

The Drawing Center's

DRAWING PAPERS

34

DIS

SOLVING

threads of water and light

CÉSAR PATERNOSTO

CECILIA VICUÑA

lines undone by water
threads undone by air
undoing completes the doing
an encounter through dissolution...

These words, composed by Cecilia Vicuña, aptly describe César Paternosto's artistic process in creating his water-thread series of drawings, "hilos de agua", as well as her first-time collaborative effort with him here in The Drawing Room. Although working in diverse media, their collaboration revolves around a shared imperative: to affect a nearly imperceptible alteration of perceived reality. This visual conversation begins with Paternosto's drawings and the construction of Vicuña's space weavings—a series of threads that hang from the ceiling—created in response to them.

For the past decades, César Paternosto has focused his attention on the edge of the picture plane. In 1969, he began to explore the idea of leaving the frontal surface blank by painting vivid bands of color on the margins of the paper. Turning his attention to the canvas, Paternosto painted these lines on the edges, inviting the viewer to move around its supports in order to see "obliquely" and thereby to question the static frontal view of a painting. His exploration of the viewer's dynamic relationship to the work intersected with his discovery of Andean geometric forms during a trip to Peru in the late 70s. What emerged was an alternative set of ideas about abstraction. His belts of burnt sienna, sandy gray, and yellow ochre frame the frontal plane, yet serve as references to ancient textile structures—forming symbolic and spiritual connections with the earth and the cosmos—rather than as mere compositional elements. Organized around significant bodies of work from 1963 to the present, the exhibition presents drawings in which Paternosto challenges the tenets of modern art in relation to the picture plane, the geometric vocabulary of abstraction, and the concept of the grid.

The grid structures both Paternosto's mottled lines and Vicuña's frayed threads. Vicuña's deft handling of unspun wool, yarn, and thread has resulted in ethereal installations that transform a corner, a room, and an exhibition. In her work, the unspun wool, "a river of hair held together by an invisible glue, its own fat, lanolin" becomes a metaphor for the life force, for transformation and dissolution. Vicuña's politics and artistic practice are grounded in unsettling the etymological roots of words by dissecting and then re-forming them in order to alter seemingly fixed linguistic and visual orders. Her ambient-colored threads intersect with Paternosto's lines to give a silent shout, creating a ripple-like effect that dissolves entrenched notions of modern and Latin American art.

Following the fluid process of reversing things (*al revés*), doing and undoing, Paternosto and Vicuña have conceived of their exhibition as a performative one insofar as it will transform and grow beyond its initial appearance. Through the gradual removal of Paternosto's drawings, the placement of Vicuña's threads will serve as remnant traces, similar to how, "in the rainbow, one color disappears to let the other be." Their visually multi-layered conversation will manifest itself as an evanescent grid that invites the viewer to witness its becoming, its "dissolving into union."

Susette Min
Assistant Curator of Contemporary Exhibitions

*Quotes from Cecilia Vicuña

THE GRID AND THE ARCHETYPAL GEOMETRIC FORMS

Baudelaire spoke of the role played by surprise in the creation of aesthetic emotion. What then when a surprise leads to a total artistic revelation?

In August of 1977—not long before I met Cecilia Vicuña—I traveled to the Andean region (northern Argentina, Bolivia, and Peru). It was a momentous trip. For a mainstream abstractionist like myself, the undiluted surprise of this encounter with the sculptural works of the Inca, which I later coupled with extensive readings in art history, anthropology, and mythology, provided just such a revelation. Suddenly, I understood that the abstract, seemingly meaningless shapes found in the ancient non-European arts were in fact deeply symbolic.

It was not just a historical notion. Think of what is involved in an apparently trivial act like doodling. While the conscious mind is involved in something else—most likely a telephone conversation—out from the pencil comes a flow of geometric shapes: spirals, concentric squares, triangles, diamonds. Are they sheer meaningless nonsense? Or could they be the vestigial outpouring of a lost, archaic “alphabet” whose imprint has remained buried as a subconscious memory?

