

G A S W O R K S

Mercedes Azpilicueta: Bondage of Passions
19 May – 4 July 2021



Gasworks presents the first UK commission by Amsterdam-based artist Mercedes Azpilicueta. Calling herself a 'dishonest researcher', Azpilicueta creates work in conversation with archives and libraries, myths and legends. In pursuit of elusive historical figures, she uncovers queer, migrant and unheard voices from South America's colonial past.

Created in close collaboration with historians, dancers and craftspeople, her installations often take the form of dramaturgy involving set designs, theatrical props, costumes and scores for a performance that doesn't yet exist, and where the viewer is invited to take centre stage.

The exhibition at Gasworks offers a speculative vision of Catalina de Erauso, the so-called Lieutenant Nun. In the early 1600s, Erauso escaped convent life in the Basque Country and travelled to the New World, where s/he lived under several male identities and became a ruthless conquistador at the service of the Spanish Empire, obtaining the Pope's blessing to pursue life as a man.

Larger than life and always on the move, Erauso adopted no less than five names and claimed many more lives before compiling their adventures into a memoir that is the stuff of legend. These voyages feature in the tapestry presiding over the main gallery. Woven on a Jacquard loom, this large-scale textile work has the hallucinatory quality of dreams, offering viewers a rare glimpse into the fears and desires of a contested figure that resists categorisation.

In the adjacent gallery, a smaller tapestry conjures a feverish vision of colonial encounters. Its title, *Abya Yala* (in Guna language, 'land in full bloom'), refers to a proposed alternative name for the Americas outside of European heritage, used among indigenous peoples. Both tapestries result from collaging archival imagery sourced from historical maps, etchings and colonial art. These feature valuable exports like indigo alongside syncretic motifs typical of Cusco School paintings, such as harquebusier angels armed with Spanish muskets.

These textiles are displayed in custom-built furniture inspired by the history of *biombos*, a luxury item that developed as an adaptation of Japanese screens in colonial Mexico. Contemporary to the time of Erauso, folding screens demarcate a space of semi-privacy within domestic interiors, creating a more fluid interplay between public and private, dressing and undressing, hiding and being seen.

Sculptures dotted around the show playfully dissect New Spain's colonial fashion to reflect on the construction of gender and masculinity. Working closely with a cutting-edge laboratory for textile development, the artist weaved metallic yarns into knitted chainmail, which is then used to sculpt a soft and malleable armour. Exquisitely anachronistic, Azpilicueta's costumes and garments combine Baroque style with glitter-drenched queer nightlife.

Assembled from leftover fabrics, an entire series of these sculptures is based on the codpiece, a fashion item that attaches to the crotch of men's trousers and emphasises male genitalia as a visible sign of social status. Satirically titled *On the Dignity of Codpieces* —like the imaginary treatise quoted in Rabelais's 1532 book *Gargantua and Pantagruel*—, it consists of a grotesque collection of bulging organs, ambiguously reminiscent of vaginal and phallic shapes, which extend into bondage restraints, straps and belts.

The show is punctuated by vinyl scattered around the gallery walls. Acting as annotations within the show, cut-up fragments of printed matter reference the official reports (*relaciones*, in old Spanish) published by conquistadors. Reproduced in holographic vinyl, they acquire a phantasmagorical quality, providing an oblique commentary on the elusive nature of historical knowledge.

Public Programme

Erauso: The Inner Experience

Video essay available online from 2 June

A letter to the artist by archivist and curator Verónica Rossi, presented in dialogue with a roaming gaze across the tapestries featured in the exhibition.

Weaving Past and Future: Panel Discussion

Podcast available online from 16 June

A panel discussion about Catalina de Erauso and the construction of history, with literary historian Amaia Alvarez-Uria, archaeologist Sergio Escribano-Ruiz, and art historian Haizea Barcenilla.

Bondage of Passions: Ode

Friday 25 to Sunday 27 June, 12-6pm

Experience a site-specific sound installation by writer and composer Ella Finer that re-imagines Azpilicueta's tapestries as portals made of speaker cloth.

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Open Studios *

Saturday 26 June, 12-6pm

Meet our artists in residence: Bassam Al-Sabah (UK), Mikel Escobales Castro (Spain), Gal Leshem (UK), and Moad Musbahi (UK).

Gasworks Breakfast *

Wednesday 30 June, 8:30-10am

Join us for a tour of the exhibition with coffee, tea and pastries, all welcome!

Gasworks events are free to attend, no booking required. Please note that seats will be allocated on a first come, first served basis.

** Subject to easing of COVID-19 restrictions.*

List of Works

1. *The Lieutenant-Nun Is Passing: An Autobiography of Katalina, Antonio, Alonso and More*, 2021. Jacquard tapestry (Merino wool, cotton, metallic yarn), 160 x 400 cm.
2. *Abya Yala (Tierra Madura)*, 2021. Jacquard tapestry (Merino wool, cotton, metallic yarn), 160 x 200cm.
3. *The Delinquent Breeches*, 2021. Textile sculpture (Merino wool, cotton, wool felt, wood), 112 x 50 x 155 cm.
4. *The Trans-forming Armour*, 2021. Textile sculpture (wool felt, viscose, metallic yarn, mannequin torso, holographic paper, wood), 182 x 75 x 155 cm.
5. *On the Dignity of Codpieces*, 2021. Series of sculptures made from leftover fabrics (wool felt, Merino wool, cotton, viscose, metallic yarn, holographic vinyl, cord), various dimensions.
6. *Relaciones peligrosas*, 2021. Holographic vinyl, variable dimensions.

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Costume assistance: Darwin Winklaar, Laura Fernández Antolín.

Studio coordinator: Angeliki Tzortzakaki.

Archival research: Verónica Rossi.

Vinyl design: Vanina Scolavino.

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Commissioning partners and exhibition supporters



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