Welcome!

Dear Educators,

We are delighted for you to join us, as the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) brings you the work of Helen Ascoli in the lobby and the second-floor gallery from April 9, 2021 – September 19, 2021.

Hellen Ascoli works with text, sound, video, textile, sculpture, and installation to explore the politicized relationship between body, object, and place. Her practice is rooted in the act of weaving, both as praxis and metaphor. The back-strap loom, her primary instrument, is a weaving tool that does not require the presence of standalone equipment, but rather uses the body and the surrounding environment as its supports. Featuring a belt on one end to be worn around the weaver’s waist, and a rope on the other to be attached to the existing architecture, this loom demonstrates the central role that body plays in Ascoli’s practice.

We invite you to explore, create, immerse yourselves, and discover what stories, connections and lessons can be found within this exhibition.

Enjoy!
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About the Artist

- Born in 1984 in Guatemala City, Guatemala.
- Received a BFA in sculpture and a minor in Advertising from Southern Methodist University Dallas, TX (2006).
- Received MFA from the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL (2012).
- Ascoli currently lives and works in Madison, WI.
- Notable solo exhibitions include Amaneci temprano para peinar el mundo (I Woke Up Early to Comb the World), Proyectos Ultravioleta, Guatemala City, Guatemala (2017), El telar me hizo tejedora (The Weaver Made Me a Weaver), Sol del Rio, Guatemala City, Guatemala (2016).
- Most recent group exhibitions included Proyectos Ultravioleta at greengrassi and Corvi-Mora, Condo London, UK (2019), Mas alla (Beyond), in collaboration with Jorge de Leon, 21 Bienal de Arte Paiz, Museo de correos, Guatemala City, Guatemala (2018).
- Winner of the illy SustainArt Prize 2020

About Asscoli’s work

- Ascoli works with text, sound, textile, sculpture, and installation.
- Here themes explore the politicized relationship between body, object, and place.
- Ascoli uses a back-strap loom, using weaving as a technique and metaphor.
- The back-strap loom allows the body and the surrounding environment to support the act.

Quotes

Ascoli writes, “Each weave is intimately related to the body it harnesses: its warp is the width of my hips, its length mirrors my height, its designs are spaced by the threads I can hold in my hand.” She continues, “It carries memory through touch, a proximity sense. I choose to use materials that reveal vestiges of bodies that were once there.”
About the Project

For her first solo museum exhibition, Ascoli presents a new collection of work, which seeks to activate an alternative lexicon of knowledge based on relation. Objects, sounds, and images that defy categorization assemble as Ascoli explores individual agency through embodiment, bearing witness to the opposing processes of integration and disintegration, life and death, order, and chaos. Firmly grounded in materiality, the installation features found and handmade textiles, paired with salvaged everyday domestic items. These artifacts – a mattress, brick moulds, moving blankets, combs – contain symbolic qualities that relate to the scale and tactility of the body and concepts such as home, memory, translation, and care. Congregating around four broad thematic groupings: the beaten body, the uprooted body, the forgotten body, and the broken body, Ascoli’s work poses the question of how collective bodies remember and how they might resist.

Vocabulary/Key words

Textile       Backstrap Loom      Weaving      Artistic Process     Identity
Guatemala     Metaphor

Themes

Body: In Ascoli’s work the body is a drive theme from her process to the final instillation. Using a backstrap loom the objects she makes come out about the size of her body. When using a back-strap loom, a belt like piece of fabric is placed around the waist if the weaver. Then the loom is placed in from and attached to the belt. To create tension the opposite end of the loom is hooked to a something like a tree.

Object: In her process of weaving Ascoli creates objects. She may hang these objects on a wall, lay them on the floor. She also manipulates them by suspending them off a built structure or by adding a mechanism to make the objects move. Found objects also play role in Ascoli’s work. She may find discarded-everyday items such as, gloves, dish rags, mattresses, etc. Combining these made and found objects Ascoli
creates compelling objects that remind us of the body and therefore collective bodies.

Place: To use the back-strap loom the place it has done becomes significant. The place and the weaver’s body work together to create tension. Not only is place important to Ascoli’s process it is also representing her roots. Ascoli, originally from Guatemala looks to her culture for inspiration. In Guatemala weaving has been a part of the people’s lives since the time of ancient Maya Civilization. Ascoli is inspired by the colors and patterns form traditional Guatemalan textiles.

PRE-VISIT DISCUSSIONS

ABOUT THE CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER

In 1939, Betty Pollak Rauh, Peggy Frank Crawford and Rita Rentschler Cushman took the advice of Edward M.M. Warburg, the founding father of the American Ballet and a founder of the Museum of Modern Art. He suggested that rather than stress about finding non-existent art jobs in New York, “Why not starting something in Cincinnati? Plenty of room there. If you decide to try, come and see me and I’ll help you.”