If we go back in time we find the first examples of this abstract work in the engraved bones and stones, in the painted and pecked cliffs, of the late Paleolithic and Neolithic eras. These practices answered early urges for the symbolic, the transpersonal, the conceptual. Then the evolution of operational grids, in the form of such things as basketry and textiles, helped with the generation and replication of the basic, archetypal *geometric* forms that are now increasingly considered forerunners of full writing.

The same could be said of the geometric designs appearing in a particular group of ancient Peruvian textiles of the Inca period, the *t'oqapu*, which are deemed to be logographic signs, like Chinese characters. And although research on the Andean signs has stopped short of a full decoding, recent ethnographic work in the region attests to the semantic or symbolic function of color stripes and geometric designs in contemporary weavings, a strong indication that, in the pre-European past, in the absence

of alphabetic writing, textiles had, at the very least, a certain signifying function.

The Greece of the Dark Ages also lacked writing, which had disappeared after the Dorian invasions. Thus it is possible to think that the geometric designs painted on the large Athenian funerary vases of the Greek Geometric Art period also concentrated a spectrum of the symbolic or semantic functions, substituting for the absence of the written word. The appearance of schematic, cipher-like human and animal figures illustrating interment rituals in the last phases of this Geometric style lends strong support to this assumption.

Underlying the great majority of these archetypal forms, there is a grid: the matrix generated by some form of weaving, such as basketry, matting, or cloth-making. According to Anni Albers (*On Designing*, 1943), “[Weaving is] the intricate interlocking of two sets of threads at right angles.” In my view, this interlocking of threads constituted a momentous achievement in human evolution, for it also entailed a mental matrix (or pattern) that influenced the art practices in other media. Painted, etched, or sculpted forms became geometric or angular, as if faithfully responding to an orthogonal model. If this can be ascertained most readily in the Andean region, where textiles acquired the status of *the* major art, it is ultimately no less discernible in other cultures, as I suggested above. It only requires some sleuthing, because that crucial matrix, the weavings, have for the most part disappeared.

The grid, therefore, as the departing stage: the *zero degree* of abstraction.

My work is based in part on the idea that these primal forms—much like Jungian archetypes—have stuck with us. That we recognize (subconsciously) the archaic symbolic power or proto-script functions of these forms. In other words, just as in our modern, de-sacralized societies, ancient myths still persist under different guises,

a morphology, or an “archaeology of forms,” would uncover the sedimented strata of meanings associated with primal, *archetypal* forms.

I mean to offer, in a sense, a contribution to this search.

