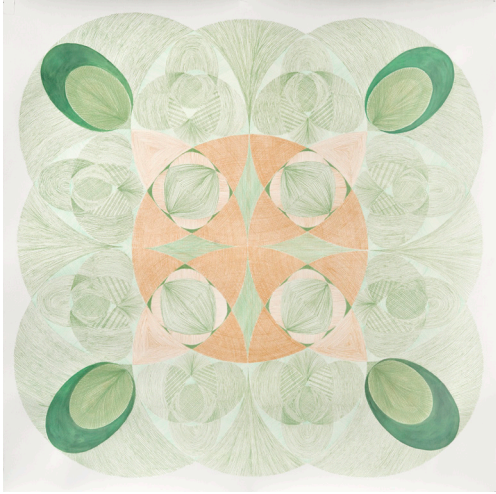


MODERN ART OXFORD

EXHIBITION NOTES



**Johanna Unzueta:
Tools for Life**

"Since my early days in art school, I always felt the need to bring my work out into the real world. It is a way of challenging boundaries, of testing how my work behaves in different environments and how the world reacts to it."

– Johanna Unzueta

Johanna Unzueta (b. 1974, Santiago, Chile, lives and works in New York) is committed to sewing and making as part of her daily creative practice. The artist's handmade approach to what she calls her 'trade' deliberately brings together fine art, craft, applied arts and manufacturing processes, exploring methods of production within the commercial industries. Unzueta's artistic training merges formal fine art education with instruction in practical craft skills. This has included working with the Mapuche people in southern Chile to learn their complex weaving techniques, and incorporating knowledge of natural dyeing processes from Guatemala, while also learning embroidery, sewing and patternmaking from the women in her family.

Johanna Unzueta, *Related to Myself*, 2018. Courtesy the Artist and Proyecto Ultravioleta. Installation view at the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University, 2019. Photo courtesy Eat Pomegranate Photography.



"I grew up working with my hands. My mum always said I learned to weave and knit before I learned to read and write. Hands are tools for me and I can't disconnect that."

– Johanna Unzueta

Collaboration is both an artistic strategy and political commitment underpinning Unzueta's work, with her performances, use of textiles and ongoing publishing projects often involving the input and expertise of others.

Johanna Unzueta, Still from *The Factory / La Fabrica*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Proyectos Ultravioleta, Guatemala City.



This is informed by her early career as an artist in post-dictatorship Chile. Here artistic survival required collaborative models of producing and exhibiting in nomadic, artist-led collective spaces like Galería Chilena in Santiago, due to the almost complete absence of state arts funding.

For the last 20 years Unzueta's practice has explored what the artist describes as labour's 'technological, historical and social impact on the human condition and [secondly] its relationship to nature.' In 1999 the artist first started making felt sculptures that precisely recreate hardware tools, industrial machinery and building components such as chains and gears, gutters, pipes and taps. These are often installed in industrial locations, where the very objects she recreates might actually appear, or presented on an enlarged scale based on the dimensions of the artist's body, such as the oversized felt sculptures on view in the first gallery.

Unzueta 'brings life' to objects by creating felt sculptures which hold the potential for mobility and movement. Motion connects many seemingly disparate aspects of her work – from the implied manipulation of chains and cogs and the suggested flow of water through felt taps, to the tracing of her own body's movement through the looped gestures of her drawings and the garments that are activated when worn. This underlying motif speaks to her wider interest in engineering and functionality: Unzueta studies an object carefully to decipher its mechanisms before creating a surrogate from natural materials. This reminds us of the symmetry between manufactured objects and the natural world. Unzueta believes manufactured components and design solutions are often adapted from natural phenomena, transferring biological innovations to improve an everyday task or object (such as the metal hinge that mimics the movement of an insect's wing). Unzueta identifies strongly with these principles of biomimicry: nature-inspired solutions for humanity's constant struggle to live and produce sustainably.

Hanging alongside the mural in the second gallery are a collection of simple handmade garments, reminiscent of factory worker uniforms. Unzueta sourced the fabric for these clothes from a factory in Guatemala that up-cycles old jeans, reaffirming her commitment to repurposing pre-existing materials where possible. The garments are tailored to fit Modern Art Oxford staff, who wore them on the opening night of the exhibition, and in doing so activated them as 'wearable sculptures.' Such performative participation is an enduring feature of Unzueta's practice, which continually blurs the line between object and action.

In the third gallery a small projection reveals a new work filmed on location at a historic textile factory in Tomé, a city in the Biobío region of central Chile, which once produced almost 80% of the country's wool textiles. Unzueta's silent film is shot on Super-8, a near-obsolete 8mm film technology. It is projected digitally onto a piece of fabric woven at the factory itself, which is currently operating on a diminished scale following the company's 2008 bankruptcy. The camera navigates the immense and seemingly abandoned industrial spaces, gradually revealing that the factory is still functioning and hinting towards the original source of production by cutting to footage of sheep.