By August of that year, Peggy Frank Crawford, Betty Pollack and Rita Rentschler raised $5000 (about $93,000 today) and created the Modern Art Society (MAS). For almost a year their “office” consisted of a letter file and a portable typewriter set up in one or another living room. Within a few years, the MAS had exhibited Renoir, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Picasso, Beckman, Klee and many more in the lower levels of the Cincinnati Art Museum. In 1952, the MAS changed their name to the Contemporary Arts Center and in 1964 they earned a space of their own in downtown Cincinnati. In 2003, the CAC moved into the Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art designed by architect Zaha Hadid. The NY Times called the structure, “the best new building since the Cold War.”

The Contemporary Arts Center is a non-collecting institution, meaning there is no permanent collection. All exhibitions are borrowed from artists, collectors and other art galleries and institutions. We strive to create exhibitions that allow visitors to “open their minds” to the arts, and to the dialogue that can be had when viewing
contemporary art. We believe that art and the creative process belong to all people and that contemporary artists are an important part of how we see and interact with our world today.

ABOUT THE LOIS & RICHARD ROSENTHAL CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTS

In the late 1990s, after acquiring the lot on which the Contemporary Arts Center now sits, a committee narrowed a field of over 300 architects chose to design the building–first to 97, then to 12 and finally 3 of the most exciting designers working in the world today. From them, a unanimous choice emerged: Baghdad-born, London-trained Zaha Hadid.

The decision was in keeping with the CAC’s 60-year history of promoting the new. Though Hadid had been the subject of adulation, study and controversy, her work exhibited at major museums with international critical acclaim, she had only completed two freestanding structures during her career. As a largely untested inventor, a woman and an Arabic Muslim, Hadid had not found the construction world easy to enter. This renowned building is Hadid’s first American building, and is the first American museum building designed by a woman. Groundbreaking took place in May 2001 and the new Center opened to rave reviews on May 31, 2003. The seven-story, 82,265 square-foot Contemporary Arts Center is named the Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art after the CAC’s former Chairman of the Board and the most generous contributor to the new building. It sits on a narrow 11,000-square-foot footprint, and includes a 2,366-square-foot black box performance space.

Born in Iraq in 1950, Hadid received her degree in mathematics from the American University in Beirut and studied at the Architectural Association in London where she won the Diploma Prize in 1977. Upon graduation, Hadid became a partner at the Office of Metropolitan Architecture where she worked with influential architects Rem Koolhaas and Elia Zenghelis. Establishing her own practice in London in 1979, she soon gained international attention with her groundbreaking plan for the Peak International Design Competition for Hong Kong in 1983. In 2004, she became the first female recipient of the Pritzker Architecture Prize, which is the equivalent to the Nobel Prize for Architecture. In 2008, she was listed as one of Forbes Magazine’s “100 Most Powerful Women,” and in 2010, Time Magazine named her one of the
“100 Most Influential People in the World,” and UNESCO Artist for Peace. She was awarded the Stirling Prize for Architecture in 2010 and 2011. In 2012, Hadid was awarded Damehood by Queen Elizabeth II. And, in 2015, she received the Royal Gold Medal from the Royal Institute of British Architects. Hadid died in 2016.

RULES AND GUIDELINES

- Visitor admission and school tours are free at the Contemporary Arts Center.
- We require that must be a chaperone for every 5 students under the age of 18 for self-guided groups. For docent-led tours, the required ratio is 1 to 10 for students through grade 5 and 1 to 15 for students grades 6-12.
- No backpacks, coats or lunches are permitted in the galleries, but personal belongings may be stored in the large bins or lockers we have available. Instructors may keep any emergency bags and purses with them.
- Currently photography is permitted in all areas of the museum. The CAC encourages you to post photos to various social media sites using @CincyCAC and #CincyCAC.
- Pens are not permitted in the gallery spaces. Pencils are available for use at the front desk.
- Walk throughout all galleries- no running, climbing, or roughhousing. If visiting with students under 18 please provide guidance and supervision.

ACCESSIBILITY INFORMATION

- Our facility is ADA compliant and we will make every effort to provide accommodations when requested.
- Hearing protection is available upon request.
- Fidgets are available upon request.
- Sensory maps and social stories are available upon request.
- Large text is available upon request.
- Two quiet spaces are available—the Lower Level Lobby and the Contemplation Room.
• For further inquiries or requests, please contact Shawnee Turner at sturner@cincycac.org

ARTWORK DISCUSSIONS

These discussions can occur prior to, during and after viewing.

