

## Press Release

### Olga de Amaral

#### *The Elements*

November 2 – December 18, 2021

508 West 24th Street, New York

*“I want to achieve a sense of floating, as though memory were suspended in a mystical space”*

Best known as a textile artist, this exhibition positions Olga de Amaral as a vital force in sculpture, installation art and indeed in painting, albeit using her foundational materials of fiber, thread, wool, gesso and metallic leaf. Amaral’s inaugural show at Lisson Gallery New York coincides with her first major retrospective in North America, ‘To Weave a Rock,’ which is now on view at the Cranbrook Art Museum, Michigan after its debut at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

Exploring the core principles of her varied career, this combination of seven different bodies of work, spanning 40 years, reveals how Amaral’s oeuvre ranges all the way from an appreciation of Colombian heritage and indigenous craft, through the influence of Latin American Modernism, to latter-day developments in experiential art, optical abstraction and post-Minimalism. The earliest work in the show, *Estudio en dos Elementos (Study in Two Elements)* from 1976, is composed of coarsely intertwined horsehair and serpentine coils of cord, which switch from deep red and ochre to black, recalling the natural tones of earthworks she was making at the time. A decade later comes the 1988 *Tierra y Oro (Earth and Gold)*, a free-floating cascade of vertical lines that relates in conception to her imposingly physical structures titled *Woven Walls* – as well as the comparably large-scale *Memorias (Memories)*, 2014 – but with the addition of light as an extra material or element – the looser weave allowing a *moiré* pattern to develop in its interstices.

Visitors are greeted at the entrance by the vision of five hanging ‘stones of gold’, invoking a sacred convention of ancient monoliths. Hovering above ground, these shimmering *Estelas (Stelae)* defy gravity and form individual parts to an ongoing series of densely packed tapestries, conjoined by layers of linen, gesso and gold leaf, with a stony gray painted on the back. Amaral’s work veers away from the domestic in feel, approaching monumental architectural proportions through the spectral presence of crosses, stripes, lines and organic shapes in others. Indeed, she initially trained in architectural drafting in Bogotá during the 1950s, but went on to study textiles at Cranbrook Academy of Art, which makes the opening of her retrospective in Michigan even more poignant.

Employing not only these forces and forms of nature and leaving behind both the ceiling and the wall, comes another singular Amaral form, the *Nudo (Knot)*, 2016. Hundreds of painted threads strung up by hand form a giant mane, with multiple loops and threads performing the knotting gesture – an essential yet overlooked aspect of weaving. Gravity finishes the composition as the threads reach the floor and touch back down to earth.

#### About the artist

Olga de Amaral spins base matter into fields of colour and weaves tectonic lines through space, unselfconsciously testing the borders between crafted object and the work of art. From the flat surfaces of tapestry through to resolutely three-dimensional sculptural forms made from fibre, the Colombian artist’s work spans more than 60 years, in turn reaching even further back to the spiritual qualities and ancient craquelure of medieval icon paintings or else the rigour and simplicity of the modernist grid, as if run through a loom. Developing her own tools and techniques, while relying on the hand for her strip-woven expanses of wool, linen and cotton, Amaral has also knotted reams of horsehair together and bolstered her fabric works through a painterly

application of gesso or stucco, often highlighting the reverse, or foregrounding the edges. Working not only on the floor or the wall, Amaral carves up interiors with her hanging tapestries, creates floating formations from yarn or plastic, while following nature's lead for outdoor works such as *Hojarascas (Dried Leaves)*, begun in the 1970s, or working at architectural scale, for the creation of the six-story façade commission, *El Gran Muro (The Great Wall)*, in 1976.

Amaral's travels in the 1950s and '60s are reflected in her wide range of international influences. After an encounter with the Japanese technique of 'kintsugi' at the ceramics studio of British potter Lucie Rie in 1970, for example, Amaral began a series of *Fragmentos Completos (Complete Fragments)* employing gold leaf, layered and intertwined within the fabric of her hand-woven textiles. Amaral's work also references religious and ceremonial dimensions prescribed to gold through the pre-Columbian worship of the substance, especially in her *Alquimia (Alchemy)* works begun in 1984, which reclaim the notion of a material indelibly connected to the sun and the earth, but equally plundered from her country over many centuries. During a lecture at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2003, she said: "As I build these surfaces, I create spaces of meditation, contemplation and reflection... Tapestry, fibres, strands, units, cords, all are transparent layers with their own meanings, revealing and hiding each other to make one presence, one tone that speaks about the texture of time."

Olga de Amaral was born Olga Ceballos Vélez in Bogotá, Colombia in 1932, where she continues to live and work. She studied Architectural Drafting at the Colegio Mayor de Cundinamarca in Bogotá, leaving for the USA in 1952 to study textiles at the Cranbrook Academy of Art outside of Detroit, Michigan. By the 1960s she was herself a teacher at the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Maine and was included in a group exhibition at MoMA, New York entitled *Wall Hangings*, before staging a solo show, entitled *Woven Walls*, at New York's Museum of Arts and Design in 1970. After living in Barcelona and Paris in the early 1970s she returned to Colombia, representing her country at the Venice Biennale in 1986 and receiving her first major survey show at the city's Museo de Arte Moderno in 1993. Her work is in many major collections worldwide, including the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA; Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX, USA; Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH, USA; Cranbrook Art Museum, Detroit, MI, USA; De Young Museum, San Francisco, CA, USA; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, USA; Museum of Arts and Design, New York, NY, USA; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX, USA; Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, USA; Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris, France; Museo Nacional, Bogotá, Colombia; American Craft Museum, New York, NY, USA; The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, Japan; Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI, USA; San Antonio Museum of Art, San Antonio, TX, USA; Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, OH, USA; and Tate Collection, London, UK.

## About Lisson Gallery

Lisson Gallery is one of the most influential and longest-running international contemporary art galleries in the world. Today the gallery supports and promotes the work of more than 60 international artists across two spaces in London, two in New York, one in Shanghai, as well as temporary spaces opened in 2020 in East Hampton and London's Mayfair district. Established in 1967 by Nicholas Logsdail, Lisson Gallery pioneered the early careers of Minimal and Conceptual artists, such as Art & Language, Carl Andre, Daniel Buren, Donald Judd, John Latham, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long and Robert Ryman among many others. It still works with many of these artists as well as others of that generation from Carmen Herrera to the renowned estates of Leon Polk Smith, Ted Stamm and Roy Colmer. In its second decade the gallery introduced significant British sculptors to the public for the first time, including Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor, Shirazeh Houshiary and Julian Opie. Since 2000, the gallery has represented many more leading international artists such as Marina Abramović, Ai Weiwei, John Akomfrah, Susan Hiller, Tatsuo Miyajima and Sean Scully. It is also responsible for raising the international profile of a younger generation of artists led by Cory Arcangel, Nathalie Djurberg & Hans Berg, Ryan Gander, Haroon Mirza, Laure Prouvost, Pedro Reyes and Wael Shawky.

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