

The Highlights - Kuna Yala Swag

I.



Aerial view of Panama City coastline, 2011

The top of Ancon Hill is the highest point in Panama City, Panama. It is a patch of concrete restraining a jungle.

Sitting there produced a feeling of geographic ambivalence. I was closer than I have ever been, while on the West coast of the American continent, to the East.

At the meeting of oceans, big ships dip low with burdens of basmati rice, I LOVE NY T-shirts, IKEA futons, and computer chips as they pass through the Panama Canal. Six in-flight hours from hustling 5th Avenue street vendors and well-trafficked retail outlets, I watched the traverse of global, manufactured bounty take place cordially in gentle water.

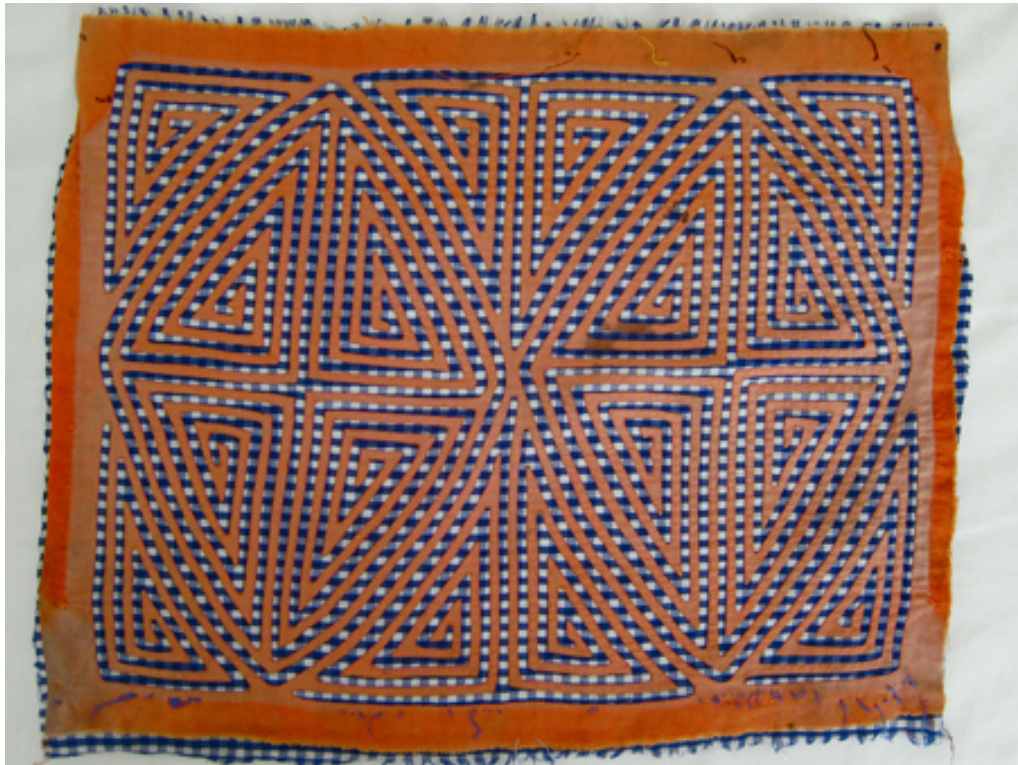
II.

To get to Kuna Yala ("land of the Kuna") you fly southeast from Panama City on a ten-seat plane over the Darién Gap. (1, 2) The islands are little pieces of earth, so small they seem less like a terrestrial habitat than a constellation of points demarcating a space of water.

Most people in Kuna Yala live on this archipelago though the territory also includes an

adjacent strip of dense coastal rain forest. The physical removal of Kuna Yala has allowed the Kuna people to maintain old customs and ways of living. At the same time, ships moving across the Atlantic Ocean offer access to commercial networks. Kuna communities exercise their indigenous identity as they participate in popular culture and international trade.

The textile tradition of mola making displays this mash up of global swag and orthodox practices. The Kuna women who make molas to wear and sell, selectively incorporate pop forms into an idiosyncratic, narrative imagination.



