

OBSERVER

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‘Sell Painting, Buy Land’: MAHKU Brings Voices of Indigenous Resistance to Art Basel Miami Beach

For the Brazilian collective, art serves as a tool of resistance and preservation, protecting Indigenous knowledge while opening lines of communication with non-Indigenous people.



Cleiber Bane – MAHKU, Nahene Wakamen (detalhe), 2023; Acrylic on canvas, 145 x 204 cm. Photo by Samuel Esteves, Courtesy of CJP

The Brazilian collective [MAHKU](#) (Acre – Amazon – Brazil) recently shook up the art world, dazzling audiences with their audacious takeover of the main facade of the Giardini's central pavilion at the last Venice Biennale, curated by [Adriano Pedrosa](#). For the first time in the Biennale's storied history, the stark white facade was transformed into a riot of color—a sprawling, 750 m² mural that pulled visitors into a kaleidoscopic world. The mural depicted *kapewë pukeni* (the alligator bridge), the Huni Kuin's myth of origin. This narrative of union and division traced humanity's journey, weaving a symbolic thread through the ancestral history of humankind.

Now, in [Art Basel Miami Beach's](#) Positions section, Brazilian gallery Carmo Johnson Projects has introduced MAHKU's message to the global art fair circuit with a vibrant suite of new paintings. These works continue to channel the spiritual and ancestral knowledge of the Huni Kuin people. Each canvas bursts with an intricate web of symbolic characters and presences, vividly translating the Huni Meka chants—traditional melodies used in ayahuasca (*nixi pae*) rituals—into a mesmerizing visual language. These chants, which guide participants toward an embrace of otherness, invite viewers to surrender to the profound interconnectivity of all living beings.

Although the artists of MAHKU paint individually, their work is bound by family ties and a shared mission to pass on their cultural knowledge. Since its founding in 2012, the collective has positioned itself as a defiant force in the art world, using vibrant creations as tools for resistance and preservation. With the Amazon forest as their muse and battleground, they embed their art with the wisdom and practices of Indigenous communities. Their rallying cry, “*Vende tela, compra terra*” (“Sell painting, buy land”), speaks volumes: every sale funds land reclamation efforts, territorial restitution and autonomy for the Huni Kuin people. The collective’s bold approach ensures that the sale of their art directly protects their land, their traditions and the fragile ecosystem they inhabit.

MAHKU has set its sights on an even bigger goal: the establishment of the MAHKU Institute, an independent research center dedicated to preserving the Amazon rainforest and its Indigenous cultures. On the occasion of their Art Basel Miami Beach debut, Observer spoke with the collective to explore how their model integrates art and resistance, how their work embodies the ancestral wisdom of the Amazon and how these lessons might inspire an alternative vision of coexistence—one capable of steering humanity away from ecological disaster.



Carmo Johnson Projects at Art Basel Miami 2024. Carmo Johnson Projects

The works you are presenting at Art Basel Miami Beach are closely related to the Huni Kuin ancestry, translating and transforming Huni Meka chants, the ceremony in which ayahuasca medicine is consecrated. Can you tell us more about this ritual and the process of translating those chants into visual symbols?

The Huni Kuin people have maintained the ayahuasca consecration ritual for centuries. MAHKU artists have been taught the traditional practices of their culture from generation to generation. The main ingredient for the preparation of ayahuasca tea is extracted from a vine and its leaves, called nix page, which means “light that comes from the vine.”

It is through this sacred drink that *mirações* (visions) are experienced. The spiritual visions are guided by many chants of the Huni Kuin people, which we call Huni Meka chants, which divide the ritual into three different moments, starting with songs to “call for strength,” followed by the moment of the *mirações*, in the middle of the ritual. At this moment, the visions are manifested in points of light, very bright colors and animals that represent a large part of the Huni Kuin myths, and calming down towards the end with songs to “lower the strength.”

