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Art is all we have left: Gaston Ugalde





'I was born and I live with textiles', ...'I am obsessed with the beauty of their colours and textures and how each thread weaves political and anthropological concepts.'

The Uyuni Salt Flats. It is one of the driest places on earth with a stark landscape of blue skies over an infinite white earth made entirely of salt. Uyuni is Ugalde's natural open studio and a white canvas where he explores his eternal love affair with this land. His work is multidisciplinary and has expanded over fifty years of practice to embrace ; performance, painting, sculpture, installation, land-art, photography, and printmaking.

Textiles are one of his main preoccupations. 'I was born and I live with textiles', he affirms, 'I am obsessed with the beauty of their colours and textures and how each thread weaves political and anthropological concepts.' Ugalde has been collecting pullus or blankets for half a century, along with fragments and scraps of fabric that he uses for his sculptures, collages, performances, and photography. Sadly, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find authentic textiles as artisans are selling their last pieces and using Chinese blankets in their place. Ugalde's work navigates the space of contemporary art, mixing modern methods with indigenous references and materials. In his work, the worlds of yesterday and the future coexist in harmony. Bolivian landscapes, the Andes, the Amazon, and the valleys are his inspiration.

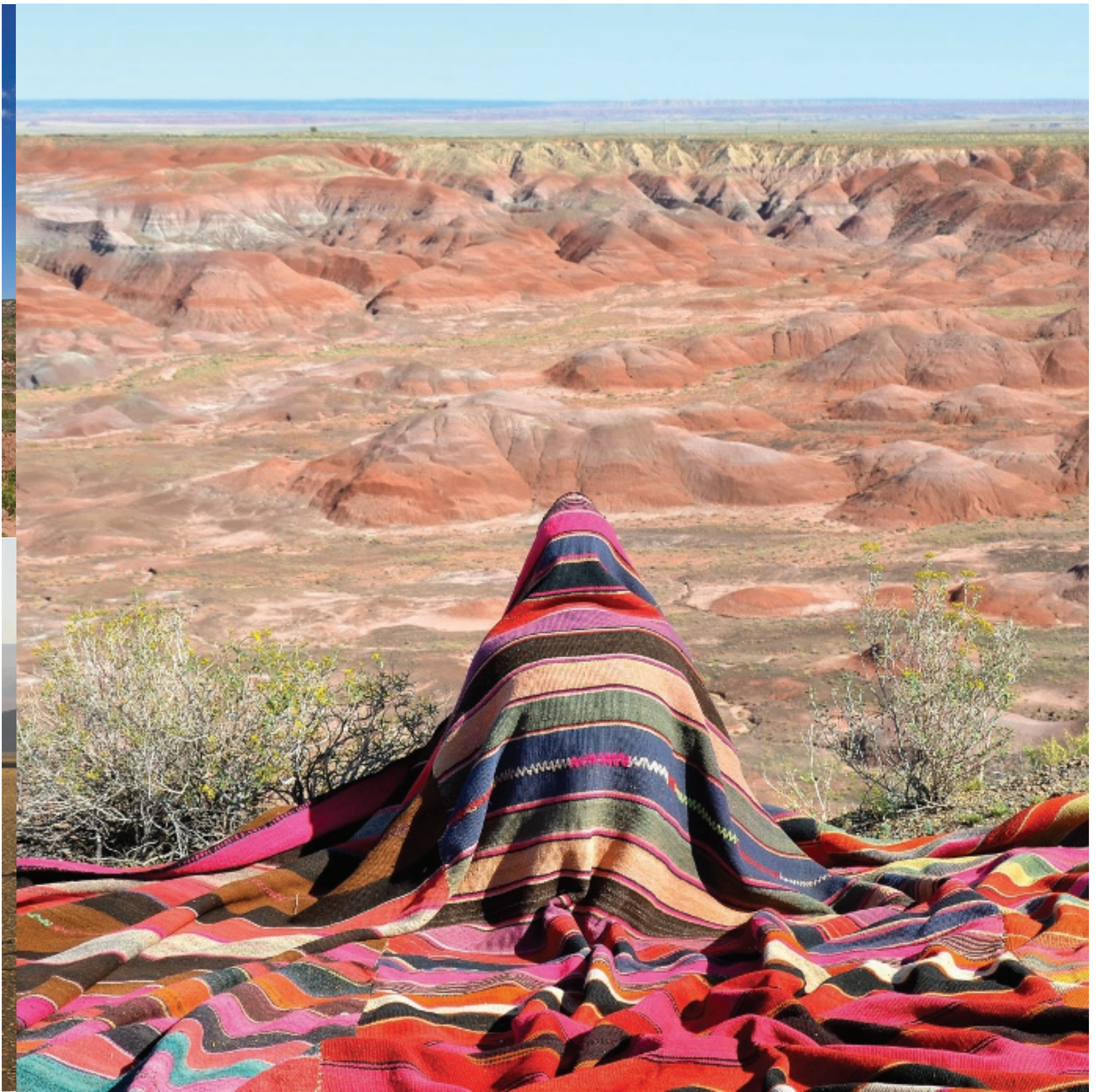
Gastón Ugalde is Bolivia's most well known artist, referred to as the Andean Warhol by many critics. Ugalde's nature is that of an explorer full of curiosity and crazy ideas, a true 'enfant terrible' with half a century of

