



The Rebels Were Waltzing On Air

Critical text by Eugenio Viola

The Rebels Were Waltzing On Air is the first Italian solo show of Nicaraguan-born, internationally-known non-binary performance artist and queer activist Elyla (1989), which follows their presentation at the 60th Venice Art Biennale, *Foreigners Everywhere*, which is still currently on view.

Elyla is part of a group of committed queer artists with localized art practices who are reshaping the landscape of performance art. Their work challenges traditional narratives and recontextualizes ancestral rituals while addressing anti-colonial discourses.

The title of the show is a response to The Clash's song "Rebel Waltz" from their fourth album, "Sandinista!" (1980). It reflects the moment when Elyla was invited to exhibit in Milan while listening to this song on their flight back to Nicaragua. The title also captures the song's nostalgic sentiment and connection to the artist's biography because their father was part of the Sandinista revolution (1).

Elyla works across various mediums, including video performance, installation, photo performance, experimental theater, radical activism, and site-specific political interventions. Their work questions colonial, imperialist, and Western accounts of identity politics related to *mestizaje* (2), queerness, and Indigenous ancestry.

They critically engage with the male heritage of the Sandinista revolution, its related narratives of national identity, and the experience of being a 'cochon' (queer) 'barro-mestiza' in a religious, conservative society. The artist coined the term 'barro-mestiza' to distance themselves from the traditional understanding of *mestizaje* and reclaim their Indigenous ancestry in dialogue with precolonial divinities and the memory of the land and soil.

Their work is a visual exploration and re-examination of visual gestures of folklore through a queer localized lens. This fusion creates a unique and compelling commentary on identity, tradition, and resistance. By combining visual explorations with layered self-led auto-ethnography research and the deep spiritual significance of Indigenous rituals, Elyla redefines performance art within an anti-colonial and queer framework.

(1) Sandinista, one of a Nicaraguan group that overthrew President Anastasio Somoza Debayle in 1979, ending 46 years of dictatorship by the Somoza family. The Sandinistas governed Nicaragua from 1979 to 1990. Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega was reelected as president in 2006, 2011, and 2016. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sandinista> (accessed on 30-05-2024).

(2) *Mestizaje*/mestizo is a political identity that can be understood as an ethno-cultural syncretism that emerges from the colonial wound.



This interplay allows them to critique imposed identities and celebrate self-determined, fluid expressions of Self. Their performances often extend into community-based activism to foster a collective experience of communal healing, inviting participation and engagement from diverse audiences.

The artist's early works are actions in public space that rebelled against authoritarian restrictions and censorship in a regime of persecution and terror. It was, for example, the case of *Solo Fantasia* (2014), Elyla's first public performance, illegally acted for the opening of the 9th Biennial of Nicaragua after their sudden expulsion from the exhibition by direct order of the Nicaraguan Government, an exclusion decided just four hours before the event. The performance was a march along the historical Bolívar Avenue in Managua, the capital of Nicaragua. The artist wore a dazzling costume, heavy makeup, gold platforms, a wand, and a mask, subtly embodying a visual journey of the aesthetics used by governments in power in the country's recent history.

Elyla disrupted the model of the 'Baile de negras' [black dance], an event held in honor of Saint Jerome in the Nicaraguan city of Masaya. It marked the beginning of an ongoing methodology in their work, aimed at subverting the culture and folklore of rural practices originating from their own history, which is re-examined through a queer lens, suggesting a new way of understanding an existence for gender and sexually diverse people's identities that are anchored in the teachings of the elders.

Torita-encuetada (2023) is a video-performance presented at the 60th Venice Art Biennale. It embodies liberation from colonial oppression through a fire ritual rooted in a Nicaraguan cultural practice called "toro-encuetado." The piece emphasizes the ritual's defiant and celebratory nature. During the ritual, Elyla asked their friend and teacher, Gustavo Herrera, to set them on fire, symbolizing a rebirth from the ashes and reconnecting with their grandparents' memories.

This powerful ceremony delves into the encounter of ancestral divinities from Nicaragua's Pacific region. It invites viewers to witness the intersections of culture, anti-colonial artistic praxis, and the sacred while advocating for a return to earth-honoring practices and the decolonization of sexual and gender-diverse identities in Mesoamerica.

Yugo Chontal (2024), one of Elyla's most recent works, was acted in Panama City due to restrictions on public actions in Nicaragua. It addresses the deep erasure of their ancestors' lineage, cosmovision, and culture in Chontales, Nicaragua. 'Chontalli' was a pejorative nickname or insult. It comes from the Nahuatl language, used throughout Mesoamerica for Indigenous peoples who were not Nahuatl speakers. It means "strange," "foreigner," or "out of place."

"After the colonial wound, I was already marked as a "foreigner" as "out of place" from "not belonging" for being a sexually diverse body. So, I bet on taking up the insult, as I have taken up the racial insult 'chontalli', and 'cochon' (faggot) as political lenses for my existence. This artistic proposal seeks to explore the feeling of thinking about 'not belonging' or being a 'barbarian', a



‘foreigner’, declares the artist."

The Rebels Were Waltzing On Air contextualizes over ten years of Elyla's committed artistic research. It highlights their challenge of oppressive systems and offers new ways of understanding identity, culture, and resistance by intertwining rituals, anti-colonial praxis, and queerness.

Elyla's work exemplifies the transformative power of art in challenging and reshaping cultural narratives. It not only honors their heritage but also pushes the boundaries of contemporary performance art, offering unexplored ways to understand and resist the complex interplay of identity, tradition, and power. Through their innovative practice, Elyla continues to inspire and provoke, carving out spaces for queer voices in the global art scene.

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