• What are textiles? Where do you normally see them?
• Does this artwork remind you of anything? If so, what? How is different than other objects you have seen before?
• How do you think it was made? Is there more than one process being used?
• Does the work engage you as a viewer? How does the work change once you come into the picture?
• How does where the object is place change how you see it?

LESSON PLAN IDEAS

• A paper loom is a great way to discuss weaving and pattern with students. Using construction paper, scissors and markers students will create colorful paper weavings. Start by folding one piece of paper in half, along the folded edge cut a line inward, stopping 2 inches before the edge. Create these cuts every 1 inches. Once opened students will have a paper loom. On the second piece of paper students will add colors or a repeating pattern, decorating their page. Once the decoration is complete students will then cut the paper into 1-2 inch strips. Finally, students will use their decorated strips to weave in and out of their looms to create colorful works of art.

• Using a cardboard loom students will be able to create their own textile work of art. Follow the link to see your list of materials and how to create a cardboard loom. Weave on a Mini Loom | #MetKids - YouTube.

• The Body of the Loom, a project from the artist! In this project student will look at the backstrap loom, learning that the different parts of the loom have anthropomorphic names. Using tracing/transparent paper they will draw a picture of the loom. They will then layer another piece of paper and draw a self-portrait with their arms and legs stretched out. Lastly, they will
layer a third piece of paper creating a playful amorphous drawing where the body and the object become one.

- Consider a recycling project! Students collect found objects such as candy wrappers, string, discarded plastic and weave those items on their looms. Ascoli used recycled thread created from discarded clothes in Guatemala.
- Quilt pieces can be made to discuss another form of art using textiles. Each student will decorate a square piece of paper or even cut fabric. A prompt might be, draw a pattern and incorporate your name, come up with a symbol that reflects who you are, etc. When all students are ready the individual squares can be assembled to create a large quilt.

ARTWORK AND WALL TEXT INFORMATION

Introductory Wall Text

Hellen Ascoli works with text, sound, video, textile, sculpture, and installation to explore the politicized relationship between body, object, and place. Her practice is rooted in the act of weaving, both as technique and metaphor. The back-strap loom, her primary instrument, is a weaving tool that does not require the presence of standalone equipment, rather it uses the body and the surrounding environment as its supports. Featuring a belt on one end to be worn around the weaver’s waist, and a rope on the other to be attached to the existing architecture, this loom demonstrates the central role the body plays in Ascoli’s practice. Ascoli writes, “Each weave is intimately related to the body it harnesses: its warp is the width of my hips, its length mirrors my height, its designs are spaced by the threads I can hold in my hand.” She continues, “It carries memory through touch, a proximity sense. I choose to use materials that reveal vestiges of bodies that were once there.”

For her first solo museum exhibition, Ascoli presents a new collection of work, which seeks to activate an alternative lexicon of knowledge based on relation. The phrase “cien tierras” signifies the expression “one hundred lands” in Spanish. Though “tierra” could also signify “earth,” “ground,” or “nation.” Objects, sounds, and images assemble as Ascoli maps out the way individual agency is manifested through embodiment, bearing witness to the opposing processes of integration and disintegration, life and death, order and chaos. Firmly grounded in matter and materiality, the installation features found and handmade textiles, paired with salvaged everyday domestic items. These artifacts – a mattress, brick molds, moving blankets, combs – contain symbolic qualities that relate to the scale and tactility of the body and concepts such as home, memory, translation, and care. Congregating around four broad thematic groupings: the beaten body, the uprooted body, the forgotten body, and the broken body, Ascoli’s work poses the question of how collective bodies remember and how they might resist.
Hellen Ascoli (b. 1984, Guatemala City)  
*Ahik’ rub’anon ak’u’x (¿Cómo está tu corazón?) (How is your Heart)*, 2020-21  
Plywood, with cotton, brown cotton (cuyuscate), and wool, and foot loom woven  
198 x 198 inches (502.92 x 502.92 cm)  
Courtesy of the artist and Proyectos Ultravioleta, Guatemala City

“How is your heart” is the central prompt of this large-scale textile work that welcomes visitors as they enter the CAC. It refers to the Mayan Kaqchikel greeting that is commonly used in place of “how are you.” The phrase appears in three languages, repeated on separate horizontal bands in multicolored plaid and horizontal stripes. The deconstructed expressions: “how heart; who heart;” and “where heart; many ear; hear heart...,” invite a poetic slippage between terms and homophones that refer to multisensory perception. Stretched on wooden supports that lean against the wall of the gallery, the textile refers to the context of its own making. The warp winding, or the process of organizing threads for a weaving, was done on a custom warp board the artist constructed on the exterior façade of her home in Madison, WI. By documenting the work in progress, we are reminded of the contextual nature of weaving (or any form of knowledge production), which is always rooted in specific social, economic, and environmental frameworks.

