

Exhibition May 28–October 20, 2025

Sabatini Building, Floor 4

Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa

Light Spectra



Illusion of Matter (2015). Presented at the BMW Tate Live Performance Room, Tate Modern.

© Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa. Photograph: © Tate (Brotherton-Lock), 2018

Much of the work of Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa (Guatemala City, 1978) is sustained by a constant search for ways to connect the broken threads of memory and retrieve what has been lost or distorted in the maelstrom of history. The tumultuous history of his country forms the backbone of his artistic reflections. It is a history riddled with different forms of violence and armed conflict and particularly marked by a prolonged internal armed conflict from 1960 to 1996 between the Guatemalan army and insurgent groups, which left around two hundred thousand people dead or missing, most of them civilians. The violence intensified in the 1980s, when massacres, forced displacements, and genocide against the Indigenous populations drove many families into exile, among them the artist's family, which had to move to Vancouver.

Ramírez-Figueroa bases his artistic practice on exhaustive investigations, particularly into oral and popular tradition, and on the use of different media, including sculpture, installation, performance, video, and drawing, which occasionally converge in scenographic installations in which the artist contests preestablished constraints and hierarchies.

In this way, his work addresses collective issues like identity, the body, and cultural history, without being limited to the specific context of Guatemala or Ramírez-Figueroa's personal circumstances. For him, art is a tool for questioning narratives firmly rooted in specific episodes of the recent past. As he himself recognizes, it provides him with a privileged position from which to unsettle the viewer and make visible the senselessness of colonial violence and wars linked inextricably to cruelty, uprooting, and genocide.

Hauntology, a term coined by Jacques Derrida in his book *Specters of Marx* (1993), describes the presence of the absent, the way in which the past never completely disappears but persists in the form of specters that continue to operate and condition our present. With this idea in mind, the title that Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa has chosen for the fullest exhibition of his work to date,

Light Spectra, expresses the richness and complexity of his artistic endeavor, always on the trail of phantoms clamoring for the reparation of memory and justice. Together with his works from the last decade, this show includes *Cuna y arrullo (Cradle and Lullaby)* (2025), an ambitious new project produced in collaboration with the Museo Reina Sofía and the Fundación TBA21 Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary.

Scenes of Censorship and Exile

Political activism in Latin America and the experimental theater of the 1970s and 1980s are fundamental to Ramírez-Figueroa's creative grammar. The body of work that emerges under the title *El corazón del espantapájaros (The Heart of the Scarecrow)* and later evolves into *Lugar de consuelo (Place of Solace)* reflects this legacy and integrates the violence of the Guatemalan internal armed conflict with the artist's lived experience and family history.

The black-and-white aquatints in the series *El corazón del espantapájaros* (2015) are the germ of a set of works in various media in which the artist revisited a play of the same name written in 1962 by the Guatemalan dramatist Hugo Carrillo. The adaptation of this play by a group of students at the Universidad Popular de Guatemala in 1975, a production in which the artist's own uncles took part, was considered an act of political protest against the repressive government of the time, when agitation unleashed by constant executions and disappearances had reached a peak. The violent reaction against the play culminated in the murder of an actor and the explosion of a bomb that destroyed the theater with some of the cast members inside. This traumatic episode triggered the family's exile, and it has remained a constant presence in the artist's mind. In the series of aquatints, the artist creates a very personal reconstruction of some of the scenes of 1975 based on descriptions from one of his uncles, a witness to those fateful events and their consequences.

The performance *Lugar de consuelo* was first presented at the 32nd São Paulo Biennial. It takes its name from the script written for it by the poet Wingston González, who often collaborates with the artist, that is based on the censorship to which Carrillo's *El corazón del espantapájaros* was subjected. The plot revolves around five extravagant and grotesque figures who represent the machinations of power: the oligarch, the president, the soldier, the Church, and the scarecrow.

The film *Lugar de consuelo* (2020) is also derived from Carrillo's play. Filmed at the Universidad Popular de Guatemala in an implicit reference to the play that was suppressed in 1975, this cinematic version uses the characters from the artist's performance to construct a histrionic, even comic, tale of the abuse of power. Nevertheless, the nonsense and humor are not deliberate but rather are the inevitable result of displaying the stupidity of despotism, tyranny, and the opportunistic relationships created by wars and authoritarian regimes. The costumes, an evolution of those used in the performance, become an independent entity in the form of a physical installation and help to emphasize the archetypes represented in the film as significant pieces of the visual narrative.



