

HÆIR
LOOM

OLLANTAYTAMBO'S
(POST)
MODERN
WEAVERS

LESLIE OSTERLING

—PHOTOGRAPHS—

EMBASSY OF PERU IN THE UNITED KINGDOM
London, 28th of June – 19th of July, 2023



My education has not followed a formal route. Despite having obtained the most important recognitions for my achievements in high school and the International Baccalaureate, marriage and children interrupted my university studies in the fine arts. Creating a stable family became my life's work.

Intent on leaving a further mark, some years ago I revived my previous interest in photography, through various courses and productions leading up to the publication of a personal book (*Huellas, memoria y tiempo*, Madrid, Calma y Sosiego Ediciones, 2019). The pandemic then imposed on me a period of self-reflection, which somehow culminated in my encounter with the experiences reinterpreted by the works in this exhibition.

Hæirloom is about a group of women in a tiny village in Cusco's Sacred Valley, knitting wigs using their own hair—and that of their peers—as raw material. Their hair is a valuable renewable resource that—well transformed—could become a new source of income. And a renewal of life. The subject resonated in my inner core. I lived almost a year in the Leukemia Department of the MD Anderson, fighting for my husband's life, sixteen years ago... This beautiful enterprise has shed a new light on that experience. And at the same time, it has again shown me how skill and perseverance can bring us out of despair. In personal terms, but also as a collective.

Our Peruvian community, confronted always with so many trying challenges, is a glaring example of this. In the midst of our many difficulties, the creative achievements of Ollaytantambo's weavers are a beacon of hope.

And an enduring inspiration.

— Leslie Osterling

The inspiration for this photographic project has been the human and cultural processes enveloping the recent but already promising trajectory offered by CHIQA, a start-up conceived by Kiara Kulisic a year ago in Ollantaytambo, Cusco. That initiative derived from its founder's personal struggles with alopecia, which severely affected her self-image since adolescence. The discovery of the natural look made possible by special wigs delicately crafted with real hair had a profound healing effect on her. That transformative experience prompted Kiara to master the complex techniques involved in the manufacture of those elements, habitually imported as luxury items, and finally set up a Peruvian business that allows her to transfer those skills to Andean weavers. Their shared vision is to introduce the results of their creative labour in the very high end of the international market, with a production primarily made to order, like *haute couture*.

The economic potential for this endeavour is boundless. The global demand for hair wigs and extensions has been valued at USD 6.13 billion in 2021 and is estimated to grow at a CAGR of 7.63% during the forecast period. The revenue expected in 2030 is USD 11.8 billion. The market size value in 2022 was of USD 6.56 billion and is anticipated to cross the valuation of USD 14.29 billion by 2032.

But, of course, the most rewarding returns are to be defined by more challenging aspects. The empowerment of local communities and subjects and cultures through their proactive engagement with a global economy. A grassroots start-up profoundly involved in the enrichment of people's lives and human capital.

And that is priceless.

Save for Kiara Kulisic, who is from Lima, all the weavers involved in this exhibition were born in Cusco's Sacred Valley.





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I am particularly pleased to present the exhibition *Hæirloom - Ollantaytambo's (Post) Modern Weavers* to be held at the Inca Garcilaso room of the Embassy of Peru in London. This magnificent exhibition by artist Leslie Osterling will be open to the public from 28th of June to July 19th, offering visitors an exciting and creative combination of different artistic expressions.

On the one hand, Leslie's inspired photography with unpublished scenes of Ollantaytambo, an Inca archaeological city located at 2,800 m.a.s.l. in Cusco, combining beautiful landscapes of the Sacred Valley with illustrations of the work being performed by women weavers, for the manufacture of natural hair wigs. On the other, the very work of these women, which has allowed them to be self-empowered and to learn new skills to significantly improve their living conditions. Finally, the circle is completed with a film that provides the visitor with a more detailed understanding of the beauty of this important cultural heritage and the dedicated work of these women.