adventures to his name, as well as being considered a video-art pioneer in Latin America.

One of his most important textile works is *Marcha por la vida* (march for life) and was exhibited in 2009, at the Latin American Pavilion as part of the 53rd Venice Biennale. This important work features a patchwork of traditional Inca and Aymara blankets that Ugalde had bought and collected over the years, creating a work that refers to weaving as a practical and metaphorical act of protection and warmth. The huge blanket was then subject to his intervention; it was tied in a knot so as to remove its protective nature and as a physical gesture that implied the desire to halt time.

Immediately recognisable, *Frazadas*, *aguayos*, *llicllas* or blankets are used in the Andes to protect against the low temperatures in high altitudes. Dating back to Pre-columbian times and made with wools from the region (camelids or sheep), they are usually colourful and have linear designs. Women use them to carry babies, food and as a complement to their clothing. Men to bring their tools to the fields and they are also used as ritual elements; wrapping the coca leaves or harvested produce. They usually have three sections: the edge or *tirja* that serves the purpose of tying it; the *pampa* or flat part; and the *salta* where the patterns are usually located. The symbolism of the colours changes from region to region and serve a similar purpose to a bar code, to identify a function or a ceremony and the place of origin. The colours of the ▶









blankets became very bright when synthetic dyes arrived in the highlands in the 1900's.

Ugalde's work could not exist without Bolivia as a context and source of inspiration. 'Bolivia is unique in the Americas because 60% of its population is indigenous,' he says. 'That is what really influences me: our everyday life, farming practices, family rituals and cosmological visions of the universe.' Bolivia is a landlocked country home to ten million people spanning a multitude of ethnicities with over 35 official languages and diverse landscapes from the Andes to the Amazon, with the valleys and the salt flats in between. One of the poorest countries on earth, whose economy collapsed because of the international drug trade, Bolivia remains rich in traditions and cultures. Ironically, an important ritual occurs around the coca leaf as a metaphor to bring people together by chewing it or brewing it in tea to cope with the high altitudes in the Andes. Ugalde has worked with coca leaves as a medium since the seventies, for example, to make a collage forming the Coca Cola Logo, an inverted map of South America, or an altered dollar bill. This work is particularly relevant, as the coca leaf also happens to be the raw material from which the drug cocaine is derived and whose usage, since 1961, has been prohibited except for medical or scientific purposes. Ugalde has documented the rapid evolution of the country and the deep issues that define it. He has used local elements such as coca leaves and textiles to tell universal

stories related to the effects and discontents of globalisation, and has questioned the ethics of the capitalist system while also bearing witness to the disappearance of important cultural traditions and artifacts.

Salt is another important medium for Ugalde, as a backdrop and as an actual material, used for sculptures. Bolivia is home to part of the Andes mountain range, that has at its crest the world's largest salt flats. This salt pan is one of many prehistoric lakes that, over thousands of years, has been crusted over with salt now spanning over 10,000 square kilometers. An enormous flat area, it is an ideal transport route across the Bolivian plateau. Below, a great secret lies: a huge reserve of half of the world's lithium. An uneasy déjà vu recalls the extraction of raw materials by rich countries in the 15th century.

With the weight of history on his shoulders and the landscape before him, Ugalde creates narratives that portray subjects (both people and textiles) as valuable. As they perform against the backdrop of - and in dialogue with - the vastness of the landscape Ugalde wraps his messages and metaphors in pure beauty and colour. Ugalde's artistic legacy is rooted in local issues but his message is universal. History, anthropology, geography, and sociology interact in his evolving creative work to raise questions and pose dilemmas that only art has the power to convey beautifully. ...
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