Mola purchased by the artist



Frank Stella, *Turkish Mambo* from *Black Series II*, 1967, (cropped). One from a portfolio of eight lithographs, composition: 10 x 15 15/16" (25.4 x 40.5 cm); sheet: 14 15/16 x 21 15/16" (38 x 55.8 cm). Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Jasper Johns, 530.1992.1 © 2012 Frank Stella / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

III.

Last February, I bought a mola from an old woman by the beach on the island of Mamitupu. It smells like rotten ocean.

The bottom cloth is a cobalt, gingham plaid, one of the iconic outputs of the Manchester textile mills. It is the same fabric that Judy Garland wore in *The Wizard of Oz*, but dull instead of radiant Technicolor. The top layer is bright orange where the sun and salt has not yet exhausted the dye, and a murky, light beige everywhere else. Rib-like strips cut into the checkered cloth beneath.

Like Frank Stella's monochromatic lithograph *Turkish Mambo* (1967) from *Black Series II*, the image on the mola appears to wobble. Shapes are unstable, folding both inward and outward. The abrupt redirection of vectors and dramatic tonal contrast cause a visual pulsation like the flow of blood or the rhythm of breath at a dubstep dance club.

Unlike with the Stella piece, a subliminal cross becomes visible in the mola. It is an embedded mark of a history of influence brought by the sea. The larger diamond shapes formed around these crosses resemble the commonly used Kuna symbol for the canoe.

The movement from abstraction to figuration, from geometric pattern to quasi-Christian and Kuna signs, is something I have noticed in many molas. In this panel, the multiple symbolic readings are emergent but simultaneous, like a schizophrenic character in the momentary shift between personalities.

IV.

I bought another mola from an artist who appeared no older than fourteen. The panel depicts an angel dressed in a blue jumpsuit, white boots, and a wide-brimmed hat, who holds up a bus and carries it through the sky.

The representation of airplanes in mola panels is fairly common, however buses are rare. I assume this is because there are no roads in Kuna Yala.

I initially interpreted the bus as the young girl's yearning for adventure or escape, but there is a curious redundancy in the gesture of carrying something designed to move. What does a bus mean to someone who has never been on one?

Perhaps the bus serves as a proxy for the artist's community or an allegory of the body in transit. In this case, the bus could be a vehicle for transcendence wherein the dead are lifted toward an afterlife, carried not across land, but above it.

V.



Sidney Russell, *Untitled*, 2012. 21 x 13 x 10", plastic shopping bags, NY baseball hat, NY pot holder, thread

I was lost long after moving to New York. Climbing out of subway stations disoriented. Constantly turned around.

I used to look at the same streets, but always see them differently. In that confusion was a moment of fresh experience. It was an encounter with a phenomenological, frenetic emptiness. Maybe the street didn't just look different, maybe it actually is.

In this way, I've started to think of my material possessions as nothing more than the containment of immaterial transactions; time for money, light into energy, distance by time.

To consider molas as immaterial may be beside the point, since they are enticingly material. (What is more immediately tactile than cloth?) Yet many of the mola panels I like most evoke the metaphysical, either in form or process, or both. I identify this quality in the performative aspects of the mola: the hours and weeks of labor or the years of wear. I can

see it in the elemental components of the mola: layers of cotton cloth produced in textile factories around the world, printed with patterns that have equally dispersed and opaque cultural histories. I see this also in the transformation of pop icons into new symbols, and in the quivering lines that breathe as the cloth erodes.

NOTES

1. Even before Europeans colonized Central America, the Kuna people were fighting for their autonomy. They negotiated with hostile indigenous and colonial forces through rain forests and riverhead waters before settling on the San Blas Islands. In the 1970s, the Kuna went to war with the Panamanian government for their independence. The land-and-sea battles that led to their sovereignty are brutally reenacted once a year during a three-day festival of memorial and celebration.
2. The Darién Gap is the place where the Pan American Highway ends, leaving hundreds of miles with no paved connection between North and South America.
3. Molos are intricate, pictorial panels that adorn the front of the traditional blouse made and worn by Kuna women. They are constructed using a reverse appliqué-stitching technique in which many different brightly colored pieces of cotton are layered and then cut into, revealing the colored cloth beneath.
4. Kuna Yala has been the object of missionary efforts directed by the Catholic Church. For the most part the Kuna integrate aspects of the Catholic religion into their culture, while shirking affiliation.