I have to acknowledge that throughout the process of preparing this exhibition I have been able to confirm, once again, that art can be a great ally of development and welfare, and that an exhibition such as this one can be a step to promote Peru while supporting women in the path of their own progress.

I especially thank Leslie Osterling for her excellent work, for her sensitivity and tireless dedication to make this exhibition possible; and Kiara Kulisic, for being the inspiration for it.

Finally, our thanks to the women of Cusco, to whom I also pay a heartfelt tribute for their determination and willingness to find new ways of using their traditional knowledge for the prosperity of their families.

Juan Carlos Gamarra Skeels
His Excellency, Ambassador of Peru to the United Kingdom





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GUSTAVO BUNTINX
— CURATOR —

— I —

Her / Hair / Heir / Heirloom...

Can a play on words play out the polysemy of images?
The conundrum of their entanglement
with a history yearning to be collective.
But inevitably unravelled in multiple, singular, stories.

Such as those of the ordinary / extraordinary women
captured by these intriguing photographs of the everyday doings
of an eccentric start-up initiated barely a year ago
in Huayronccoyoc Pampa, at the outskirts of Ollantaytambo:
one of Cuzco's most paradoxical towns,
submerged in history, in geography, in geology itself,
and at the same time threatened
by the disturbing effects of mass tourism
that convert its ancient culture
—and nature—
into a thematic park.

A once small, semirural community,
with outstanding Inka origins, and monuments,
transfigured by the tantalizing bounties
derived from its transformation into the most important outpost
on route to the dreamlands of Machu Picchu.

Driven by complex personal reasons
—alopecia—
Kiara Kulisic moved from Lima to the fringes
of that now cosmopolitan village,
intent on establishing a home-grown production
of high-quality wigs
manually made, by native hands, with natural hair.

With motivations of her own, but similarly painful
—cancer—

Leslie Osterling accompanied that project
through a sequence of photographic forays
that gradually procured
the enticing set of images now in exhibition.

Now *exposed*.

— II —

Exposed in their narrative, as well as in their artistry.
There is something liberating in these pictures.
Almost libertarian.
Inscribed in them we can ponder the emancipatory potential
of such innovative enterprises.

Particularly for rural women:
the insertion they thus attain in a different market economy
permits them to acquire not just a trade but a certain autonomy.

And, above all, a sense of agency that loosens their entrapment
within the twin constraints of their disrupted community.

Ollantaytambo's (post)modern weavers
manage to elude some (some) of the archaic burdens
placed on the feminine condition by peasant societies.
But they do so without falling prey to the bastardizing demands
of turning their real selves into the congealed simulacra
of an essentialized identity paraded as a banal commodity
for quick tourist consumption.

These women do not *perform* their identity.
They *metabolize* it.

They are not spoken by the past,
although the past undeniably inhabits them.
They translate it into their present, actual, existences.
In a plural sense that recognizes, and enhances,
their contemporary singularities.

Each one of them has a name.
A proper, individual name.
Written into the very title of each photograph.
And thus, subtly but incisively,
into the semiotic texture woven around the pictures.
Through the images themselves.

— III —

Through the images and their context:
their at times dramatic settings,
that might seem staged,
but are also part of the factual surroundings
of their everyday lives.

The homes, the workshop, the land, the landscape.
The intricate knitting of it all in photographs
that are as exact as they are tender.

And poignant. Or surreal.
As in that picture of one of the weaver's spontaneous breastfeeding
under the watchful gaze of the mannequin heads,
with their sewn hairdos halfway into the making.
And the cell phones casually lying on the worktable.

Or those solo portraits of her companions
silently handling their weaving.

Some of them
— Juanabel Pillco Solís, Flor de María Coronel Quispe —
almost Vermeer like under the light that flows upon them
from the windows hinted at their side.

Next to an orchid.
Or by a glaring and yet mute vessel
made of plastic and glass.

But how their eyes confront us.
Placidly.

— IV —

Placidly. Or enigmatically.

There is a hieratic ambivalence in such semblances.
To the point of becoming allegorical
in the two more ambitious portraits.
Maritza Baca Espinoza and Claudia Ccahua Huaman,
statically posed in front of an imposing lithic formation,
or next to the trapezoidal niche of a crumbling Inka ruin.

