

Stepping Softly on the Earth
18 November 2023 – 14 April 2024
Press Preview: Friday 17 November, 11am-3pm

Baltic challenges visitors to rethink the human-nature relationship from a decolonial perspective, through ambitious exhibition of non-Western and Indigenous artists



Naomi Rincón Gallardo, *Eclipse* (2023). Video HD. Photo-documentation: Claudia López Terroso

Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art (Gateshead) is delighted to announce a ground-breaking group exhibition titled ***Stepping Softly on the Earth***, opening on Saturday 18 November 2023. Through the work of 20, mostly non-Western and Indigenous, artists from around the world, this research-led exhibition, and its accompanying public programme and publication, invites visitors to consider human's relationship to land and territory from a decolonial and anti-colonial perspective.

The exhibition will, for the first time, present a range of artistic practices that approach our

relationship to land and territory through the understanding of the world as a pluriverse – a world in which many worlds coexist and support each other. In this world, all things and beings are interconnected and human and nature are not separated. ***Stepping Softly on the Earth*** includes artworks exploring questions around ancestral cosmologies, spirituality, inter-species communication, embodied knowledge, oral traditions, autonomy, mapping and legal frameworks.

The title of the exhibition revisits a quote that Indigenous activist, writer and thinker Ailton Krenak brings to life in his 2022 book *Ancestral Future*. Krenak quotes a speech attributed to Chief Seattle (c.1786–1866) in which he says that his people ‘step softly on the Earth’, for they are connected to it, and invites the colonisers to teach their children to do so.

In 2022, the project benefited from an International Collaboration Grant from the British Council towards its Research and Development phase. This enabled the development of a collaborative R&D framework with four international partners: **CAPC** (Bordeaux), **La Escocesa** (Barcelona), **Más Arte Mas Acción** (Colombia) and **Pivô** (São Paulo).

The exhibition presents two new commissions by Mexican artist **Naomi Rincón Gallardo** and Colombian artist **Leonel Vásquez**, alongside numerous artworks that are being shown in the UK for the first time. Many of the artworks and artists included in the exhibition have not yet received the visibility they deserve in the UK and Europe.

Artists include: Aline Baiana (Brazil), Marwa Arsanios (Lebanon), Denilson Baniwa (Brazil), Ursula Biemann (Switzerland), Shatabdi Chakrabarti (India), Solmaz Daryani (Iran), Cian Dayrit (Philippines), Gidree Bawlee Foundation of Arts (Bangladesh), Shereoanawe Hakihiiwe (Venezuela), Karachi LaJamia – Shahana Rajani & Zahra Malkani (Pakistan), The Karrabing Film Collective (Australia), Takumã Kiukuro (Brazil), Queenie McKenzie (Australia), Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri (Australia), Dharmendra Prasad (India), Naomi Rincón Gallardo (Mexico), Taller Leñateros (Mexico), Tizintizwa (Nadir Bouhmouch and Soumeya Ait Ahmed) (Morocco), Roy Underwood (Australia), and Leonel Vásquez (Colombia).

Leonel Vásquez's new commission is a living sculptural installation titled ***Templo del agua (Water Temple)*** (2023). It invites visitors to enter a state of embodied presence by experiencing the resonance of water in their body and immersing themselves in its vibrating nature. The activation of sculptural instruments with the flow of water in the space proposes a collective meditation through listening, awakening our beginning as aquatic beings. *Templo del agua* addresses the binary separation between humans and nature in Western modernist cosmologies that has led to the destruction of water bodies on a planetary scale.

Naomi Rincón Gallardo's newly commissioned film ***Eclipse*** (2023) forms the concluding chapter of *The Tzitzimime* trilogy, in which the thresholds between the worlds of the dead, the undead and the living blur. In Aztec mythology, the Tzitzimime were female deities linked to fertility and rain. They were at the same time feared for their ability to descend to Earth and devour men during solar eclipses, when it was feared that darkness would reign forever. An eclipse heralds the culmination of the multiple endings of the world, which accelerate and intensify in an era of collapse. The Sun is devoured by the Moon, darkness emerges victorious, and the Tzitzimime descend to Earth to devour men; it is the planet itself that undertakes an act of cosmic self-defence.

Eclipse (2023) was commissioned by Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, with the support of La Casa Encendida, Madrid; Artes Mundi, Cardiff; and La Virreina Centre de la Imatge, Barcelona.