- This work has the phrase “How is your heart” in the Mayan dialect Kaqchikel, Spanish, and English.  
- The phrase is what is used to ask “how are you?” in Guatemala.  
- Bands of pattern can be seen as time, identities.  
- She does not use Mayan imagery intentionally because she isn’t Mayan; however, language is used as a comment on Colonialism.  
- Used her house in WI to create the warp for the weaving. Consider ideas of home and place along with heart.
Featuring yellow, brown, and navy horizontal stripes, in three registers, the fine woven lines of *la memoria es la insistencia de recordar* (Memory is the Insistence of Remembering) create a tension between the expected uniformity of the grid and the handmade quality of Ascoli’s weave. The titular phrase is brocaded across the middle band in such a way that from close-up it reads as an abstracted series of lines and dots. Only when stepping back from the work do the words become legible. This enforced distancing evokes the experience of recalling the past, as the details become ever-more difficult to discern with clarity and certainty over time.

- In keeping with the title, this textile can only be read when stepping back.
- Consider ideas about perspective—e.g. “hindsight is 20/20” or memories are more general and about experience than details.

Housed in a salvaged 35mm slide storage cabinet mounted to a bench, images printed on acetate that document the terrain of a cemetery are carefully displayed in a four by three grid format. Although recognizably depicting the same site, subtle changes suggest the passage of time—grass regrowing after being uprooted, flowers at various stages of life, the seasonal color changes of the landscape. The work is comprised of photos taken since 2016 by Ascoli’s parents documenting their weekly visits to the resting place in Guatemala of a member of the family who was murdered without cause. The work’s framing, in a box typically intended for the organization and cataloging, applies order to the chaos and uncertainty of grief.
Visitors are invited to sit on the bench, open the drawers, and look through the photos.

- Ascoli’s brother was murdered in 2016.
- The slide cabinet allows for “organizing” and making sense of grief.
- Images show changing of seasons and passage of time.

Hellen Ascoli (b. 1984, Guatemala City), with Sofia Jade Tanski (b. 1996, Dallas)
*What memories record of us*, 2021
Single-channel audio
15 min., 30 sec.
Courtesy the artist and Proyectos Ultravioleta, Guatemala City

Hellen Ascoli (b. 1984, Guatemala City), with Sofia Jade Tanski (b. 1996, Dallas)
*¿Hear Heart? (¿Escuchas corazón?)*, 2021
Single-channel audio
Courtesy of the artist and Proyectos Ultravioleta, Guatemala City

*¿Hear Heart? (¿Escuchas corazón?)* is made up of a rhythmic pulse comprised of sampled sounds from the artist’s everyday life, such as the thump of a foot loom, the cracking of ice on a frozen lake, the click of a dog lapping water, and the synchronized drumming of a crowd at a demonstration. The combination of noises suggests a non-hierarchical unity between the human and the natural world. Displacing an anthropocentric perspective, here the beating “heart” is not simply the involuntary act that sustains human life, but a chorus of activities that have their own mystical order.

- The rhythmic sound is meant to evoke the heartbeat—but is comprised of everyday sounds meaning that life is really in the everyday

Hellen Ascoli (b. 1984, Guatemala City), with Negma Coy (b. 1980, San Juan Comalapa, Chimaltenango, Guatemala)
*Ruk’ oxomal taq k’uxaj (Sonidos de corazones) (Heart Sounds)*, 2021
Single-channel audio
3 min., 2 sec.
Courtesy the artist and Proyectos Ultravioleta, Guatemala City