Lugar de consuelo (*Place of Solace*), 2020. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. On indefinite loan from the Fundación Museo Reina Sofía, 2022 (gift of Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza)



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Corazón del espantapájaros (*Heart of the Scarecrow*), 2015. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. On indefinite loan from the Fundación Museo Reina Sofía, 2022 (gift of Julia Borja and Mario Cader-Frech).
Photograph: Joaquín Cortés / Román Lores

Resisting Oblivion with Fragments of Childhoods and Dreams

For Ramírez-Figueroa, childhood is an autobiographical referent that, time and again, gives rise to subjects with a more global scope. Conceptually and artistically, childhood is apt to throw the established order into disarray and appeal to alternative but equally valid realities. Examples of this are works such as *Illusion of Matter* (2015), *Cuna y arrullo* (2025), and *Life in His Mouth, Death Cradles Her Arm* (2016).

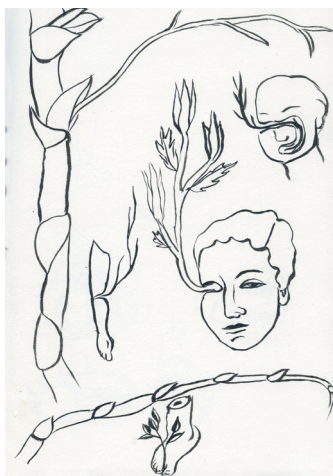
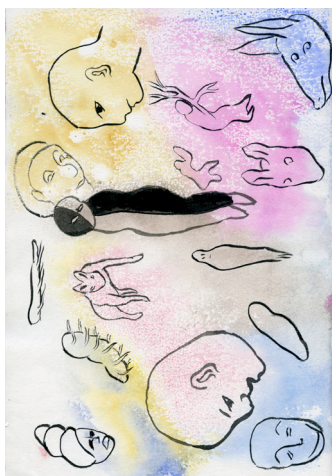
The performance *Illusion of Matter*, devised and filmed expressly to be watched live on the internet, revisits Ramírez-Figueroa's childhood memories on the basis of a dream. The deliberately precarious and structurally transparent stage set recalls the children's theater productions that Ramírez-Figueroa used to attend regularly in his native city when he was just six years old. This type of theater often incorporated experimental critiques that escaped censorship owing to its childish content, absurd tone, and unpolished staging. Its influence is palpable in



Cuna y arrullo (Cradle and Lullaby), 2025. Produced by the Museo Reina Sofía and Fundación TBA21 | Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary.
Photograph: Joaquín Cortés / Román Lores

the nonlinear narrative of many of the artist's works, as well as in a fusion of the ludic and the critical that is meticulously transferred to his set designs. In this game of interplaying layers, the artist dismantles his broken memories of childhood as though they were haunted by a luminous specter, opening wounds in the darkness of both dreams and life.

In *Cuna y arrullo*, the new project produced for this exhibition, the artist constructs a stage setting that springs from dream and play, but which ultimately refers to personal episodes from his childhood, specifically to shared experiences in the homes for refugee children in Mexico, where he spent some months before being granted asylum in Vancouver. As in previous projects, dreams help to fill gaps in fragmented memories. In accordance with beliefs rooted in his ancestral lands, dreams guide and illuminate, challenging the status of waking life as the only legitimate reality. Within this framework, the artist uses his own free and flexible logic to broach complex issues through unexpected connections, which, like dreams, make certainties waver.



Untitled (*Huertos de las ch'olti* [*Orchards of the Ch'olti'*] series), 2020. TBA21
Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary

In this work, the structural deconstruction of the concept of the cradle is heightened by the creatures who shelter in it while passing freely between dream, memory, and present reality. Moreover, those figures, such as the spider, the bee, and the lizard, are references to the *Ch'olti' Dictionary*, an exhaustive study of this extinct Mayan tongue that was written by the evangelist friar Francisco Morán in the seventeenth century. The exhibition also picks back up the research carried out by the artist in 2020 on the Ch'olti' people, through a series of drawings entitled *Huertos de los ch'olti' (Orchards of the Ch'olti')*. Inhabitants of southeast Guatemala and areas near Petén, the Ch'olti' are a symbol of resistance in the history of Mesoamerica. With an advanced, efficient agricultural system, they became a prime target for colonizers, who subjected them to many forms of violence and oppression ranging from forced displacement from their lands to the prohibition of their language, dress, and Maya identity, classifying them in the *casta* (caste) system as mestizos. Although the defiance and strength of this people did not prevent their genocide, it gave rise to a whole spectral mythology, the Orchards of the Ch'olti', which bears witness to their fortitude and resolve. While the Maya population was severely decimated during both the colonial period and the internal armed conflict, small Ch'olti' communities have managed to survive in some places in Latin America, as have some of the words compiled in Morán's dictionary, which reverberate in *Cuna y arrullo* as a thread connecting history, memory, and dream.