Moroccan duo Tizintizwa (Nadir Bouhmouch and Soumeya Ait Ahmed), currently showing at the 35th Bienal de São Paulo, will present ***Seasonal Work Song*** (2023), a film that laments the condition of agricultural workers and monoculture in the Atlas Mountains. The project sought to

project onto film the collective process by which oral poetry and stories are forged by communities over time.

Tizintizwa is Nadir Bouhmouch and Soumeya Ait Ahmed's collaborative duo, which they created in 2019, to address their sense of urgency towards rapidly eroding ancestral, artistic, social and ecological practices and knowledge – which are even more at risk in light of the recent earthquake in Morocco's Atlas mountains. Their work looks at how rural art forms have often been relegated to the category of folklore, which distorts their perception and questions their validity as contemporary art forms. They collaborate with rural communities, document oral literature, exhibit, curate, initiate cross-regional conversations, and allude to the importance of transgenerational transmission and relations between lands and people.



Tizintizwa (Nadir Bouhmouch and Soumeya Ait Ahmed), *Seasonal Work Song* (2023)

Sheroanawe Hakihiwe is an Indigenous Yanomami artist from Sheroana, a small community of the Upper Orinoco River in the Venezuelan Amazon. He learned the skills of hunting and fishing from his father. From his mother, he learned the visual imagery of Yanomami ancestral knowledges and their application in basketry and body markings used in ritual ceremonies. Working primarily with drawing and handmade papers crafted from native fibres, he draws from his ancestral knowledge of the signs and symbols of Yanomami culture, and their application in basketry and body painting for ritual ceremonies.

While such practices are female in Yanomami culture, he has consciously recovered these motifs to build his visual lexicon. Hakihiwe's work is a very personal interpretation of Yanomami creation stories, tradition and identity; his drawings and paintings speak to his rites and beliefs, observations of the rainforest and concern for the ecosystem. For the exhibition Hakihiwe will produce new paintings.

Dharmendra Prasad's *Harvest Books* are part of his ongoing Harvest School project in Bihar that gathers farmers, craftsmen, fishermen, urban youth, and non-human agencies to unlearn colonial, nationalistic and industrial practices through workshops and deep observations. These books are the visual and textual documents of non-extractive stories and vernacular knowledge system of landless farmers of Dalit communities in the Buxar district of Bihar.

NOTES TO EDITORS

Stepping Softly on the Earth

During the R&D phase, the following artists, academics and curators were consulted for artists and practitioners nominations: Minia Biabiany (Guadeloupe), Diana Campbell Betancourt (US/Bangladesh), Carolina Caycedo (Colombia/US), Yolanda Choís (Colombia), Ericka Flórez (Colombia), Mônica Hoff (Brazil), Catalina Lozano (Colombia/Spain), Sally Mizrahi (Colombia), Molemo Moiloa (South Africa), Hammad Nasar (Pakistan/UK), Plata (Argentina), and Florencia Portocarreño (Peru).

The exhibition display of **Stepping Softly on the Earth** is being conceived – in collaboration with Brazilian exhibition designer Juliana Godoy – as an immersive space that encourages conscious embodied experience, contemplation and playfulness, challenging visitors to encounter nature not as a resource to be exploited, but as a living and spiritual entity that is in all beings and unites people beyond borders. Visitors will encounter new ways of creating art that are influenced by politics, ethics and ancestral cosmologies in relation to their impact on local populations and contexts.

The publication, designed by Brazilian design studio Bloco Grafico, will include a text by Ailton Krenak and new writing contributing to the development of innovative discourses in contemporary art. The public programme proposes a two-day event on 8–9 December 2023, guest curated by Eva Posas, a Mexican curator of Zapotec origin, working on the immateriality of language, identity and memory as forms of production, and in culture. Speakers include writer, translator, linguist and activist Mixe Yásnaya Elena Aguilar Gil, Mayan collective Taller Leñateros, and Ngiba artist Ulises Matamoros.

Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art

Baltic is a major international centre for contemporary art situated on the south bank of the River Tyne in Gateshead, England and has welcomed over eight million visitors since opening to the public in July 2002. BALTIC presents a distinctive and ambitious programme of exhibitions and events, and is a world leader in the presentation and commissioning of contemporary visual art.