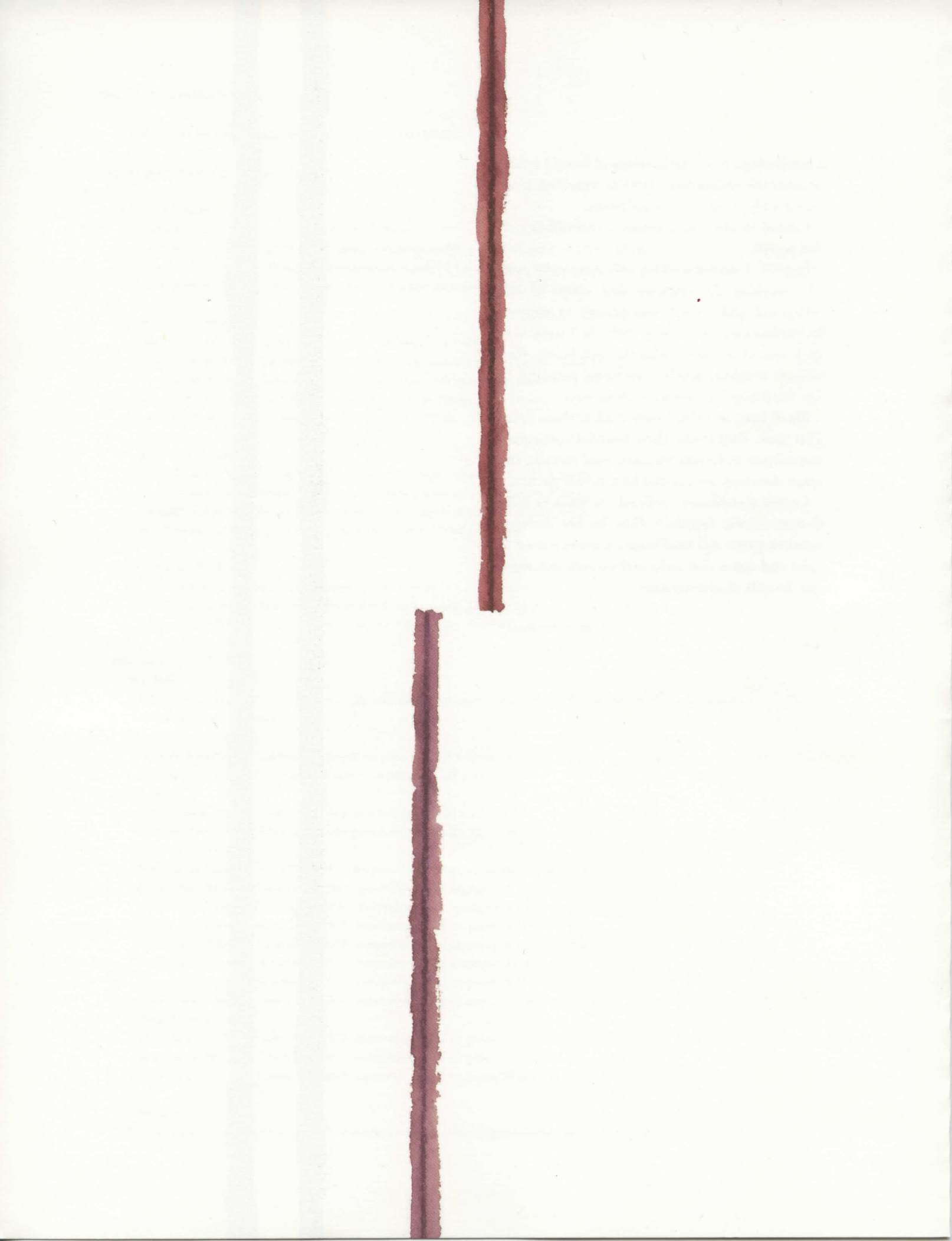
In 1971, I started working with watercolor pencils, marking the verticals (the warp) of the orthogonal grid—which was enough to suggest, by implication, the missing weft. As I went over each one of the lines with the wet brush, they became wiggling, brushy—an ironic response to the “hard edge” dominant in those days.

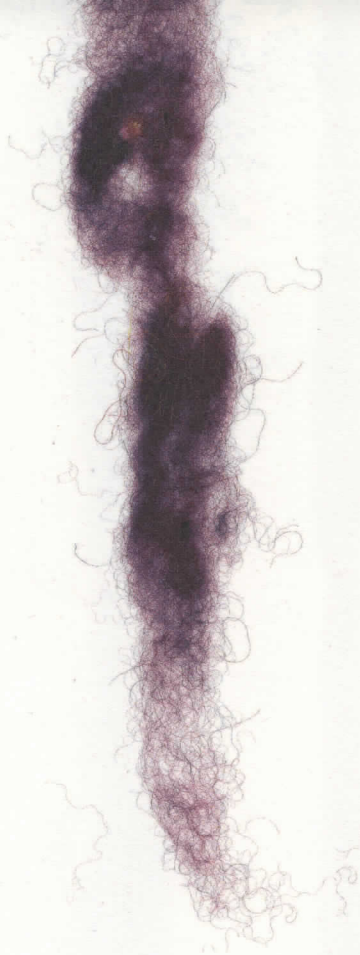
Much later, in 1996, I went back to these lines. This time, they found their material/conceptual counterpart in Cecilia Vicuña’s wool threads, the space weavings she created long before we met.

Cecilia immediately defined my lines as *hilos de agua* (“water threads”). Thus the line dialogue between paper and wool began, a conversation in color and space that links and extends our separate threads of investigation.