But that architectural detail,
so suffused with ancestral connotations
—nearly a shrine—,
surrenders its recesses to the display
of a startlingly blonde wig.

Or not quite:
the visibly dark roots of those transformed hairs
betray their dyed nature.
Their nature betrayed, and redeemed,
through the paradoxical arts of artifice.

Of reverse appropriation, of empowerment even:
what in other contexts would suggest a commercial exhibit
in this placement evokes
the phantom image of a trophy head.
Culturally repossessed.
Reembodied by the very attributes of these models
enhancing their own loose hairs entwined with hair extensions
of surprising hues.
Gray, or grayish, with a hint of blue.
Or redundantly black.
Unapologetically modern.

(Post)modern:

Claudia has been photographed here deliberately barefoot.
And almost bundled in native garbs.
But sporty trousers seem to lurk
from beneath her lavishly woven poncho.
And in the other portrait Maritza's entire attire
is of cheap synthetic manufacture...
...save for the indigenous mantle in which she holds,
and exhibits, and hides,
the treasure of her child protected from our gaze
by that native fabric.

And by the artificial hair
that prolongs her own natural capillary threads,
interlaced by the lens into the very texture and design
of the traditional garment cloaking her heir.

Or heiress.

— V —

Her heir, her hair, her heirloom.
Not an inheritance but a heritage.
A legacy, no matter how awkwardly assumed as such.

In yet another elaborated solo portrait,
Luzmarina Silva, Claudia's pubescent daughter,
contemplates her own unfocused image
vaguely reflected on a mirror in the background.
But what hits our sight, in full close-up detail,
is the dashing cascade
of her gorgeously black, glimmering hair.
A precious token of primordial beauty,
underscored by the typical design motifs in her *lliklla*,
the traditional Andean shawl.

And yet, the animal figure hanging from the glass
—the *looking* glass—
is in fact a cheap trinket.
A llama key chain,
massively produced for the tourist trade,
and here blurred by the same effect
that blurs the girl's semblance as well.

The mirage of identity.



— VI —

Identity as phantasm, as fantasy, as *fantasia*.
 With sometimes spiritual undertones,
 brought to the surface in two almost religious photographs:
 the aura of those open hands
 —faces unseen—
 holding the hairs recently cropped, or dyed.

An offering.

The longing, the lingering, of an atemporal existence,
 duly queried in the remaining photographs
 by the real-time of really lived lives.
 In all their complexity and contradiction.

A keen response to the tautology
 of so many conventional images
 content to re-produce a static, essentialist image of identity
 as a primeval and eternal given. Softly kitsch.

Softly acknowledged
 —and reversed—
 by subtle but crucial inclusions
 in Leslie's constructed images.
 Or in her intuitive captures of what is already present.
 Already given.

As in the large, tired poster
 adorning a bright blue wall of the only bedroom
 at Juanabel's home:
 a native girl in smiling native attire,
 accompanied by an endearing llama,
 with the high hills as their inevitable backdrop.

An identity-pose
 that Leslie's broader capture
 registers in its close proximity
 to the thoroughly westernized school trappings
 —Captain America and all—
 accompanying the portrait of Juanabel's own son.
 While traditional religious images
 lie somewhat hidden on a sidewall.

A mise en abyme
 of the fetching counterpoints prodding our eyes
 throughout the exhibition.
 A revelation inscribed not just in the photographer's gaze
 but in the actual home-made aesthetics of its subjects.
 And literally painted onto the façades of their community's houses,
 enclosed by majestic Andean landmarks
 but identified with English signs
 ("Claudia House", "Elizabeth House")
 courtesy of the Australian ONG responsible
 for the reconstruction of the village
 after its obliteration by an avalanche.

These are such stuff that dreams are made on.
 The very mortar of a culture
 inevitably impure and contaminated,
 reinventing itself despite all essentialist demands.

Beyond identity.
 Beyond the appeasing gratifications of a naturalized origin.