Housed in a landmark ex-industrial building, BALTIC consists of 2,600 square metres of art space, making it the UK's largest dedicated contemporary art institution. BALTIC has gained an international reputation for its commissioning of cutting-edge temporary exhibitions. It has presented the work of over 460 artists of 60 nationalities in 220 exhibitions to date.

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Artist Biographies

Aline Baiana is an Afro-Pindoramic artist born in 1985 in a territory now known as Brazil. Graduated in cinema and with studies in environmental management and contemporary art, her research addresses Afro-Brazilian and indigenous worlding practices and the ontological conflicts between the Global North and South. Baiana has participated in several exhibitions in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Belo Horizonte and Salvador. She was also commissioned for the 14th Sharjah Biennial and the 11th Berlin Biennial. Her work is part of the collections of Kadist and Freunde der Nationalgalerie für zeitgenössische Kunst, and she has recently been selected as a holder of the Berliner Förderprogramm Künstlerische Forschung grant during 2022 and 2023.

Nadir Bouhmouch and Soumeya Ait Ahmed of **Tizintizwa** are storytellers, researchers and multi-disciplinary artists based in Marrakech. Their collaboration is based on their sense of urgency towards rapidly eroding ancestral, artistic, social and ecological practices and knowledge. Their work looks at how rural art forms have often been relegated to the category of folklore, which distorts their perception and

questions their validity as contemporary art forms. As programmers and curators, Soumeya and Nadir are also the co-founders of AWAL, an art and research residency and programme which trains researchers and artists to encourage audio-visual documentation of disappearing oral traditions in Moroccan rural areas. As part of AWAL, they have co-curated exhibitions including “All the Countries Without Legends are Condemned to Freeze to Death” (2021-2022) and “Timghi” (2020-2021) at LE18, Marrakech. As co-curators at LE18, their work, including performances, a public programme and an archival film library has been shown at documenta fifteen. They are currently showing at the 35th Sao Paulo Bienal.

Marwa Arsanios' practice tackles structural and infrastructural questions using different devices, forms and strategies. From architectural spaces, their transformation and adaptability throughout conflict, to artist-run spaces and temporary conventions between feminist communes and cooperatives, the practice tends to make space within and parallel to existing art structures allowing experimentation with different kinds of politics. Film becomes another form and a space for connecting struggles in the way images refer to each other. Solo shows include: Heidelberger Kunstverein (2023), Mosaic Rooms, London (2022), Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati (2021); Skuc Gallery, Ljubljana (2018); Beirut Art Center (2017); Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2016); Witte de With, Rotterdam (2016); and Art in General, New York (2015). Her work has also been featured in numerous group exhibitions including: Documenta 15 (2022), Mardin biennial (2022), 3rd Autostrada Biennale, Pristina (2021); 11th Berlin Biennale (2020); Gwangju Biennial (2018); 14th Sharjah Biennale (2019); and 55th Venice Biennial (2013). Arsanios was a researcher in the Fine Art Department at the Jan Van Eyck Academie, Maastricht (2010–12). She is currently a PhD candidate at the Akademie der bildenden Künste in Vienna.

Denilson Baniwa is Amazonian of origin from the Baniwa nation. He currently lives and works in Niterói, Rio de Janeiro. His background is in the research of appearances and disappearances of Indigenous people in the official History of Brazil. In his artistic practice, he researches Indigenous cosmologies and their artistic representations, as a possible method of sharing ancestral knowledge. He is also interested in creating an archive of cosmologies as a way of safeguarding them. His work is included in the 35th Bienal de São Paulo: *choreographies of the impossible*, in the first edition of the Bienal das Amazônias - Belém do Pará, and a solo show at the Pinacoteca de São Paulo with the installation "Escola Panapaná".

Ursula Biemann is a Swiss artist and author, whose practice centres on fieldwork, often in Indigenous territories, and the creation of networks between different fields of knowledge. Her artistic practice reflects on the political ecologies of forests, oil and water, creating through her videos, books and installations critical perspectives on the dynamics of extraction and also proposing alternative, ecocentric modes of ecological and epistemological relatedness. Biemann recently had solo exhibitions at MAMAC in Nice and at the Art Museum at UNAL in Bogota. She published the online monograph “Becoming Earth” on ten years of her ecological video works and writing and the book “Forest Mind - On the Interconnection of All Life” with Spector Books.

