LISA ALVARADO
MATRIX 192
SPINNING ECHO

JUNE 2 – SEPTEMBER 3, 2023

WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART
"With color, I think about how I can make the works be seen at a distance and how they function with a foreground of moving instruments and people, to highlight the situation and create a back-and-forth. I’ve been painting for a long time, so paint has become an instrument I communicate with. The way musicians get started playing a certain instrument is the way that I went into painting. You develop a language with it over so many years of playing, it becomes your voice. I think that is my relationship to paint. I see it as a very ancient process. You have this liquid stuff that you’re guiding to a solid state."

—Lisa Alvarado

In Lisa Alvarado’s Chicago home, art, music, and life weave together into a rich tapestry of creative existence. Alvarado’s paintings hang throughout her living spaces, forming a backdrop for her family’s everyday activities as well as the music that fills her domestic and professional worlds. Her studio shares a wall with the sound studio of her partner and collaborator, Joshua Abrams, a composer and multi-instrumentalist. Jazz artists from the couple’s orbit are a frequent presence, rehearsing and recording. While Alvarado paints, vibrations of music pulse throughout her space and medium. To say that this sonic context influences her paintings would be an understatement; they capture it physically and materially.

Alvarado’s practice is characterized by the blurring of boundaries: between painting and textile, history and present, sound and material, art and life. Working primarily in acrylic on unstretched canvas, Alvarado creates meditative, intricately patterned works that draw inspiration from a wide range of non-Western abstract traditions but carry a visual language entirely of their own. Her paintings are accented with fringes and backed with screen-printed fabrics, perhaps calling to mind curtains, scrims, or heraldic flags. She attaches the works to strips of wood and displays them away from the wall, suspended from the ceiling and meant to be viewed from both sides. They move gently in the air and absorb vibrations from the ambient soundscapes Alvarado frequently installs alongside them, or the musical performances that sometimes happen in front of the paintings, seemingly translating these extravisual phenomena through their pulsating patterns and densely worked surfaces.

This practice has its roots in the artist’s childhood. Growing up in San Antonio, Texas, Alvarado absorbed expressions of pattern and color in the form of public murals and vibrant textiles, such as serapes, long before visiting an art museum. She later found
that these rich visual traditions, among other art forms that relate to her Mexican American heritage and culture, were often categorized in arts institutions as crafts or artifacts instead of art. Wanting to complicate this divide, Alvarado draws on the openess of abstraction as a global tradition that long predates its adoption in European modernism in the early twentieth century. “I’m interested in the history of textiles as a framework to think about painting and abstraction,” she says. “It’s a culturally inclusive history that provides a different trajectory to think about forms and art objects, their histories and uses.”

For Alvarado, abstraction is a realm where different, sometimes opposing ideas and materialities can coexist in both harmony and tension—“a powerful and poetic transmitter of the experience of multiplicity.” Without distinct or literal citations, Alvarado’s visual language conjures a host of possible connections and reference points—on the part of both artist and viewer—from modernist and contemporary...
abstraction to vibrant, living textile traditions, perhaps including Aymara weavings of the Bolivian Andes or narrative yarn paintings made by the Huichol of northern Mexico. “Abstraction can build open forms for perspectives that exist within invisibility,” she says. Channeling her wide-reaching interests and her own lived experiences through a contemporary painting practice, Alvarado grapples with the fact that mediums associated with certain cultures—as well as those associated with domesticity or women’s work—have been frequently left out of the Western art-historical canon.

Around the time when she started painting, Alvarado discovered jazz when a friend burned her a CD of John Coltrane’s live performance of *A Love Supreme*. She describes the experience of listening to the legendary saxophonist as “a direct transference of energy that could recalibrate the spirit,” adding: “I wanted the path of my work to stay close to what I heard in that recording.” After transferring to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago to complete her painting studies, Alvarado met Abrams
and took up playing the harmonium, an accordion-like instrument. The pair forged a collaborative life and creative partnership, experimenting with artmaking and music-making in a shared studio where influential instrumentalists often played. Abrams formed the ensemble Natural Information Society in 2010 with Alvarado and Mikel Avery, developing a sound that mixed elements of minimalism, jazz, and *cosmiche*. In their lush, hypnotic music, Alvarado’s melodic playing interweaves with strings, winds, and percussion.