"I don't think of drawing as going on the wall. It is a body you can walk around, not a flat thing. [...] I think of them as sculpture. All my objects are installations in space."
– Johanna Unzueta

Occupying the final gallery is a collection of Unzueta's ongoing series of freestanding abstract drawings. The time spent making her drawings (the implied labour of their intricate designs) is signalled by their titles, which list the month/year and city in which Unzueta produced them. Initiated in 2013, these large sheets of paper, often tinted with indigo, fustic and other natural dyes, are transformed into three-dimensional objects through the support of transparent frames, secured to bases of locally sourced recycled timber. These abstract systems, both precise and handmade, embrace variation and imprecision, while taking inspiration from the symmetrical geometries and 'golden ratio' found in nature. Both diagrammatic and deeply connected to the human body, they point to the potential for organic growth and renewal.

Gallery 1

- 1. ... *My Tears Started a Rain / The Darkness of the Sea Open My Eyes*, 2020
Indigo-dyed felt, wooden dowels, charred wood
Courtesy of the artist

These sculptures mark the first time that Unzueta has used natural indigo pigment to dye felt, previously only working with it in its raw state. The 100% merino wool felt is dyed by hand and then cut and shaped into a pattern by the artist, which she hand sews to create the three-dimensional shape of an everyday tap and its pipework.

Unzueta first incorporated indigo dye into her practice following a residency in Guatemala, where the indigo-producing plant is native and was used centuries ago to create Mayan blue. Most indigo used in the global clothing industry is now synthetically manufactured, and the natural pigment is highly prized.

- 2. *Related to Myself*, 2019–20
Felt, thread, recycled wooden spoons, burnt wood
Courtesy of the artist and Proyectos Ultraviolta, Guatemala City

This work belongs to Unzueta’s *Chains and Gears* series (on-going since 2012), which she describes as ‘based on the mechanical relationship between gears and chains. Taking the engineering of movement of a simple bicycle as a starting point these two elements can be found in most industrial machinery.’

The natural felt used to make this 9 metre-long suspended chain sculpture (whose cogs are based on the dimensions of the artist’s body) is manufactured by a family company founded over 200 years ago. For Unzueta, sourcing the felt from this family company is a mark of respect: acknowledging the time and skill required to make this type of material purely from natural resources.

- 3a, b and c.
February 3rd, Upper Gallery, Oxford, 2020, 2020
Oil pastel on wall
Courtesy of the artist and Proyectos Ultraviolta, Guatemala City

Gallery 2

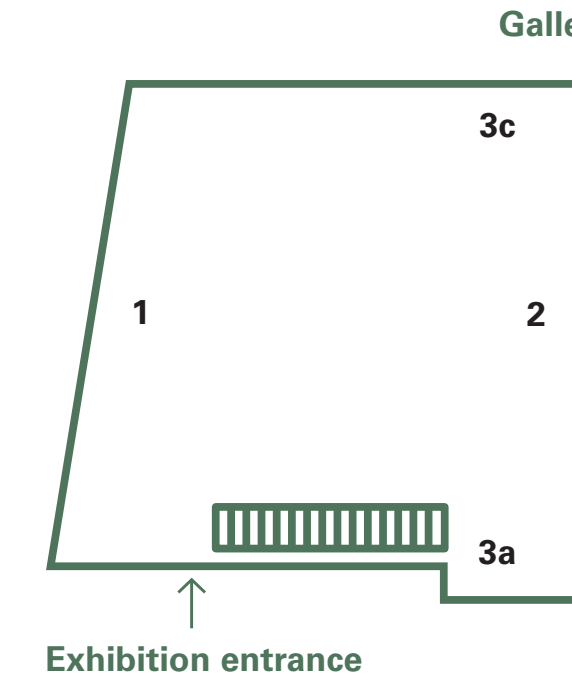
- 4. *Nocturnal*, 2020
Oil pastel and charcoal on wall
Courtesy of the artist and Proyectos Ultraviolta, Guatemala City

Unzueta pays close attention to how the materials used in her work are themselves manufactured. She endeavours to use natural and non-toxic materials, such as the oil pastels used in this wall mural, which contain highly concentrated pure mineral organic pigments. Completed over the course of a week, *Nocturnal* is a scaled-up transformation of a drawing Unzueta first made on a small sheet of indigo-dyed paper.

