

Ana María Hernando

Climb Every Montaña

Words: **Bonnie McCune**, Image: **Alison Vagnini**

From the bare rocky splendor of Pikes Peak to the tree-feathered, maternal slopes of the Alleghenies—there are mountains that challenge and mountains that shelter, there are even mountains out of mole holes.

The entire concept of mountain-ness is captured in *La Montaña*, an installation by Ana María Hernando at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver through April 19th. Comprised of a multihued collection of hand-crocheted underskirts from the women of Mollamarca, a tiny village located more than 12,000 feet high in the Peruvian Andes, Hernando explores the multitude of complex attitudes and relationships of the women, descendents of the ancient Incas.

Regardless of the native culture, women's work throughout the world is often constant, unvarying and unacknowledged. Women's creative expression is often through handcrafts and textiles, where the individual is submerged and unidentified. What better avenue to explore their manifestation than through the humble collective of these articles of personal everyday apparel? In doing so, Hernando conveys the femininity, strength and unity of the community.

By stiffening the underskirts with resin and mounding them into a mountain, she suggests the physical geography in which these particular women are born, grow, give birth, work and die. The Andes are steep, and the women become strong and agile as they function within their slopes and valleys, she says. And they operate together in a community tradition, helping nurture each other's children, carrying burdens, herding, farming. The underskirts suggest this impression of group strength, stubbornness and purpose.

Additionally, mountains carry spirituality to Mollamarcans. The Andes have spirits both masculine and feminine and are, in some sense, protectors of villagers. People who embark on becoming shamans may be called in dreams or visions by a mountain, which comes to have a special tie to that person. Mountains as part of nature are imbued with animism, the ancient philosophy that views everything as having an indwelling spirit. So, *La Montaña* also depicts the intangibles of spiritual beliefs. Part of the installation is a four-wall video of village women and children in various festival and celebratory scenes. The bright colors and movements wrap around the mound just as the transient activities of human life surround physical bodies.

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Hernando, more generally known as a painter, first envisions her installations as an image, which she then embodies as she manipulates physical materials. Born in Argentina, she draws on frequent trips to South America for inspiration and has incorporated other textile arts in her work, including embroidery from cloistered nuns. She wanted to be an artist from the age of five and says, "If I weren't an artist, I'd be an angry person," hinting at the expression that visual arts has given her.

This particular piece could be identified as "conceptual art" (an idea or concept not necessarily involving traditional art such as a painting or sculpture). However, she prefers not to label her pieces. "I let other people do that," she says. Recently she was included, along with nearly ninety other artists, in *Colorado Abstract: Painting and Sculpture*, a new book curated by Michael Paglia, art critic for *Westword* and co-authored with Mary Voelz Chandler, art and architecture critic for the *Rocky Mountain News*.

For information on the exhibition, contact MCA Denver, 303.298.7554 or visit MCADenver.org.