For example, [Pedro Mana](#)'s painting *Yame Awa Kawanai* shows the final moment of the ritual with the crossing of the animals, which is slow and subtle and represents a healing passage. The animals are spirits of care and protection. They are often associated with the Kayatibu Huni Meka songs that are sung so that the *mirações* (visions) subside at the end of the ceremony. The process of translating these chants into paintings has been the tool used by MAHKU—a deliberate idea put into practice under the leadership of Ibã Sales Huni Kuin, who conceived it as a method of preserving the Huni Kuin's ancestral knowledge and making it understandable to non-Indigenous people.



Cleiber Bane – MAHKU, *Nahene Wakamen*, 2024; Acrylic on canvas, 146 x 155 cm. Photo by Samuel Esteves, Courtesy of CJP

Can you describe some of the main recurring symbols that both appear in these canvases and emerge in those rituals?

MAHKU's works are visual translations of chants and myths from the Huni Kuin oral culture. There are dozens of them, and they will never be represented in the same way. The chants and myths are part of a culture that lives in the Amazon rainforest, so animals and plants are some of the recurring symbols. For example, in the ayahuasca's emergence myth, [Acelino Sales](#)' artwork tells about the knowledge of how to prepare the ayahuasca. That knowledge was given to the Huni Kuin people by a half-boia constrictor and half-woman from the so-called Boa's people, who inhabit the underwater world of rivers and lakes. It is common to see that mythic figure in MAHKU's painting, just like the boia itself and its patterns. Patterns and psychedelic graphisms are often part of the paintings and the Huni Kuin visual culture, they are called *kenes*.

In paintings like *Nai Mapu Yubekã*, which means Sky, Bird, Boia in Hãtxa Kuin (Huni Kuin language), the main figures in the chant will always be represented. For example, the water animals in *Nahene Wakamen*, a chant that brings images of the sacred waters of the forest and enchanted animals and fish while asking for cure and protection.



Acelino Sales – MAHKU, Mito do surgimento da Ayahuasca (Myth of the origin of Ayahuasca), 2024; Acrylic on canvas, 147 x 155 cm. Photo by Samuel Esteves, Courtesy of CJP

How do you feel about presenting those highly ritualistic and deeply symbolic paintings within the context of an [art fair](#)? Do you hope that people will be willing to dive deeper into the genesis of these images and the stories and profound traditions behind them?

We're thrilled to be debuting at an art fair like Art Basel Miami Beach that is so crucial to connecting the south and north art markets. Especially showcasing MAHKU (Huni Kuin Artists Movement). Our main goal at the fair is to present MAHKU's work by introducing to the public its unique form of expression and its multi-dynamic and complex social context as Brazilian Indigenous artists. The paintings themselves visualize MAHKU's artists' perception of the spirit of the forest as an essential tool to express their physical, psychological and spiritual experiences. It is important to note that MAHKU's paintings are not ritualistic objects themselves. However, being an expression made by artists whose culture is deeply connected with nature, the paintings carry out the force of the forest and the joy of their artists. MAHKU's paintings are a tool and a communication technology; their paintings are bridges between the Indigenous and the non-Indigenous world.

It is our responsibility to communicate to the public that MAHKU's paintings are produced in the Amazon rainforest and are intrinsically related to the cultural, aesthetic and spiritual aspects of the artists' ethnic group, the Huni Kuin people. Their actions through contemporary art come from a life experience linked to caring for and protecting nature and culture. MAHKU's paintings carry vibrations inherent to their surface, and being captured by these forces is already related to their ritualistic genesis. We'll be delighted to lead interested people into the unique, powerful and culturally genuine context of MAHKU.

alligator.



Pedro Maná – MAHKU, Nai Māpu Yubekā, 2024; Acrylic on canvas, 160 x 280 cm. Photo by Samuel Esteves, Courtesy of CJP

Your art is still intrinsically related to and depends on the spheres of ritual and sacrality, from which all art forms originated at the beginning of civilization. How do you see the evolution of art, which has progressively been separated from this spiritual dimension and attributed new values, particularly economic ones?

