

MERCEDES AZPILICUETA AN ART STUDENT IN MUNICH

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The exhibition “*An Art Student in Munich*” presents a new body of work by artist Mercedes Azpilicueta. These works arise, first, from a belief in the regenerative power that revising the past has today—a political, cultural, and epistemological power—and, secondly, from the recognition of a 19th-century artist who lived in Munich and was as transgressive as she was forgotten. Azpilicueta rescues Anna Mary Howitt.

Inspired by her reading of *An Art Student in Munich* (1853), a book that compiles the memoirs and articles Howitt wrote during her stay in the city between 1850 and 1852, Azpilicueta has created sculptures and drawings within a large-scale installation.

Howitt, a British artist, travelled to Munich to further her art studies. She was aware of the limitations faced by women in Victorian England, where they were forbidden from enrolling at the Academy of Fine Arts. In Munich, they were likewise barred from entering the Akademie der Bildenden Künste, yet Howitt managed

to study in Wilhelm von Kaulbach’s studio and, more importantly, to cultivate an alternative education supported by a sisterhood of women who had chosen to develop their artistic sensibilities together. Howitt was a pioneer in advocating for women’s artistic education and professionalization, seeking to increase their social visibility. Azpilicueta now revisits Howitt’s legacy, amplifying these historical moments and extracting their contemporary relevance.

Azpilicueta’s works portraying Howitt in Munich pulsate with feminist power: she has created three sculptures employing second-hand easels, period furniture, leather and other repurposed materials from her own previous works. She took as her starting point a passage in Howitt’s book in which she describes the studio in Munich she shared with her fellow art sisters—other women dedicated, like her, to learning and creativity. Even then, Howitt conceived of art education as a collaborative project, and Azpilicueta continues to promote models of solidarity among women.

After honing her painting skills in Munich, Howitt returned to England in 1852 and continued her career. However, when she exhibited a large historical canvas—engaging with the noblest of painting genres but centering on a female heroine (Queen Boadicea, who rebelled against the Romans in the 1st century as they expanded their empire into England)—she received harsh criticism from the influential John Ruskin. The response drove her to a nervous breakdown; she destroyed her works and found in spiritualism another channel for her artistic vocation. As a medium, she created spiritual drawings featuring female deities.

Azpilicueta has crafted a theatrical environment that highlights three sculptures that can undergo transformation. Developed with her longstanding collaborator, Katharina Kasinger, these modular works are reconfigurable. Azpilicueta can rearrange their components, combining the three sculptures into one, for example. Transformations, correspondences between elements, adjustments, and renewal lie at the core of her art. She explores the merging of subjectivities, multiple and flexible identities, and hybridity, blurring categorical distinctions and permitting us to question the systems that have governed the world. Azpilicueta seizes every opportunity to forge new social connections, build communities, and affirm sustainability and empowerment. The reconfigurability of the sculptures is not merely a formal detail—it is a literal demonstration of the

fluidity that runs through Azpilicueta's art. Indeed, she rewrites women's history, resists the rigidity of traditional art narratives, and proposes flexibility in the construction of identity.

Azpilicueta's art is full of energetic pulp—a vibrant, playful, and unapologetic energy that fuels her opposition to all forms of oppression. Her works invite both reverie (to imagine what some experiences might have been like in the past) as well as the rigor of the archive (to meticulously reconstruct historical episodes that were neglected but that now can awaken a collective strength).

The drawings on display, transformed into carpets that complement the sculptures, reveal Azpilicueta's creative process. We can imagine the artist wielding a pencil, contemplating how to convey the moods and experiences of Howitt—a woman whose restricted education did not prevent her from pursuing her artistic calling.

Do the drawings—both in the installation and in this exhibition's extension on view at the Instituto Cervantes—tell Howitt's true story? In Azpilicueta's art, historical truth is questioned: we see Howitt through the eyes and mind of another artist, filtered through Azpilicueta's perception and imagination. History, and the ways in which it is interpreted, reflect acts of knowing and understanding that are inevitably shaped by subjectivity. Thus, by exploring the figure of Howitt through Azpilicueta's gaze, we as viewers can travel back to 19th-century Munich, confronting its barriers against women, and connect to these past accounts with empathy and affective resonance, constructing new meanings in the present.

Azpilicueta brings to life today the space that these women claimed for themselves nearly two centuries ago in Munich—a space to paint, to create—a room of one's own, or rather, a room of their own. Like them, Azpilicueta challenges the notion of the artist as an individual hero, as a male demiurge, and instead affirms creation as an act of collectivity and resistance.

Florencia Malbrán

SALTAART is collaborating with Instituto Cervantes Múnich to present the work of Mercedes Azpilicueta (Argentina, based in Amsterdam). This partnership highlights Salta art's commitment to fostering cross-cultural exchange and providing a platform for artistic exploration and critical engagement. The exhibition is part of Metabolic Sessions, an initiative by Instituto Cervantes Múnich that examines contemporary artistic practices through the lens of Spanish-speaking artists. Inspired by Clémentine Deliss's reflections on rethinking museums, the project seeks to reshape cultural programming and uncover new narratives. Through this exhibition, a dialogue emerges between the artist and the Munich audience, fostering meaningful connections and expanding the discourse on contemporary creation.

Production in collaboration with Katharina Kasinger.

Exhibition design in collaboration with Vanina Scolavino.

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ABOUT

Mercedes Azpilicueta (La Plata, Argentina, 1981) is a visual and performance artist based in Amsterdam. Her practice brings together figures from the past and present, exploring the vulnerable or collective body from a decolonial feminist perspective. Drawing from speculative Latin American literature, neobaroque art history, and contemporary popular culture, her work manifests in performative and sculptural installations that merge craft-based techniques with industrialized production.

Florencia Malbrán is curator and writer currently working out of Buenos Aires, Argentina.