- 5. *A Garment for the Day*, 2019–ongoing
Dedicated to Ellen Hotton and to so many more children in the world that we will never know their names, where they spent and spend their

days in the shadows of a factory, plantation, captivity ... desolation
Up-cycled denim and organic cotton, thread, wooden buttons
Courtesy of the artist and Proyectos Ultraviolta, Guatemala City

The title of this work hints at the throwaway culture of ‘fast fashion’, while its longer dedication is Unzueta’s tribute to the child labourers who have been the often-ignored shame of low-cost globalised manufacturing since the Industrial Revolution. The fabric in this work is sourced by the artist from a factory in Guatemala that specialises in recycling old denim material, while the garments’ wooden buttons are handmade win Mexico.



Gallery 3

- 6. *Matches*, 2009
Felt, thread
Courtesy of the artist
- 7. *The Factory / La Fabrica*, 2016–19
Filmed on location at Bellavista Oveja Tomé textile factory (est. 1865), Chile
8mm film, transferred to digital projection, 5 minutes and 55 seconds, looped
Courtesy of the artist and Proyectos Ultraviolta, Guatemala City

‘My video and film work began in 1998; first as documentation of work made for the public space in Santiago de Chile while I was studying at the art school of the Universidad Catolica (1994–1998). It has always been thought as an extension to my sculpture practice, both in terms of the subjects and ideas that influence my work as well as a study in the possible behaviours of my “sculpture work” outside the museum or gallery environment. The preferred use of 8mm film over video has to do with

my focus on creating ambience, focusing more on the sensations of space – both urban and natural – and of the objects and situations that I make happen in these spaces.’
– Johanna Unzueta

Gallery 4

- 8. *August, September 2018 Berlin*, 2018
Watercolour, graphite and pastel, needle holes, indigo and fustic hand-dyed watercolour paper; acrylic and wood
Courtesy of the artist and Proyectos Ultraviolta, Guatemala City

- 9. *April 2015 NY, November 2015 Cuernavaca*, 2015
Watercolour, pastel, watercolour paper hand-dyed with indigo; acrylic and wood
Collection of Heloisa Becker Genish

- 10. *December 2014, January, February, March 2015 NY*, 2014–15
Watercolour, pastel, watercolour paper; acrylic and wood
Courtesy of the artist

- 11. *September Berlin, November NY 2018*, 2018
Watercolour, pastel, needle holes, indigo and fustic hand-dyed watercolour paper; acrylic and wood
Private Collection

- 12. *Not Twins, June/November 2017 NY*, 2017
2 sheets, pastel, needle holes, indigo hand-dyed watercolour paper; acrylic and wood
Collection of Heloisa Becker Genish

- 13. *November 2017, January 2018 NY*, 2018
2 sheets, graphite and pastel, needle holes, indigo hand-dyed watercolour paper; acrylic and wood
Tate: Purchased with funds provided by the Knapping Fund 2019

- 14. *April, May 2018 NY*, 2018
Graphite and pastel, needle holes, indigo hand-dyed watercolour paper; acrylic and wood.
Tate: Purchased with funds provided by the Knapping Fund 2019

- 15. *April, May 2016 NY*, 2016
Watercolour, graphite and pastel, needle holes, indigo hand-dyed watercolour paper; acrylic and wood
Tate: Purchased using funds provided by the 2018 Frieze Tate Fund supported by Endeavour to benefit the Tate collection 2019

‘In 1999, I was in the countryside near Temuco in the south of Chile, when I first learned how to work with plant dyes from a Mapuche woman. She taught me how to weave and use natural dyes from onionskins, beetroot, and other plants. Later, in 2015, I had the experience of learning traditional dyeing techniques in Antigua, Guatemala, specifically using the plant añil to make indigo. Since then, I’ve started to dye all my papers. The overall composition is created with embroidery hoops and other oval or circular shapes, sometimes in combination with my own shapes made from paper templates, some as big as two metres. [...] I don’t use rulers, I actually use my hands and fingers, or other parts of my body to measure and I calculate their relationships by eye.’
– Johanna Unzueta

- 16a, b and c.
June NY, October La Boissiere, December NY 2019, 2019
Watercolour, graphite and pastel, needle holes, indigo hand-dyed watercolour paper
Courtesy of the artist and Proyectos Ultraviolta, Guatemala City

‘There are many ways to work with indigo, but it is tricky and can’t be forced. I don’t follow rules, I experiment, which can take weeks to allow the colour to change over time and has an organic aspect I like.’
– Johanna Unzueta

As the artist suggests, indigo has its own ways of working: it requires patience to work with natural dyes. Multiple layers of dye are required to achieve an intense blue pigment, and each layer must dry before the next layer is applied. The darkest sheets of her paper have 11 to 12 layers of this natural blue dye.



Artist thanks

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