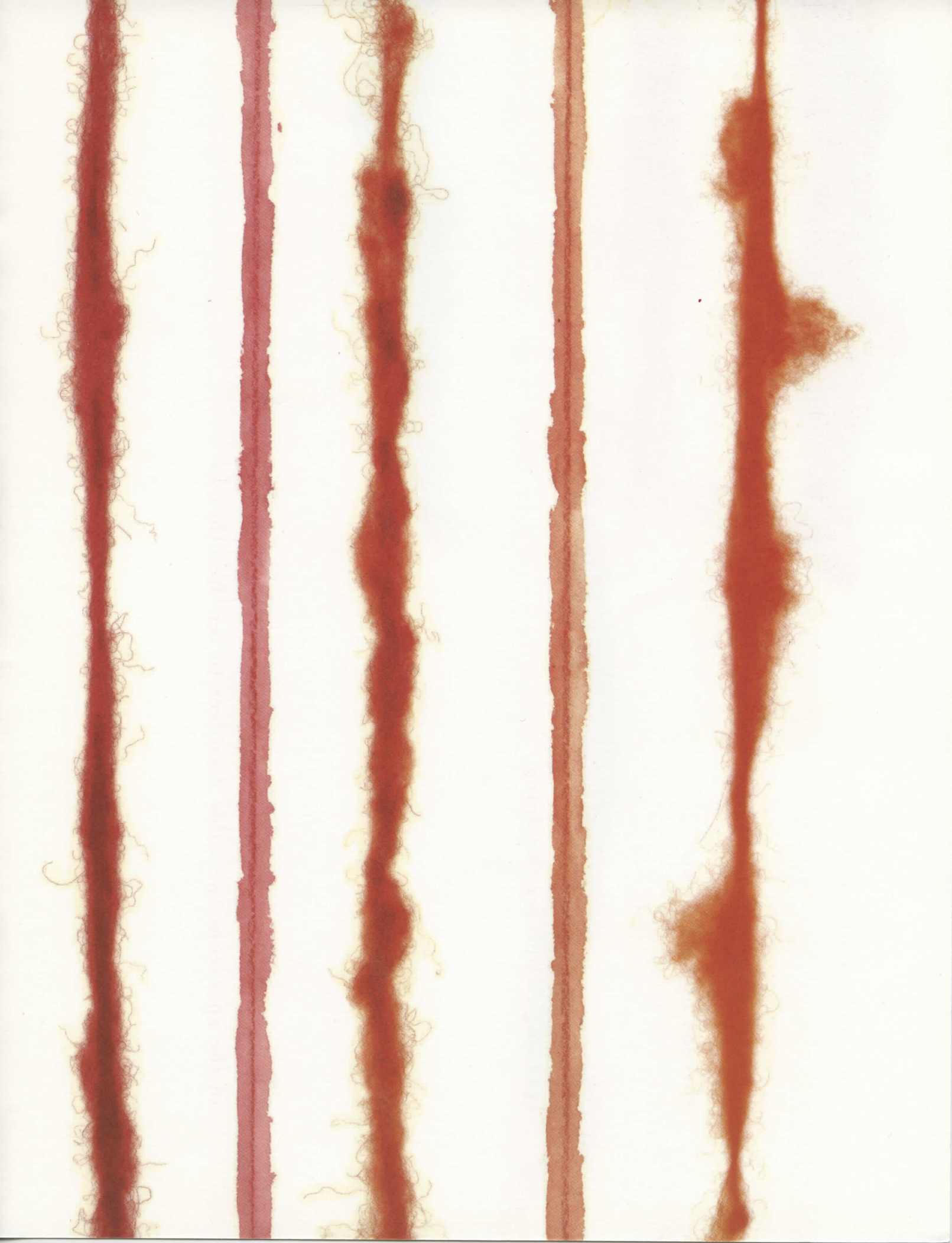
César Paternosto











lines undone by water



threads undone by air

undoing completes the doing

an encounter through dissolution.

in the spectrum one color dissolves to let the other be

“love is light” they say

K'isa, a color gradation in Quechua

is a melting process, a transformation.

Weaving K'isas you are changing perception

imperceptibly.

Works by Cecilia Vicuña

K'isa #2, Space Weaving, 2002; unspun wool; dimensions variable.