Prrrr prrr prrr ut ut ut ut q’uq’ q’uq’ q’uq’ xpumuuuy xpumuuuy
E k’o, e ajawal tukr nikirik’ik’ej kixik’, nikiyek qaxik’ ustape’ oj sokotajnäq q’uq’ kow yojikiiyika’ k’o b’ey kan nik’oje’ kan retal chi qij achi’el ri b’amal nikiqe’ qak’aslem, nikib’olajj qanima, nikijeq ri b’ey ri yaruk’waj chi ruchi’ ri xib’alb’ay chi ri’ k’o wi’, pa rutza’ni ri sotosik nkil jun iniq’axomai k’u’x.
¡Loq’olaj saq’il! Matyox xoja’wil, wawe’ oj k’o wi’ pa b’eleje’ ruq’a’ ri qa’an tz’uj, tz’uj, tz’uj kan yech’ich’an raqän taq ya’, ri ye’aq’oman, ri ye’oyon qichin re yejasjot chi re qanima, k’o k’a b’ey rikin ronojel kuchuq’a’ nikiib’ij kib’i’:
Atitaj – Mama’aj, Te’ej –Tata’aj, paq’ij – aq’a’, kaq’iq’, ya’, kaj, ulew, ulew, Qate’ ruwachulew pom, ronks, kuxa, rora, tiqatzija’ qachaj chuqa’ tiqatz’ija’ tiqasik’aj jun ka’i’ oxi’ qamay.
Here is a VERY loose translation in English: They are, they stretch their guardian owl wings, they lift our wounded quetzal feathers they shake us hard and sometimes mark our body like a jaguar ditch our Being, furrow our chest, open the path that connects to the underworld there it is, at the tip of the spiral they find the scar of contrition. The light reaches us. Blessed clarity! We are here on rung number nine tz’uj, tz’uj, tz’uj the traveling rivers sparkle, the medicine waters, those that call whisper to our soul, but when it is necessary mercilessly roar his name: Grandmother – Grandfather, Mother - Father, day - night, wind, water, sky, earth, earth, Mother Earth pom, roses, kuxa, ruda, let’s light our ocote and smoke some puros of tabacco. Let it thunder, once two and three times let it thunder Let’s open the third eye! The rainbow time has come, the metamorphosis of our frightened heart is near it will be announced with a drum and chimarilla, with chinchines and ocarinas, yes, it will be announced death and also life. Tremble, born, grow, flourish, suckle and repeat it trembles, it is born, it grows, it blooms, it suckles the offering, the word, the number of life. Let’s untangle the word

Están, estiran sus alas de búho guardián, levantan nuestras plumas de quetzal herido nos sacuden con fuerza y a veces marcan nuestro cuerpo como al jaguar zanjean nuestro Ser, surquean nuestro pecho, abren el camino que conecta al inframundo ahí está, en la punta de la espiral encuentran la cicatriz de contrición. La luz nos alcanza ¡Bendita claridad! Estamos aquí en el peldaño número nueve tz’uj, tz’uj, tz’uj centellean los ríos viajeros, las aguas medicina, las que llaman nos susurran al alma, pero cuando es necesario sin piedad rujen su nombre: Abuela – Abuelo, Madre - Padre, día - noche, viento, agua, cielo, tierra, tierra, Madre Tierra pom, rosas, kuxa, ruda, encendamos nuestro ocote y fumemos algunos puros de tabaco. Que truene, una dos y tres veces que truene ¡Abramos el tercer ojo! el tiempo arcoíris ha llegado, la metamorfosis de nuestro corazón asustado está cerca se anunciará con tambor y chimarilla, con chinchines y ocarinas, sí, se anunciará la muerte y también la vida. Tiembla, nace, crece, florece, amamanta y repite tiembla, nace, crece, florece, amamanta la ofrenda, la palabra, el número de vida. Desenredemos la palabra para el encuentro, escuchemos la voz de la sagrada vara desenredemos los hilos para tejer nuestra piel, convertirnos en jun b’atz’ jun chowen que los tz’ula’ nos lleven de la mano, ellos marcan el camino, vamos hablemos con el corazón del cielo, tierra, viento, agua, hablemos con el corazón seamos fuego, montaña, mar, volcán, colibrí, seamos espíritu y remolino de media noche
for the encounter, let's listen to the voice of the sacred rod we untangle the threads to weave our skin, become jun b’atz ’jun chowen let the tz’ula ‘take us by the hand, they lead the way, let's go Let's talk with the heart of the sky, earth, wind, water, let's talk with the heart Let's be fire, mountain, sea, volcano, hummingbird, let's be spirit and midnight whirlpool

Hellen Ascoli (b. 1984, Guatemala City), with Karl Williamson (b. 1982, Marshall, WI)
Asunción (Assumption), 2020-21
Plywood, with HD color video
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and Proyectos Ultravioleta, Guatemala City

Asunción (Assumption) features a video documenting a commemorative action where the artist burned fabric collected from found mattresses, mounted within the frame of a boxspring. For Ascoli, the mattress is an object that symbolizes a place of rest, but also violence. The work cites the murder of 41 girls at the Virgen de la Asunción orphanage in San José Pinula, Guatemala in 2017. The women, ages 14 to 17, were locked in a room as punishment, when a mattress was lit on fire in protest of repeated acts of abuse, neglect, and maltreatment. They burned to death when their cries for help were ignored by the administrators, who were later charged with homicide. This series makes formal connections between the flower and star patterns commonly found on mattress coverings and the iconography of bullet holes and fires, calling attention to the prevalence of femicide and the state’s failures to protect its citizens.