MAHKU wants to paint so that non-indigenous people can understand and learn what the spirit of the forest means. The relationship between the sacred and art has been separated, and with MAHKU, it's no different: what is sacred are the rituals that take place in the life and cultural practices of the Huni Kuin people; the sacred is in the experience that takes place during the ayahuasca ceremonies. Painting is a tool, a technology of communication between the Huni Kuin world and the non-Indigenous world, and their way of recording the Huni Kuin ancestral culture. So we're part of this movement, this turning point, where the artwork becomes a tool of resistance and insertion into the contemporary art scene and market for Indigenous artists.

Since its founding in 2012, MAHKU has been important in establishing new models of support for Indigenous communities by raising attention and funds through the contemporary art system. What were some of the biggest challenges you've encountered when confronting the often opaque dynamics of the art market?

One of the most significant challenges for MAHKU is to be comprehended for their ability to be collective and individual at the same time. The Indigenous way of life is absolutely collective. It is different from the way of life and economy of other societies. MAHKU'S work catalyzes a unique experience through vivid colors and their own, almost surrealistic, interpretation of the Amazon forest and their culture, but each of them has their own specificity and way of painting, self-references of memories and impression of the *mirações* (visions) and are recognizable by the aesthetic distinction between their paintings, as in the case of the three artists exhibited at Art Basel Miami Beach: Acelino Sales, [Cleiber Bane](#) and Pedro Mana. But even though they produce individually, they will use their efforts for the common good. For MAHKU, the sale of artworks becomes a tactic to divert the art market to buy plots of land, which are then restored for their community. So, MAHKU's painting is a political, social and aesthetic tool that the collective uses to recover lost lands, guarantee basic rights and perpetuate the oral and visual Huni Kuin tradition. Their latter most notable achievement was through the *Vende tela, compra terra* ("Sell painting, buy land") initiative, pursuing territorial restitution.



Acelino Sales – MAHKU, *Dau Shawa Péturi*, 2024; Acrylic on canvas, 146 x 204 cm. Photo by Samuel Esteves, Courtesy of CJP

This debut at Art Basel, after the takeover of the main facade of the central building at the Giardini of the Venice Biennale, comes at a time when we are seeing a progressive rediscovery of various forms of Indigenous knowledge and ancestral technologies and spiritualities, which is then shining a spotlight on contemporary Indigenous art practices. Why is this happening now?

We believe that we should avoid the idea of ‘discovery’ or ‘rediscovery’ as much as possible because it sounds colonial. The growth in attention to Indigenous forms of knowledge and ancestral technologies goes hand in hand with care for nature and discussions that seek to find urgent solutions to keep natural dynamics alive. [MAHKU recently took part in Future Ours](#), at the invitation of the UN—an art public project about the future of our planet curated by [Hans Ulrich Obrist](#), [Jeppe Ugelvig](#) and Patricia Domínguez, in which artists from around the world were invited to respond to the Summit of the Future and reimagine how we can safeguard our common planet. On the occasion of this invitation, MAHKU developed a poster with the motto “Sell painting, buy land,” a movement to regain territory in the Amazon rainforest. The growing attention to Indigenous knowledge and art is linked to the urgent protection of nature to have still a planet to live on in the years to come.

MAHKU’s primary goal is to keep their culture alive, to keep the songs and myths understood by non-Indigenous people to preserve and to maintain their existence as a way of not falling into oblivion and disappearance. For MAHKU, the monumental mural painting on the facade of the Venice Biennale Main Pavilion is a healing portal, welcoming outsiders to the Indigenous world who are now getting to know it. The myth chosen to be painted, the ‘Kapewë Pukeni’ (the myth of the alligator bridge), makes it all the more symbolic, as it depicts the story of the Huni Kuin people crossing two continents in search of seeds, housing, knowledge and land. After a long walk, the people meet an alligator who, in exchange for food, offers to help them cross to the other side. It’s a fundamental scene that suggests that the Huni Kuin are both producers and products of bridges—between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds and between the visible and the invisible. In this way, ‘Kapewë Pukeni’ becomes a central image in strengthening ties between strangers everywhere and in the role of art as a means of resistance.

MAHKU’s paintings are on view at Carmo Johnson Projects (Booth P8) at Art Basel Miami Beach through December 8.