Works by César Paternosto

The Earth/Nature

- *Untitled*, 1963; gouache on paper, 11 1/2 x 7 1/4 in.
- *Untitled* (from “Adobe” series), 1979; acrylic emulsion/marble powder on paper; 9 1/2 x 9 1/2 in.
- *Untitled*, 1997; acrylic emulsion and tempera on paper; 11 1/4 x 11 in.
- *Untitled* (from “Surcos” series), 1996; acrylic emulsion on paper; 11 1/2 x 11 1/4 in.

Chromatic Constellation

- *Merry Go Round*, 1965; tempera and collage on paper; 7 x 7 1/4 in.
- *Untitled* (from “Magic Balloons” series), 1964; collage and tempera on paper; 12 x 7 3/4 in.
- *Untitled* (from “Magic Balloons” series), 1964; collage and tempera on paper; 9 x 6 1/2 in.
- *Infinito*, 1965; tempera on paper; 7 5/8 x 9 1/2 in. Collection Cecilia Vicuña.
- *Untitled (Orphic)*, 1965; tempera on paper; 7 3/4 x 3 7/8 in.

Lateral/Oblique Vision

- *Untitled* (sketch for “Oblique Vision” series), 1969; crayon on paper; 8 1/2 x 9 5/8 in.
- *Untitled* (sketch for “Oblique Vision” series), 1969; crayon on paper; 8 1/2 x 9 5/8 in.
- *Untitled* (sketch for “Oblique Vision” series), 1969; crayon on paper; 8 1/2 x 9 5/8 in.
- *Feliz Navidad*, 1974; acrylic emulsion on folded paper; 10 1/2 x 4 1/2 in.

Lateral Vision/The Systemic

- *1.2.1.2*, 1972; acrylic emulsion on paper; 18 7/8 x 24 in.
- *Double Sequence Spectrum*; 1972; acrylic emulsion on paper; 18 7/8 x 24 in.
- *Sequential*, 1972; acrylic emulsion on paper; 18 7/8 x 24 in.

Hilos de agua

New York:

Fold Back Series, 1971; colored pencil, ink, and collage on paper; 22 x 30 in. Collection Jack S. Blanton Museum, University of Texas, Austin.

Buenos Aires

Hilos de agua #9, 1997; watercolor pencil on paper; 11 1/8 x 11 in.
Hilos de agua #11, 1997; watercolor pencil on paper; 11 1/8 x 11 in.

The Music

Hilos de agua (98.18), 1998; watercolor pencil on paper; 22 x 22 in.
Hilos de agua (98.24), 1998; watercolor pencil on paper; 22 x 22 3/8 in.

The Rainbow/Mojácar

Murxis Acra Rainbow, #2, 2000; watercolor pencil and gesso on paper; 22 3/8 x 22 in.
Murxis Acra Rainbow, Variation 1, 2000; watercolor pencil on paper; 8 x 8 in.
Murxis Acra Rainbow, Variation 2, 2000; watercolor pencil on paper; 8 x 8 in.
Murxis Acra Rainbow, Variation 3, 2000; watercolor pencil on paper; 8 1/8 x 7 7/8 in.
Murxis Acra Rainbow, Variation 4, 2000; watercolor pencil on paper; 8 1/8 x 7 7/8 in.
Murxis Acra Rainbow, Variation 5, 2000; watercolor pencil on paper; 8 x 8 in.
Murxis Acra Rainbow, Variation 8, 2000; watercolor pencil on paper; 8 1/4 x 8 in.
Murxis Acra Rainbow, Variation 9, 2000; watercolor pencil on paper; 8 1/4 x 7 7/8 in.

The Rainbow/Springs

Variation on Spectrum Colors, #1, 2002; watercolor pencil on paper; 11 x 11 in.
Variation on Spectrum Colors, #2, 2002; watercolor pencil on paper; 11 1/4 x 11 in.
Variation on Spectrum Colors, #3, 2002; watercolor pencil on paper; 11 x 11 in.

Wall Installation

Wall Installation (El band o neón), 2002; watercolor pencil on folded paper mounted on the wall; 80 x 56 in.

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