- Mattress frame references the murder of 41 girls in an orphanage in Guatemala—they were locked in a room as punishment and died in a fire set as protest.
- The domestic imagery like flowers reference femicide in general.
- There is an altar-like reference in the burning pots.
- Frame designed by her partner Karl Williamson
Hellen Ascoli (b. 1984, Guatemala City)
Here Heart (Aqui Corazón), 2021
Industrial cotton and brown cotton (cuyuscate), backstrap loom and mending, two parts 48 x 48 inches (160 x 160 cm) each, bundled
Courtesy the artist and Proyectos Ultravioleta, Guatemala City

For Ascoli, the repeating intersecting lines of the grid are not simply a pattern, but a record of a practice of reconfiguring physical existence and giving form to daily life that is also indicative to weaving, and what author Octavia Butler calls “god shaping.” A salvaged red blanket with a white grid pattern appears bundled on the floor. The cross points of the lattice have been picked out and repaired by Ascoli with hand stitching in a natural brown cotton indigenous to Guatemala, known as cuyuscate. A patch of the fabric, pinned to the wall, has also been mended, and attached to a scrap from one of Ascoli’s own weavings. Ascoli writes, “weaving is an act of topography and considering your position in relation to other things.” The title of the work, Here Heart, echoes the homophones present in the lobby installation, connecting the act of weaving with a form of knowledge production, which is rooted in a particular place.

- Used salvaged material and altered; using cuyuscate, a traditional natural brown cotton–titled “Here heart” we’re made to think about listening to our heart
- The ritual-like orientation gives credit to one of Ascoli’s influences, the writer Octavia Butler, and her likening of weaving to “god-shaping”

Negma Coy (b. 1980, San Juan Comalapa, Chimaltenango, Guatemala)
Sipanik (Herencia) (Heritage), 2021
Cotton, backstrap loom woven
22 x 32 inches (55.88 x 81.28 cm)
Courtesy of the artist

“Initially introduced as someone involved in theater, I met Negma in 2014. Our first exercise together was on walking and the translation of poetry. This later transformed yet again into a long term collaboration centered on the pedagogy of the back strap loom.”
Back to poetry.

Back to translation.

Now add sound.

Sending each other voice notes through whatsapp is a common form of communication between my home in Madison and hers in Comalapa. We send photos of our gardens.

She asks me “Achike’ Rubanön Ak’u’x” and sends me a voice note on how to pronounce it correctly. I struggle with the sounds in my mouth.

I take it as a prompt to embody heart. To ask heart where it may be located? And, how is it dispersed?

I return to Negma, who by now, I have learned manifests easily the notion of Ts’íib, which

‘is an alternative to understanding ‘writing’ that does not stand in opposition to but rather fully encompasses alphabetic writing, placing it alongside and in dialogue with a number of other forms of recorded knowledge’ - Rita Palacios and Paul Worley’s book Unwriting Maya Literatures

I share this reflection with Negma who in turn responds to the notion of the beating heart by writing the poem, ‘Ruk’oxomal taq k’uxaj’ which translates into the ‘Sound of Hearts.

The heart too is located in the backstrap loom. Another translation for another beating heart.

She sends a weaving titled Sipanïk which is Inheritance. Written on it are three glyphs: the sound, the voice and the echo of hearts.

She describes it to me as each heart has its own voice. It sounds, it sings, it cries, it jumps, it yells, it calls and it loves.”

-Hellen Ascoli

- Not made by Ascoli—created by her friend Negma Roy; Ascoli’s work is the poem that accompanies it
- Note the traditional Mayan symbols/imagery
Hellen Ascoli (b. 1984, Guatemala City), with Karl Williamson (b. 1982, Marshall, WI)
*What X is change, What X is shhh, What X is gone*, 2017-21
Plywood, with HD color video
Approx. 20 min.
Courtesy of the artist and Proyectos Ultravioleta, Guatemala City

Hellen Ascoli (b. 1984, Guatemala City), with Karl Williamson (b. 1982, Marshall, WI) and Sofia Jade Tanski (b. 1996, Dallas)
*What E is Eh, What E is eeeeee, What E is fingers intertwined*, 2017-21
Plywood, with color video
Approx. 30 min.
Courtesy of the artist and Proyectos Ultravioleta, Guatemala City

This slide-show format video contains photos and text that refer to the ideas, objects, and landscapes that surrounded Ascoli while producing this body of work. It features fragments from letters to collaborators and quotations of writers who inform her practice, including César Paternosto, Octavia Butler, and Donna Haraway. Displaying strategies of animation, repetition, and layering, it evokes the sensation of reading something as it is being written or perusing someone’s journal. Displayed on a monitor mounted to a plywood armature that resembles a collapsible laundry drying rack, the video explores the intersectionality of weaving. The crossed wooden dowels create “x’s,” a symbolic shape for Ascoli that refers to the *shed*, or the temporary separation between upper and lower warp threads, through which the weaving sword with the weft is woven. The x shape also is the building block of the grid, which simultaneously refers to the history of modern abstraction, epistemologies of weaving, and ancient geometric forms found in Mayan and Inca visual culture, establishing a genealogy of abstraction outside of Anglo or Western-centric histories.

