

A reflection on an exhibition: *The Portable Universe*

Wenxin Yang

It was a Wednesday evening. My friends and I were hungry for food but did not want to miss any one of the only two exhibitions on display at the Montreal Museum of Art. Hastily, I set foot in the second exhibition room. On display was *the Portable Universe: Thought and Splendor of Indigenous Colombia*. The lights turned dark right upon entrance. Things turned quiet. My vision became narrower by the dimming light but senses amplified because of the quietness. The smell, sound, and air flow, everything was different. A part of me felt like Alice entering the wonderland without knowing if I was invited, with a secretly growing excitement.

On the walls were words. Words in different languages. English, Spanish, French, and an indigenous language spoken by the Arhuaco people in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in Colombia. I did not understand almost any of them until two months later when I sought help from Google translate trying to write an essay about the exhibition. On that particular night, however, getting lost in translation only got my uncanny excitement to grow. Clashes of cultures do not always feel great but these words looked like they were trying to tell us something. They were inviting and non-aggressive, still but flowing.



Figure 1

The series of pictures with capitalized words (Figure 1) caught my eyes. To translate the message into the language closest to my heart, there needs to be three steps: “IPQUA KAKA XIE NZINGA.” → “Gracias Abuela Agua Amada.” → “Thank you beloved grandma water.” → “感谢亲爱的母亲河 (Thank you dear mother river).” In China, we call major rivers our mother rivers, and 7 out of 13 rivers referred to as a mother river are in China according to Wikipedia (which very likely is not an exhaustive list). In stark contrast, I could hardly find anything when searching grandmother river or abuela agua. Even with the translations, I still feel lost in some way. Words are essential means of communication but they also sometimes collapse the

entanglements and multiple worlds inhabiting and making the same space. They are hints but don't seem to give us all the answers.

Stepping further into the exhibition rooms, sounds of creeks and bird chirps became clearer. An Arhuaco elder was sitting against a rock in the forest (Figure 2). He would chew the coca leaves, reach out to his pouch for lime powders, and stay silent. He was still for the most of the time such that I could not tell if the same video clip was played over and over again or if he actually stayed still for that long. Such steadiness is rare to observe in humans nowadays. Are our hastiness and movements amplified in relation to one another? Or does the background of forest blur, absorb, or even ameliorate the silhouette of a human figure and what they do?



Figure 2. Source: LACMA (<https://www.lacma.org/art/exhibition/portable-universe>).

“To be on the *banquito* (benches or stools) is to be in sync with the universe. – Jaison Perez Villafana, Arhuaco elder.” It said on the wall. Maybe trying to be in sync and cross the divide of human - inhuman is what directs us onto the same coordinate system of movement as with the others, so that we look still. I could not say that I fully understood as I still had to rely on finding similar concepts or behaviors in a culture I was familiar with. But the exhibition was affective with messages emitting from all angles to reach all my senses. I stopped trying to comprehend the words and started allowing the exhibition to flow through me. Later as I discovered from the documentary of the exhibition, the curators also experienced similar difficulty and cultural shock of comprehension in the process of production. In addition to working closely with and shifting more responsibility of narration to the Arhuaco people, the curators were asked to forget about their expertise in art curation and narration, and join the Arhuaco elders to connect with the universe through meditation and sacred plants. It thus becomes clearer to me that comprehension and understanding is more than just an activity of mind, but also an activity of the body, through the process of which, the worlds enrich us while we enrich the worlds. As Dewsbury (2002) puts it, “in the performances that make us, the world comes about”. Here, being engaged in a thinking dialogue with the universe (or “the forces of life” according to the exhibition) at the right place (i.e., the *banquito* or in the *Portable Universe* exhibition), the connection, attunement to the universe, or the sync begins.

A piece of artwork in the room seemed to me the perfect illustration of such connectedness (Figure 3). It was a tripod offering bowl with man-like figures and birds on the side, holding arms with each other. Within the bowl were emerald stones and votive figures. The birds and stones reminded me of a Chinese mythology of a bird meticulously carrying stones and branches to fill the ocean to protest against the relentless waves that took away her previous human life. As in this artwork, a theme of human-nonhuman connection and fluidity is prevalent around the exhibition, especially between humans and birds. During a talk given by Rex Koontz on the iconography of ancient Colombian birds, he mentioned how birds were central in indigenous Colombian cultures, and that birds were humans turned into a different form. So are we the same beings inhabiting different bodily forms? Or is the inhabitation itself boundless like a flow? Similar to the concept of placemaking, is there possibly a process of human making?



