burned hot white and cancerously direct. No exhibition guide had yet been printed, but I had starred the listed exhibition sites on Google Maps—an old press trip habit—and set out for Plaza Civica, a broad square that abuts a large indoor market. A propeller plane had crash-landed on the paving stones, and daylight glinted off its unpainted tin. Two small boys bounced up and down on its wings, while women carrying baskets of fruit passed by, taking little notice. This was a Beechcraft Super King 200, I later learned: the same model that was carrying the president of Ecuador, Jaime Roldós Aguilera, when it mysteriously crashed on May 24, 1981—here reconstructed by the LA-based collective Finishing School. Not long after Chilean president Salvador Allende was murdered in a CIA-orchestrated coup, the tragedy has long been shrouded in suspicion of US involvement and galvanized Ecuadorian resistance to American imperialism. That morning, though, with no accompanying label, it shone like an oversized Christmas bauble.

Other works were less easy to find. I browsed market stalls packed with green *lucuma*, orange *aguaymanto* and *naranjilla*, before finding myself back where I'd started. There a halved column of cast concrete, its two sides just an inch apart, had been erected in the center of the plaza. A photographer stood snapping photos, another auspicious sign. When I got closer I noticed a heaving body encased inside: Carlos Martiel, the artist and performer of his work *Gente de Color* (People of Color), 2018. The intensely claustrophobic gesture elicited more curiosity from locals. Many pressed their noses to the crack; some were surprised to find a man staring back at them. Behind Martiel, Quechua shoe-shiners knelt at their stations before mostly white clients, an unsettling parallel to the prison of racism his work enacted.

On my walk back to the hotel, Cuenca's usually quiet streets swelled with drumbeats and chanting. Thousands of students began to march past the central square carrying signs and umbrellas. "Con el futuro del país NO SE JUEGA" read one—"DO NOT PLAY with the future of the country." The target of their fury, President Lenín Moreno, appeared in effigy and cartoon, his outstretched hand clutching US dollar bills. Days before, Moreno had announced major cuts to higher education funding. Dancers in traditional Quechua dress twirled burning incense sticks, and a small rock band coasted by in the flatbed of a pickup truck, singing protest ballads.

Austerity had already affected the biennial. In August, it was announced that a measly \$100,000 of public funds would be available for the exhibition, a third of what Fuenmayor and his team had anticipated. Moreno, who is considering a loan from the IMF to offset deficits and falling oil prices, has made even deeper cuts to government salaries. While none of the 53 artists were dropped from the program, the installation was agonizingly slow, and each day I found myself visiting shuttered venues rumored to be open and hunting for work yet to be finished, like Kafka's K. circling the castle. Maps, meanwhile, never arrived.

That day, Casa Bial—*the exhibition's hub*—was mostly empty, works by Lygia Clark, Santiago Reyes, and Jimmy Robert boxed up in labelled crates. I wandered up a warped staircase festooned with painted ivy garlands and velvet curtains with gold brocade, an illusion ruptured by chipped plaster. In a small second-floor administrative office, a young man helpfully explained that the biennial wouldn't open until Friday; I had flown in on Tuesday night. Nonetheless, several venues had finished with install, and after handing me a press badge he recommended I visit the Museo de las Madres Conceptas, a convent just 10 minutes' walk away.

Founded in 1599 and reconstructed after the 1797 earthquake, the nunnery is a vast windowless fortress spread across one city block, like the region's Inca palaces with their high stone walls. It was a favored destination for unmarried daughters of the Spanish royal family, who for years served as unofficial state bankers for the colonies. ATMs having made these lending habits obsolete, the sisters of Conceptas now sell baked goods through a revolving door near the convent chapel. I circled the building several times before I found the small alcove, where a woman lay a dollar on the rotating shelf, a small plaque above it praising "Ave Maria." As it slowly spun, the cash vanished and in its place appeared a *pan dulce*. There was no sign of the nun but a muffled "Gracias."



At a side entrance, I flashed my badge at a guard, who ushered me into the empty cloister, its courtyard garden fragrant with mint and rosemary. The program listed projects by Rey Akdogan and Ana Mazzei, as well as work by Ecuadorian artists Jenny Jaramillo, Santiago Reyes, and Juliana Vidal, but every door I tried was locked. Upstairs, the low hum of chanted prayer filtered through the walls. Passing a darkened window, I jumped at the sight of a kneeling woman: a life-sized mannequin, a literal model of religious devotion. Another room held a diorama of the archangel Michael slaying the devil, a horned red doll hideously coated in patchy feathers and fur.



Luc Tuymans, *The Return*, 2018. Photo by the author.

Downstairs, I jimmied one last door and found myself in a lightless chamber; on the floor lay an elegant lattice resembling a pilates machine of Scandinavian modernist design. The sculpture by Ana Mazzei allows users to mimic the bodily positions of subjects in baroque and Renaissance religious paintings: St. Paul on the road to Damascus, the Virgin swooning at the sight of crucified Christ. An empty vessel, not unlike the quiet cloister in which it sat, that could furnish either torture or rapture.