- X represents the “shed” in weaving when the threads of the upper and lower warp separation; it is also the building block of the grid which references geometric abstraction of Mayan art and Modernism
- Film displays photos and text that inspired Ascoli
Hellen Ascoli (b. 1984, Guatemala City)
*Cien Tierras (One Hundred Earths)*, 2020-21
Cotton and wool, foot loom woven
62 x 80 inches (157.48 x 203.2 cm)
Courtesy of the artist and Proyectos Ultravioleta, Guatemala City

*Cien Tierras* features different configurations of the Spanish root word “tierra” rendered in brown and navy thread with red, blue, and yellow horizontal stripes. The brocaded text features poetic uses of literary wordplay devices including malapropism, orthography, and idioms to demonstrate the pliability of language and the complexity of translation. The upper panel reads “en cielo” or “in the sky,” which is abutted with the phrases “en tierro” and “des tierro,” which translates to “in the land” and “of the land” respectively. However, when spoken, sounds like “entierro” resemble the Spanish word for burial or grave. “Destierro,” means “to be pushed away” or “exiled.” The lower panel depicts the phrase “sin tierra,” which literally means “without land” or “landless.” The title, “cien tierras,” connotes the expression “one hundred lands,” though “tierra” could also signify “earth,” “ground,” or “world.” *Cien Tierras* was created using a two-step process. First, a band was woven on the backstrap loom, Ascoli’s weaving instrument of choice. Then it was cut and sewn together to create a square composition.

- Play with homophones: “en cielo” or “in the sky,” “en tierro” and “des tierro,” which translates to “in the land” and “of the land” respectively. When spoken, sounds like “entierro” resemble the Spanish word for burial or grave. “Destierro,” means “to be pushed away” or “exiled.” The lower panel depicts the phrase “sin tierra,” which literally means “without land” or “landless.” The title, “cien tierras,” connotes the expression “one hundred lands,” though “tierra” could also signify “earth,” “ground,” or “world.”
Hellen Ascoli (b. 1984, Guatemala City)
*Keexik, Keetik, Keemik,(Kiché) (To Grind, To Snap, To Weave)*, 2020-21
Cotton and wool, backstrap loom woven
20 x 50 inches (50.8 x 127 cm)
Courtesy of the artist and Proyectos Ultravioleta, Guatemala City

This textile contains words written in K’iche’, a Mayan language, to explore how weaving has become decontextualized from movement and the land. This combination of words connects Keemik (weaving) with other terms that share this kee- prefix, such as keek (deer); keetxk (to plow earth); keetik (to snap thin branches). *Keexik, Keetik, Keemik,(Kiché) (To Grind, To Snap, To Weave)* shows the impact of Mayan textiles and cosmologies on her practice. The stripes in blue, green, red, purple, and navy, refer to Mayan cosmovision, where weaving patterns and in particular, stripes, are tools for storytelling. Ascoli writes, “Translation is the proprioception of words. It tugs at the articulation of language, adds weight, and lets us know where we are located within it. It reveals where - and how - we stand within the world of words.” She continues, “I no longer wish to create. I wish to translate.” The textile itself is sewn in an infinity loop, which serves to subvert the 2D formats of both books and paintings, turning the work into an object that occupies a space between knowledge and action.

- References Mayan traditions—symbols and weaving patterns are part of storytelling (think of the different definitions of weave)
- Colors—blue, red, green, purple, navy—reference Mayan cosmology
- Play on words with kee- prefix in K’iche (Mayan dialect)

Hellen Ascoli (b. 1984, Guatemala City)
*I woke up early to comb the world*, 2017-21
Plywood and found acrylic, metal, and wooden combs, with cotton and brown cotton (cuyuscate), handwoven
Dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist and Proyectos Ultravioleta, Guatemala City