Mystified.

— VII —

Beyond identity.
And willing to confront the inescapable challenges
of their subject's hybrid existences.

Maritza's daughter, for example.
Lizete Adriana Avilés,
the girl with a makeshift cosmopolitan outfit
flaunting her golden wig while standing tall
on an ancestral boulder. And next to the remnants
of an ancient house built out of mud bricks
with still intricate geometric designs...
...in jarring rhyme with the industrial patterns
adorning her modish pants and glaring footwear.

That glare might well be the decisive moment
in some of Leslie's more disquieting images.

The contrived neon glitters that pervasively infiltrate
the domestic attributes of the weavers' true lifestyles.

The sneakers, some jackets, every plastic clothespin
and even the synthetic chord that holds these last,
almost inadvertently,
in the posed portrait of Juanabel,
and her children, and her dog,
in front of their cement house.
In the midst of an exuberant countryside
nowhere to be found
in this particular take.

But everywhere breathable.

— VIII—

Their yet unpainted house of cement.
What colours shall bring life to those surfaces?
Are they expectant or are they deprived?

It is tempting to perceive
in these pictures' continuous counterpoints and intrusions
something akin to what Roland Barthes
famously denominated the *punctum* of the photograph.

But the *punctum*, as Barthes would have it, is non-deliberate.
It belongs to the realm of the unconscious of the image.

It is not demonstrated by the photograph
—the photographer—
but revealed
by the wounded personal gaze of the beholder.

My gaze, for example, pricked above all
by the sense of *lack* in that last picture.
The unpainted wall, the missing husband,
the absent father,
the nature known to surround it all
but cloistered out of the camera's frame.

Only to overwhelm us
in a single, major, photograph,
conceived as an almost telluric abstraction
of the utter, the solemn silence, of the *apu*:
the grand sacred mountain,
freckled with nearly imperceptible archaeological remains.

Cultura fused into *natura*
in an animistic cosmos
that reigns
over the weaver's homes and their fields.
Soon to be radically transformed.

Perhaps.

— IX —

Perhaps that suspense is the latent tension
that so energizes these images.
An expectancy in some point ominous,
and yet gravid with a certain
—uncertain—
element of hope.

A force to be glimpsed even in those apparently warm
—but severe—
photographs that picture together all the weavers
—Kiara included—
displaying their assortment of wigs
while horizontally lined up under the goal
of a football field in Huayronccoyoc Pampa.

Or randomly strewn in a bright but hidden garden.
With the mild flowers and the quiet greenery
somehow unsettled by the entangled mixture
of hairs, of fabrics, of skins.

The secret gardens of identity.
Their conundrums, their cryptic rhymes.
Delicately inserted into the images,
by the images' own structural paradox.

The analogy
—and the friction—
that relates the orderly line-up of weavers
with the irregular profile of the mountain range.

Looming over the horizon.

— CODA —

Looming:
It is (melo)dramatically appropriate for this text
to find closure in pointing out the also textile connotations
of that highly charged term.

And its free association with the subverted notion of *legacy*,
linguistically woven here into its very subject.
Its very anatomy.

Hæirloom.









Flor de María, Workshop

Juanabel, Workshop





Juanabel and Children, Bedroom



■ Weavers, Football Field



■ Maritza and Baby, Workshop



■ Juanabel and Children, Patio



■ Kiara, Mirror



■ Francisca and Daughters, Living Room



■ Weavers, Garden



■ Kiara, Kitchen



■ Francisca, Kitchen





■ Isabel, Haircut

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/ Juanabel Pillco Solís / Francisca Salas Quispe / Luzmarina Silva Ccahua

His Excellency, Juan Carlos Gamarra Skeels,
Ambassador of Peru to the United Kingdom

Désirée Prinzessin von Preussen

Ricardo Malca,
Cultural Counsellor, Embassy of Peru in the United Kingdom

José Antonio Osterling Letts —my husband
who makes everything possible

This exhibition is dedicated to my four children



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28th of June – 19th of July, 2023
Monday to Friday: 10 am – 4 pm