There were more sculptures by Mazzei listed at the Museo de la Historia de Medicina, or Museum of Medical History, where I set out the following day—one before the public opening of the biennial, two before my scheduled departure. The museum lay on the other side of the Rio Tomebamba, a churning rapid of mountain snowmelt. Beyond a small parking lot and hospital waiting room, where elderly locals sat awaiting care, the museum encompasses an open courtyard, where two men were busy drilling together sheets of corrugated aluminum into a large shed sculpture by Oscar Abraham Pabón. Once again, the galleries were dark: I could find no Mazzeis in their long halls crammed with rusting 19th century obstetric devices and gynecological examination chairs. Painted portraits of mustachioed men—notable surgeons and chemists—adorned the walls. Collages by Pablo Helguera, culled from 1950s home furnishing advertisements and medical textbooks, had already been placed in glass vitrines, where they made too-obvious reference to their creepy surroundings: a limbless pharmacist mannequin in a white lab coat, smiling amongst dusty drug-filled bottles. In an empty administrative office a few yards away, a moody soundtrack played from a crackling boombox. "O, statua gentilissima" (O, gentle statue) from *Don Giovanni*, the titular Lothario's duet with a vengeful gravestone, sent me swiftly on my way.

That night, I joined the visiting artists at Tiesto's Café for *costillas* and *picudos*. No one seemed much bothered that their work had not been installed on the eve of the opening. Felipe Meres had come from the Pumapungo Museum, where he had waited in vain for a projector to arrive while browsing the city's anthropological collection, including Inca fertility statues he 3D scanned and manipulated for his commissioned film. The work did screen the following night, and in it each object slowly rotates, some turning translucent as blown glass. Nina Canell and Robin Watkins were in high spirits, having shipped all their materials with them from Berlin: thin wishbone lengths of wire that, when zapped with an electric current change their shape. The artists seemed to take the biennial's theme most directly to heart, giving dead matter life through muscle memory. Luc Tuymans, stone-faced and chain-smoking, seemed nonetheless at ease, having completed his painting in situ that afternoon. It was the only other finished work I saw on my visit the following day to the Municipal Museum of Modern Art, which was full of unopened crates and loose electrical wiring. In it, the ghoulish woodsmen from Season Three of *Twin Peaks* descend a staircase, faded Tuymans's signature slate gray, as out of place in that sunny Andean town as their Belgian maker.

The maps did ultimately arrive—in digital form—though the weather took a turn. The skies darkened as I followed the river to Pumapungo, which rests on the ramparts of a former Inca royal palace. Cuenca was, for a brief time, the northern capital of the Empire. Spanish conquistadors heard decadent tales of the "Gate of the Puma," of its houses with golden

roofs and floors. When they arrived, though, the place had been stripped bare and abandoned; historians believe it may have been El Dorado, the lost City of Gold. There wasn't much on display during my visit, though the view was majestic from the outdoor terrace, a broad court paved with mossy stones. I looked for Matheus Rocha Pitta's work—rumored to incorporate a school bus—and followed the map deep into a garden filled with agave and squawking parrots. I saw no bus, and the rain began to pour, so I set off, my disappointment slowly waning.

The bright light of the airport terminal the following morning was like waking from a dream. In five days, I had seen little of what I was promised, and yet far more still. As I waited for my late TAM flight with Nina, Robin, and Ana, we tried on Panama hats and sniffed bagged coffee, sad to return to the dull certainty of New York, Berlin, and São Paulo. As we landed in Quito, more protests were reported in the capital, and I wondered what would become of the biennial. Fuenmayor had done his level best with limited infrastructure—conditions all too familiar at public institutions—but our waiting was a plural experience richer than any biennial drive-by. Absent art, we'll always have Cuenca.



Carlos Martiel, *Gente de Color*, 2018. Photo by the author.

CONTRIBUTOR

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is a New York-based Writer and critic, and the assistant editor of *Frieze*.

RECOMMENDED ARTICLES

Caracas-Havana: The Dirty Word Exile

by *Gabriela Range* | MAY 2018 | CRITICS PAGE On December 9 or 10, 1986—I don't remember exactly when—I left for San Antonio de los Baños to study film. At the time, I was a pretty bourgeois punk who wanted to change the course of history in South America.

from Farallones

by *Tim VanDyke* | SEPT 2017 | POETRY Tim VanDyke grew up in Colombia, South America, until guerilla warfare forced him back to the United States. Since then, he has worked in several insane asylums. His books include *Topographies Drawn with a Divine Chain of Birds* (Lavender Ink, 2011), *Fugue Engine* (Cannibal Books, 2012), and *Light on the Lion's Face: A Reading of Baudrillard's Seduction*. (Argotist 2012). His work has most recently appeared in *Typo*, *Drunken Boat*, and elsewhere.

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