“I woke up early to comb the world.
I rake earth.
The weather has changed and the sparse grass no longer holds on to its roots.
Sticks pulled by the long fingers of the rake, snap.
Rocks found, tossed into the base of a tree crack.
Small piles of rubbish gather to form ephemeral bodies in my yard.
///
These bodies appear to hold a space for a moment.
To concentrate my thoughts.
This is not un-similar to the way organize my threads concentrates my thoughts by positioning my body in attention
In tension with the warp
In tension with the architecture
In tension with the world out beyond the window I look at when I weave.”
-Hellen Ascoli

Hellen Ascoli (b. 1984, Guatemala City), with Karl Williamson (b. 1982, Marshall, WI)
*We shaped soft gods here, 2020-21*
Plywood, cotton, brown cotton (cuyuscate), wool, with 132 3D printed plastic components, and motor
Dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist and Proyectos Ultravioleta, Guatemala City

Hellen Ascoli (b. 1984, Guatemala City), with Sofia Jade Tanski (b. 1996, Dallas)
*What songs we sing, What hums we hum, What voices move, What spirits create, 2017-21*
Two-channel sound
Approx. 4 min.
Courtesy the artist and Proyectos Ultravioleta, Guatemala City

Formed from reconstructions of six variations of brick molds that were collected from factories outside of Antiqua, this perforated wall explores concepts of heritage, memory, and value. Clay workers typically use wooden molds like these to cast bricks, which are the primary material for construction in the highlands of Guatemala. Between where the bricks would be, Ascoli has placed vertical kinetic elements made of inkle woven bands in vibrant colors that signify the mortar that is used to connect bricks. Their pattern is made in part from cuyuscate, a breed of...
cotton indigenous to Guatemala that is naturally brown in color. The material, which today is extremely rare and difficult to work with, was traditionally used by the Mayans for ceremonial and utilitarian garments and linens. Ascoli remarks “archeologically speaking, hard shapes last longer than soft shapes...[which] aren’t perceived as something important to keep.”

Hellen Ascoli (b. 1984, Guatemala City)
*God is Change*, 2021
Cotton and wool, backstrap loom woven, with brocading
50 x 50 inches (127 x 127 cm)
Courtesy of the artist and Proyectos Ultravioleta, Guatemala City

Hellen Ascoli (b. 1984, Guatemala City), with Laura August
*Dear Hellen (Querida Hellen)*, 2021
Single-channel sound
Approx. 40 min.
Courtesy the artist and Proyectos Ultravioleta, Guatemala City

Hellen Ascoli (b. 1984, Guatemala City) and Jorge de León (b. 1976, Guatemala City)
*En los días prósperos días (In prosperous days)*, 2021
Oil, oil stick, crayon, found wood and metal on canvas, five parts
5 7/8 x 8 ¼ inches (14.73 x 20.96 cm) each
Courtesy the artist and Proyectos Ultravioleta, Guatemala City

Paintings by Jorge de León (b. 1976, Guatemala City) act as traces of an exchange between him and Ascoli. The two made a commitment during the early phases of the COVID-related lockdown to communicate only through images. The resulting paintings are imbued with irony as the two began to discover parallels between their respective places of residence—Guatemala City and Madison.

- Consider communication and place—this was part of the communication between Ascoli and her friend Jorge de Leon in Guatemala City
Hellen Ascoli (b. 1984, Guatemala City)
*Thinking Things X*, 2021
Cotton and wool, backstrap loom woven, with wood
Courtesy of the artist and Proyectos Ultravioleta, Guatemala City

- Relate to the X of the weave in the backstrap loom, as well as the interconnectedness of all things

Hellen Ascoli (b. 1984, Guatemala City)
*It Takes Effort to Burn a Body*, 2021
Mixed media
Courtesy of the artist and Proyectos Ultravioleta, Guatemala City

- Bowls burned in relation to the Assumption—the fabric was floral (like mattress fabric) and feminine
Consider the domestic role of women and how easily their lives are being taken in Central America

**RESOURCES**

Hellen Ascoli | Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design (miad.edu)
Proyectos Ultravioleta (uvuvuv.com)
LEARNING STANDARDS

Common Core Standards
http://www.corestandards.org/

Ohio Common Core Links
http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Learning-in-Ohio/OLS-Graphic-Sections/Learning-Standards
http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Learning-in-Ohio/Fine-Arts/Fine-Arts-Standards

Kentucky Common Core Links
https://education.ky.gov/curriculum/standards/kyacadstand/Pages/default.aspx
https://education.ky.gov/curriculum/standards/kyacadstand/Documents/Kentucky_Academic_Standards_Arts_and_Humanities.pdf

Indiana Standards Links
https://www.doe.in.gov/standards
https://www.doe.in.gov/standards/fine-arts-dance-music-theatre-visual-arts

Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change
http://www.animatingdemocracy.org/aesthetic-perspectives