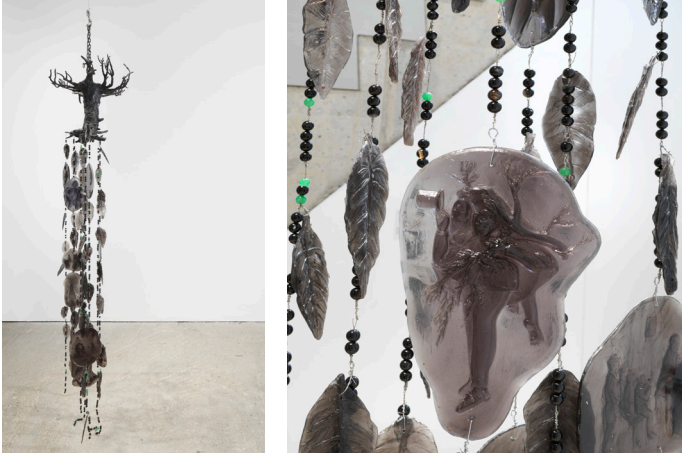
In the meantime, the performance *Life in His Mouth, Death Cradles Her Arm* is an incarnation of the idea of living memory. It was filmed at the General Cemetery of Guatemala City in 2016, and in it violence, history, and identity converge on a setting so dramatic that it requires no accessory props. A fixed camera simply records a frontal image of the artist, who holds a block of ice in his hands as though he were cradling a baby. The transformation of the natural light and the slowly accumulating puddle of water are the only indications of the passage of time. As often occurs in Ramírez-Figueroa's works, spoken language disappears and is replaced by elaborately poetic titles that broaden possible

readings and interpretations. Running through this work are self-referential elements that expand its significance toward a collective history: the mourning for and memory of those who were disappeared in Guatemala.

Colonial Ecosystems and Their Phantoms

The ecological impact of colonization is another recurrent concern in Ramírez-Figueroa's work. He addresses it in projects like *The House of Kawinal* (2018), on the Maya city of Kawinal that was submerged following the construction of a dam, and *Linnaeus in Tenebris* (2017), an investigation of the silencing of Indigenous knowledge by the colonial cataloguing systems and Enlightenment thought of the nineteenth century. This line of work is illustrated in this exhibition by two works, *Anthurium* (2021) and *Chiperrec* (2021), which emphasize that the imposed Western classifications were a form of environmental violence with irreversible consequences.

In his paintings on anthurium leaves, the artist focuses on the jungles of the Colombian and Panamanian Pacific rims to reference an apocryphal episode, the disappearance of this native plant owing to the determination of a nineteenth-century French collector to come into exclusive possession of the whole species of this plant. *Chiperrec*, on the other hand, refers to a site where various fragments of colonial history converged. A sacred place of the Maya in the Guatemalan region of Alta Verapaz, Chiperrec was transformed in the nineteenth century into a large plantation growing tea destined for export to Europe. The introduction of the first *Camellia sinensis* tree to Guatemala coincided with the expeditions to China of the Scottish botanist and explorer Robert Fortune, who covertly gathered information on the cultivation and processing of tea in order to introduce it to the Viceroyalty of India. Chiperrec was also the scene of violent episodes during the Guatemalan internal armed conflict. Some murals of the period made that violence visible, showing victims tied to the tea bushes with their limbs cut off. Those events are visually narrated



Chiperrec (2021). Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf. Photograph: Jens Ziehe

by the resin medallions that make up Ramírez-Figueroa's piece, which link the history of this region of Guatemala to a broader narrative on the complex dynamics of power, oppression, and resistance that have transcended time and space to leave their imprint on autochthonous ecosystems.