Experiencing rehearsals in front of her works, Alvarado began to see them as not only connected to the music but responsive to it, visually amplifying the experience of its sound for musicians and viewers alike. The band embraced her large-scale paintings as integral to their performances. For Alvarado, this felt like bringing her studio and home environment onto the stage, while also giving audiences a visual focal point while listening to their music. As she describes: “On stage, the presence of the handmade...
hanging works offers an unexpected conduit to a different sensing mode, one that overlaps the hearing experience with sight and the visual experience with sound, forming an alternate passageway for a realignment of one’s eye-ear-body focus within a shared space and breath.”

Alvarado became fascinated with the idea that her works would accumulate “residue” from these performances, as well as from their repeated furling and unfurling as she traveled with them on the road. “The works are often in motion, in a juncture of shifting contexts—rotating from being rolled and unrolled, packed along with musical instruments, hung in performance venues, art galleries, or placed within the family home,” she says. “Like our skin, the works are absorbent. They carry an embedded accumulation, a residue from the spaces they have inhabited, of the experiences the works have passed through and intersected, absorbing the vibrations and atmosphere of the moment, the music, the hands that helped move them, the happenings of the
people around, and the feeling of the times.”8 Alvarado also notes how the works contain memory for the band members, signaling shared recollections of time and place. Whether or not any of this is visible, the knowledge of past uses adds a layer of meaning to the work.

Still made for both the gallery and the stage, Alvarado’s paintings are rendered in two distinct styles through “very different processes that arrive at similar ends of movement, vibration, and pulse,” she says. “It relates a lot to music and sound but also, for me, to the heartbeat and the breath and how the painting can tune in with someone’s body.”9 Some works, intricately patterned, emerge from a meticulous process, beginning as drawings in a sketchbook where explorations of line and shape intermix with writings (as well as drawings by her young daughter). She scales up and maps out the compositions on her canvases, which can measure up to eight feet in both dimensions; these proportions make the works “big enough to feel as though you could walk into them, like a passageway,” says the artist.10 All-over geometric motifs like steps, chevrons, waves, and snaking forms merge into mosaic-like abstractions that the artist hopes will invite meditation and contemplation, with rhythmic repetitions that direct the viewer’s eye all over the canvas. Electric colors are carefully selected for unexpected pairings and contrasts, creating a vibrational effect that calls to mind a wide range of visual traditions, from Tibetan mandalas to
op art and 1960s psychedelia. Alvarado's other mode of painting is more focused on process and material, with layers of paint poured and rubbed into her canvases to infuse them with textured, luminous pigment. In these works, patterns emerge that are more organic and elusive, although just as intricate, perhaps evoking cracked landscapes. “The process is slow, and I see it as meditative, repetitive, mantra-like,” Alvarado says. “I think about how the paintings can create balance in my life.”

Alvarado has cited inspiration from a range of artists who ask similar questions about the boundary between painting and textile, including Howardena Pindell and Pacita Abad. A significant touchstone for her practice is Moki Cherry, with whom she discovered a kinship after she developed her practice. Cherry toured the world in the 1970s with her husband, the pioneering jazz trumpeter Don Cherry, accompanying him musically on the tamboura (an Indian string instrument) and transforming the spaces where they lived and performed with vivid artworks, including large tapestries, fabric sculptures, and costumes. Moki’s work has been called the visual embodiment of Don’s music, and some consider the two to have been each other’s muses. For Moki, making these artistic accompaniments was more than set dressing; it was a radical way of dissolving the boundaries between her domestic life and her life as a performing, collaborative musician, bringing visual consistency to an itinerant existence. As Alvarado writes: “(Moki Cherry’s) works are embedded with the
residues, vibes, and auras of growing children, travels, and the many powerful musical experiences they accompanied. They are relics of something magical, of a lived exploration into a reunderstanding of what it means to be a creative person, to have a family, and to bring it all together into something that is full of spirit.”  