Figure 3. "Tripod Offering Bowl with Votive Figures ('Tunjos') and Emeralds"
Source: <https://www.artoftheancestors.com/blog/the-portable-universe-lacma>

My favorite artwork in the exhibition is a series of 14 watercolor paintings by Confucio Hernández Makuritofe – *The Annual Cycle of a Wild Caimo Tree* (2020, Figure 4 and 5). They delicately depict the subtle changes surrounding a Caimo tree. The tree is changing, its visitors are changing, the relationships between them are also changing, but everything seems in harmony. It shows how the landscape of the tree and its surroundings is an ongoing creation with different visitors being parts and parcels of the whole (McHugh, 2009). The paintings remind me of Bennet's (2004) words that "a material body always resides within some assemblage or other, and its thing-power *is a function of that grouping*. A thing has power by virtue of its operating *in conjunction* with other things." The still Caimo tree in paintings becomes animated as we witness its changing relationships and functionalities with the assemblages it

belongs to in different times of the year. Such dynamics make the Caimo tree come to life and the interconnection between the tree and the non-tree becomes tighter with each overlap in space and time. Echoing Ingold's words (2011), "lives are led not inside places but through, around, to and from them, from and to places elsewhere (Ingold 2000a: 229)". The beautiful birds (Figure 4) are around the tree now, but they come from elsewhere and will go elsewhere. The birds leave their trails, as Ingold (2011) beautifully puts it, "every inhabitant lays a trail. Where inhabitants meet, trails are entwined, as the life of each becomes bound up with the other. Every entwining is a knot, and the more that lifelines are entwined, the greater the density of the knot."



Figure 4. One painting in *The Annual Cycle of a Wild Caimo Tree* by Confucio Hernández Makuritofe.



Figure 5. All 14 paintings of *The Annual Cycle of a Wild Caimo Tree*. (Source: [flickr](#))

I could not help but think that the density of knots could be the power of life, and that how the knots could strengthen our unity (i.e., improve sustainability) as well as incur chaotic entanglement (i.e., crises). We do not only co-occur, but also disturb and disrupt each other's paths and lives. Simple representations sometimes collapse the meanings of worlds but even without them worlds confront each other.

Then at this very moment, what was my relationship to the exhibition? What was my identity and position in this *Portable Universe*? I am not the birds. I am not the people. I am not the tree. Nevertheless, part of the point of being here is to allow myself to be affected, unlearn and learn, and to start to be in sync, not just with their universe, but also with mine. Each universe, full of its own assemblage and entanglement, then starts to entwine with each other, forming a grander cluster of life and being. The entanglements could well make all our lives more chaotic, but chaos might just be an essential trait of liveliness, or the trait of the power of life. Me and the non-me sometimes overlap and interact in space and time, and a single encounter could be the starting point of us reaching out to each other. It almost feels like how we make friends, but not just with people or organic beings. Artworks, words, music, etc., a different lens (e.g., from vital materialism) could enliven them to thus begin our friendship. In this exhibition, my friendship with the artists, the birds, the people, the tree, and the landscapes and beyond. Through being physically in the exhibition and writing this essay, I interact with them and our paths hence cross a little bit more. Friendship to me means a loving lens ("co-feeling or sympathy with suffering, and also upon a certain love of the world, or enchantment with it", Bennet, 2004) and the abandonment of barriers (especially self-imposed ones, "feeling an object for its own sake, beyond those aspects of it that can be understood or used" or misunderstood or misused, Shaviro, 2011), and visiting and thinking about the exhibition makes me feel just like that.

We eventually left the exhibition for a delicious dinner. Now that I think of it this way, the distinct worlds and paths of me and my friends crossed a little bit more over art, food, and the chilly night in Montreal. The *Portable Universe* also found itself a new nest to inhabit within my heart. I am unable to predict the future crossovers between me and my human friend or between me

and the landscape where the artwork came from. However, it has become slightly easier for me to embrace uncertainty lately. The loving lens does soften up a lot of the unnecessary anxiety.

References

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