Shatabdi Chakrabarti is an independent photojournalist, filmmaker and writer, based out of India. Her experience spans close to 2 decades in the documentary, news and advertising space. As a visual storyteller, Shatabdi's passion is to document real stories from the ground and her focus areas are conservation, communities and the natural world. She is an award-winning photographer, and her work has been exhibited both in India and abroad, along with being featured in global digital publications and platforms.

Solmaz Daryani is an Iranian documentary photographer loosely based between Iran and the UK. She is a grantee of the Magnum Foundation, National Geographic Society grantee, and a member of Women Photograph and Diversify Photo. Her work is mainly known for exploring the themes of climate change, water crisis, focusing on humans and their relationships with the environment, communities, and cultures. Her ongoing project, The Eyes of Earth, is the 2015 London Magnum Photos Grant recipient, 2020 The Alexandra Boulat scholarship, 2018 PhotogrVphy Grant, and 2021 FotoEvidence Book Award.

Cian Dayrit is an interdisciplinary artist whose work investigates notions of space, power and identity as they are represented and reproduced in monuments, museums, maps and other institutionalized media. He has been exhibited in international biennials, including the Sidney Biennial, Gwangju Biennale; Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art; Dhaka Art Summit, Bangladesh; New Museum Triennial “Songs for Sabotage” in New York; and Göteborg Biennial. Dayrit has also participated in exhibitions at ParaSite, Hong Kong, Hammer Museum, L.A., the Metropolitan Museum of Manila, and the Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw. In 2019 he was an artist in residence at Gasworks, London.

Gidree Bawlee Foundation of Arts was established by artist Kamruzzaman Shadhin in 2001 and is co-run by Salma Jamal Moushum in the village of Balia in Thakurgaon, North Western Bangladesh. The organisation aims to develop artworks and projects that respond to local history, culture, and the environment. This is done through various social practices and community-focused activities. They work in an area of northwest Bangladesh with a rich hybrid culture of indigenous traditions imparted by waves of settlers displaced historically by colonization, the privatisation of land and today also climate change.

Sheroanawe Hakihiiwe is a Yanomami artist from Pori Pori, a remote community located in the Alto Orinoco, in the Venezuelan Amazon. Under the guidance of Mexican artist Laura Anderson Barbata, his practice began in the 1990s after learning to make paper using native fibres. This allowed imagery traditionally destined to the body to travel outside the Amazon, as Yanomami people do not normally draw on paper. This is linked to the belief that knowledge belongs to the community and to the territory. Hakihiiwe keeps a notebook of sketches until he is able to translate them into different techniques when he spends time in Caracas. Using drawing, painting and screen-printing onto paper and fabric, Hakihiiwe's work is a very personal interpretation of Yanomami tradition and identity; his drawings and paintings speak to his rites and beliefs, observations of the jungle and concern for the ecosystem. His practice aims to protect the oral memory of his people, their cosmogony and ancestral traditions from Westerners' continued and pervasive attempts to erase indigenous cultures. Together with Laura Anderson Barbata, the two artists founded the Yanomami Owëmamotima community project, a self-sustaining initiative whose first handmade books were written, illustrated and published from a collective community experience. Hakihiiwe's work has been shown extensively in Venezuela and abroad. Recently, it was presented at the XII Shanghai Biennale (2018), at the 23rd Biennale of Sydney (2022) and at the 59th edition of the Venice Biennale (2022).

Karachi LaJamia is a nomadic space moving outside the institution to collectively explore new radical pedagogies and art practices. They occupy public spaces in the city as sites of study, disrupting imperial modes of knowledge production and circulation. They propose community approaches to research and pedagogy as slow, relational practices of connection, collaboration, and care. We work closely with local organisations and activists to build solidarity and alliances with ongoing struggles in the city. Karachi LaJamia was founded by artists Shahana Rajani and Zahra Malkani in 2015.

The Karrabing Film Collective consists of over 50 members, all but one Indigenous stakeholders for the land, with ages from new-born to elder. They use the creation of film and art installations as a form of Indigenous grassroots resistance and self-organisation. The collective opens a space beyond binaries of the fictional and the documentary, the past and the present. Meaning "low tide" in the Emmyengal language, *karrabing* refers to a form of collectivity outside of government-imposed strictures of clanship or land ownership. Shot on handheld cameras and phones, most of Karrabing's films dramatize and satirize the daily scenarios and obstacles that collective members face in their various interactions with corporate and state entities. Composing webs of nonlinear narratives that touch on cultural memory, place, and ancestry by freely jumping in time and place, KFC exposes and intervenes into the longstanding facets of colonial violence that impact members directly, such as environmental devastation, land restrictions, and economic exploitation.