Conspiracy Theories and Other Subversive Assemblages

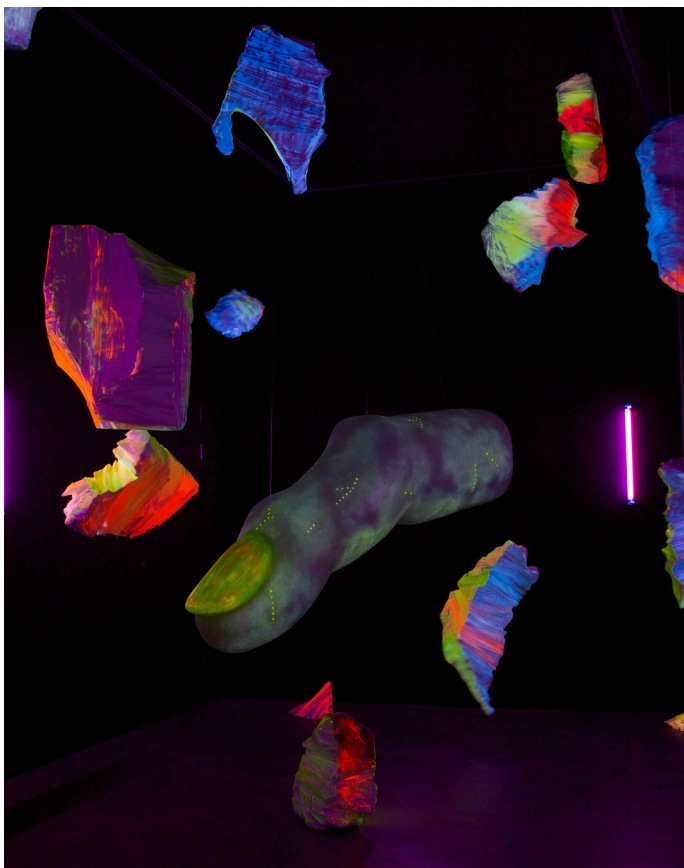
Human beings are becoming accustomed to having their perception of reality altered by confusion, lies, and bewilderment, to the point where their capacity for amazement is diminished and their belief in certainties shattered. In the installation *Fettered Flamincos* (2017), the artist explores this phenomenon on the basis of a chance encounter in the street with a plastic flamingo attached to a chain. Random assemblages and maladjustments between form and concept are a constant that allows his work to open up to different signifiers. His taste for the absurd and the inevitably contradictory impregnates the works with a freshness and humor that seem to provide an organic link between very different ideas



Fettered Flamingos (2017). Kunstmuseen Krefeld, Sammlung Heinz und Marianne Ebers-Stiftung. Photograph: Volker Döhne

and structures. A fettered pink flamingo thus evokes ideas such as the domestication of the body, the subjection of nature, and abuse of the environment.

The growing rise of conspiracy theories today has highlighted the arbitrariness with which certain blatant lies are perpetuated and spread faster than ever. Ramírez-Figueroa is interested in the volatility of these discourses, as easy to construct as they are to dismantle and often sustained by a puerile perspectivism that could easily be rebuffed were it not bolstered by dominant power structures. This is evident in *God's Reptilian Finger* (2015), an installation that was first presented at Gasworks in London, where he highlights two conspiracy theories that are remote from each other but similar in their lack of a scientific basis and the large number of fervent followers and defenders they attracted. One case has to do with the amateur archaeology practiced by the first Mormon missionaries to arrive in Guatemala in 1947. This type of archaeological pseudoscience rested on the theory that



God's Reptilian Finger (2015), Colección Elisa Estrada. Curated and produced by Gasworks, London. Photograph: Andy Keate

the history of certain pre-Columbian civilizations coincided with the narrative of the Bible. The other case refers to the theory of a British man, David Icke, who speaks of a Babylonian Brotherhood that controls mankind and claims that many politicians, monarchs, and prominent businessmen are reptilians. Alluding to both, a gigantic finger of God is seen floating in the air, surrounded by stones painted in fluorescent colors. This creates a spectral atmosphere. The deliberate use of flimsy, naively constructed materials evokes the imagery of childhood innocence while displaying the volatility of this type of outlandish theory, and it offers a hybrid version of a mythology that blurs the limits between religion, speculation, and power.

Through a range of works by Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa, the exhibition *Luminous Specters* reveals how absences still inhabit the present, transforming themselves into presences that interpellate our memory and perception of the world. The show functions as a space where the intangible, silenced, acquires form and the forgotten has the potential agency to imagine futures engaged in dialogue with those persistent presents. The artist invites us to think of time as nonlinear, where the specters of the past continue to affect us, reminding us of what was, what might have been, and what still could be.

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From 10 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

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The exhibition galleries will
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All of the works:

Courtesy of the artist and

Proyectos Ultravioleta, Guatemala

City, except *Illusion of Matter*, 2015

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