For Lisa Alvarado / MATRIX 192 / Spinning Echo, the artist has created an installation of paintings, floor sculptures, and sound. The six new paintings, each titled Spinning Echo (2023), hang on simple chains from the ceiling, spaced around the rectangular MATRIX gallery like soft, moveable architecture. They invite us to view them from different angles, front and back, up close and afar. Alvarado explores subtle shifts in composition with these works. In her poured, fluid abstractions, the layers of paint have been applied within a geometric structure. In the patterned works, intricately stenciled motifs of zigzags and waves repeat around the canvas, with a mix of precise repetition and subtle variation. As their title suggests, these shapes converge into forms that suggest a spinning motion, optically hovering in front of saturated backgrounds. As is typical for Alvarado, this body of work explores her interest in complex phenomena relating to both perception and natural transformation.
“For me the works are more like poems of movement or vibration equations,” she says. “They work in a language of motion that is rhythmic and considers how the opposites elements of nature are in constant alteration, like day to night, breathing in and out.”

The floor sculptures were made on-site using colored sand and handmade stencils—a practice the artist has developed in recent years to make her site-specific exhibitions feel more immersive, like worlds of their own. Alvarado intends the sand sculptures to extend the rhythms and patterns of the hanging works onto the floor, “grounding” them and further directing visitors’ eyes and movement with “points of absorption and constellation.” The sound work, made in collaboration with Abrams, is a four-channel composition that cycles through the space. To coincide with the exhibition’s opening weekend, Alvarado will perform with Natural Information Society in the Wadsworth Atheneum’s historic Avery Memorial Theater, one floor below the gallery where her works are on view. One of Alvarado’s older paintings, bearing the patina of many performances, will hang behind the band on stage.

With her resolute interdisciplinarity and refusal to accept traditional boundaries, Alvarado offers a compelling testament to the continuing relevance of painting today. Her works invite intensely personal interaction, asking viewers to feel the act of seeing or to see the act of listening, while also holding space to consider centuries of artmaking both inside and outside the art field. Traveling through different contexts that demand different types of interaction, the paintings exist in a constant state of dynamic shifting. “When a work leaves the studio, it looks completely different from one place to another,” Alvarado says. “It’s more like a living thing.”

Jared Quinton
Associate Curator of Contemporary Art

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5. A broad genre of loose, free electronic music with roots in 1960s West Germany.
7. Ibid.
8. Kopel.
11. Kopel.
13. Email from the artist, April 2023.
14. Ibid.
15. Beta.

Alvarado was born in 1982 in San Antonio, TX, and lives and works in Chicago. She received a BFA in painting from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2007. Alvarado is represented by Bridget Donahue, New York, and The Modern Institute / Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Spinning Echo, 2023
Acrylic paint, canvas, fabric, wood
92 x 87 in.

Spinning Echo, 2023
Acrylic paint, canvas, fabric, wood
88 x 56 in.

Spinning Echo, 2023
Acrylic paint, canvas, fabric, wood
93 x 82 1/2 in.

Spinning Echo, 2023
Acrylic paint, canvas, fabric, wood
81 x 74 in.

Spinning Echo, 2023
Acrylic paint, canvas, fabric, wood
84 x 80 in.

Spinning Echo, 2023
Acrylic paint, canvas, fabric, wood
81 x 74 in.

Spinning Echo, 2023
Multi-channel sound
In collaboration with Joshua Abrams

Spinning Echo, 2023
Sand
Dimensions variable

All works courtesy of the artist, Bridget Donahue, New York, and The Modern Institute / Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow.
ARTIST CONVERSATION
with Lisa Alvarado and curator Jared Quinton
Thursday, June 1; 5pm exhibition preview;
6pm conversation – In museum

CONCERT
Natural Information Society
Saturday, June 3; 3pm – Avery Theater

CURATOR TALK
with Jared Quinton
Friday, August 4; 1pm – In museum

SECOND SATURDAYS FOR FAMILIES
Saturday August 12; 12-2pm – In museum

SOUND WALK
with Adam Lenz, composer and museum educator
Saturday, August 26; 1pm – In museum

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