Takumã Kiukuro is an internationally acclaimed filmmaker and curator whose work has been showcased at top-tier events such as the Venice Biennale and the Glasgow Science Centre, where it was featured in the lead-up to COP26 in 2021. With his roots in the Ipatse village, a Kuikuro community located in the Alto Xingu Indigenous territory in Brazil's Amazon basin, Takuma learned his craft through the pioneering Video nas Aldeias project and has since produced several notable films, including *The Day When the Moon Menstruated* (2004) and *The HyperWomen* (2012). His latest film, *Jungle Fever*, is a captivating reflection on the Xingu communities' struggle to protect their habitat and preserve their ecosystem and rare species in the rainforests.

Queenie McKenzie (1915–98) was born at Old Texas Downs Station on the Ord River, to the south-east of Turkey Creek. She grew up among Gija people and speaks Gija as her first language. Queenie was the first women painter to gain prominence in the East Kimberley school of painting. When Rover Thomas began painting for the public domain, his work inspired Queenie McKenzie to take up painting herself. She preferred using natural pigments and included distinctive powdery pink and pale violet colours made from ochres that she mined herself. In her compositions, she usually placed images of geographic features in rows against monochrome grounds.

Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri (c. 1932–2002) was born on Napperby Cattle Station about 200 kilometers North West of Alice Springs in Australia. In the early 1970s he became one of the founding figures of the 'dot-and-circle' desert painting movement, established by the aboriginals settled at Papunya. His work is held in all major public collections in Australia and many significant collections internationally. Collections include the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra and the New South Wales Art Gallery in Sydney. His work has travelled extensively around the world, including 'Dreamings - The Art of Aboriginal Australia' in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and St Louis.

Dharmendra Prasad is an artist based in Guwahati, with a practice spanning across mediums of installation, video, painting, photography, performance. He practices between the fields of Ganga, the villages, water bodies, rainforests and the vast community culture of northeast India.

Naomi Rincón Gallardo is a multidisciplinary Mexican artist. Her artistic production addresses the "creation of counterworlds" or alternative worlds in the Global South. She has participated in individual and group exhibitions: Resiliencia Tlacuache, 11th Biennial of Contemporary Art of Berlin (2020), Sangre Pesada, XIII Biennial FEMSA "Nunca fuimos contemporáneos", Mexico (2018); Ocotepc Odyssey, Akademie der Künste der Welt, Köln (2014); Sex, Drugs and Rock&Roll, Museo del Chopo (2014); Mexico Inside Out – Themes in Art since 1990, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth (2013); Between Utopia and Disenchantment, Jardín Borda, Cuernavaca, Morelos (2014) and The incessant Cycle Between Idea and Action, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Carrillo Gil (2012).

Taller Leñateros is a cultural society and an alliance of Maya and mestizo women and men. Mexican poet Ambar Past founded it in 1975. Taller Leñateros promotes longstanding Indigenous practices of dyeing and papermaking techniques, as well as preserving, supporting, and disseminating Maya and related Indigenous popular culture and oral history.

Roy Underwood was born in the Great Victorian Desert in Western Australia. He is the senior 'owner' of the Ilkurla rock hole, a particularly important site in two major Spinifex Dreamings - the Wati Jutjara (or Two Men) Story, and the Kalaya (or Emu) Story. In his paintings Underwood combines elements of both key stories related to the site.

Leonel Vásquez is a Colombian artist. His practice explores sound as a substance that shapes sensory experiences through vibrations that travel through space, through sculptures, audio-visual installations and sonic architectures. He has worked as a researcher and cultural manager for projects with the Radio Nacional de Colombia and the Ministry of Culture. He has presented numerous solo exhibitions including Tierras del Mar at the Festival de las Artes Valparaíso (2018), and the installation The River's Cradle at the OpenArt Biennial 2017 in Sweden. He has been invited to participate in various international encounters like the XI Festival Tsonami in Chile (2017), and the Hemispheric Performance and Political Institute Encounter at Canada, among others. He currently works as a professor of sound art at the University of Los Andes in Bogota.