

# Seba Calfuqueo

## Caminantes

By LAURA HAKEL

Seba Calfuqueo grounds their work in a reflection on Mapuche cultural identity, revisiting colonial history and the legwwacy imposed on the Indigenous world from the complexity of the present. Her work proposes questions such as: What reach can “policies of restitution” possibly have, considering the historical pillaging that went beyond objects, attacking bodies, families and entire communities, shattering their history and erasing all record of it? How can the indigenous past and present be reconciled in South America without cultural stereotypes? In what way do queer and transgender identities bring back debates on the right to recognize bodies and subjectivities beyond colonially sedimented heteronormativity?

Through paintings, ceramics, performance, videos and installation, the artist investigates intersections between Mapuche and Western thinking, questioning their historical constructions, both those that are inherited and those that emerge in the present, adding complexity to de-colonial discourse.

*Caminantes* [Walkers] is her first exhibition in Argentina, and it takes place simultaneously in the exhibition space at W and Valerie’s Factory, bridging two art galleries and two Buenos Aires neighborhoods. This text covers the works in both spaces, as part of one same show.

### Archive

The exhibition takes its name from Mapuche leaders Inacayal and Foyel’s relocation with their families from Patagonia to Buenos Aires, after having been captured during the Campaña del Desierto. This passage, which occurred between 1883 and 1886, concluded in these families being taken captive for purposes of study and exhibition at the recently founded Museo Histórico de La Plata, where the last descendants lived until the beginning of the 1930s.

In this project, Seba Calfuqueo recovers and transforms documents from the archives of Robert Lehmann-Nitsche, the first Director of the Museum’s Anthropology Division. Paintings like *Cautivos* [Captives] (2025) or *Informantes* [Informants] (2025) transfer small 19th century photos, almost completely veiled by time, to a large format. Produced in accordance with the Museum’s scientific protocol, these images record indigenous people as if they were objects, dehumanizing them, with their identities

reconfigured through an ethnographic lens. In her paintings, Calfuqueo returns definition and presence to the portraits, emphasizing not only the prisoner families, but also the Westernized indigenous people who acted as translators of Mapudungún, the Mapuche language, transmitting an oral record of their culture to the Museum.

The simultaneous colonial construction of indigenous people as “others”, and as “intelligent indigenous” is central to how Calfuqueo observes processes of cultural friction and assimilation. This contrast is presented in two installations, *KANGECHI* (2019)—a word that derisively alludes to the “other” in Mapuche language—and *KELLUFE* (2025)—understood as “informer” or “collaborator”. In these works, exhibited at Valerie’s Factory and at W, respectively, one echoing the other in these two spaces, the words seem to emerge from ceramic faces that spit out lines of black hair. They highlight the complexity of translation processes, which function both as a tool for conserving Mapuche memory (records of which were taken, in large part during the colonial era) and as a form of subjugation.

To continue with the exhibition title, *Caminantes* also refers to the dual identity of indigenous people who move between two cultural worlds. For example, the ceramics from the series titled *Imagen País* [Country Image] (2025) recreate modern and traditional Mapuche trades that survived into the early 20th century in cities and rural zones that are documented in the Museo Histórico de La Plata archives. From street cleaners to police personnel to artisans who produce mates, each figure is represented on a sphere, like a universe, with frontier riders on horseback particularly highlighted, as symbols of communication between communities living in the mountains.

In the works brought together at W, Calfuqueo critically activates the fragmented Lehmann-Nitsche archive, which was split up between Argentina and Germany when the anthropologist returned to his country during the 1930s. This revision enables her to confront the political and museological violence that shaped indigenous lives and memories during the 19th century, and which still has repercussions today. Instead of undertaking a faithful recomposition, by translating, filtering and dismantling archives, images and objects, she looks to “de-museumize” and “de-anthropologize” them, in order to critically transform them into living elements.

### Makeup

The epew is a traditional Mapuche form of oral transmission, a narration in which animals with human characteristics are the protagonists, transmitting teachings or morals. Told to young people by elders, the epew functions as a vehicle of intergenerational transmission. Nevertheless, in *NGÜRÜ KA WILLIÑ* [Fox and Otter] (2022), it is Seba Calfuqueo's young voice that reinterprets an ancestral narration that describes a scene of deceit and violation. The artist approaches this epew as a non-problematized space of tradition, proposing a critical reading through satire, where 3D animation language, a furry aesthetic and the performative use of her voice construct an empowered version of the fox, who demands justice and asserts the right to pleasure. Using humor and irony, the author gives shape to a new story, where gender violence and abuses of the queer community cease to be perpetuated as the norm, while in turn infiltrating Mapuche culture with this debate.

3D animation is a tool for escaping documentary recording, situating the tale in a different possible reality, one that can be modeled. Through the use of digital language, Calfuqueo recontextualizes objects currently found in museums and private collections, while simultaneously injecting tension into the denominations typically used to classify them commercially: antiques, relics, patrimony or souvenirs. This operation is manifested in the video titled *CHUMAL ELKANIEGAL* [Why Collect?] (2023), in which digitally modeled objects—a kollong (mask), ketru metawe (duck pitcher), ñimin trarüwe (woven sash), rutram (silver pieces) and pifilkas (flutes)—leave their glass showcases and are activated by a tale about their provenance and function. The work evidences the senselessness of their isolation, the lack of information with which they are conserved and the need for these objects to exist in relation to human bodies and within a tradition.

The virtual realm, disguises, and the use of materials that simulate being something else are recurring strategies in Seba Calfuqueo's work. In pieces like *Destellos* (2024) and *Cascadas de pelo* (2023), what seems to be silver is actually luster glazed ceramic, and the black hair is actually synthetic hair. By means of similes and makeup, the artist positions herself outside the essentialism that often permeates identity politics. She works on the basis of approximation and analogy, avoiding "the authentic", and defusing expectations of material and symbolic fidelity.

However, the artist's work also has a didactic element. Every one of her works contains precise historical information, explicitly shows bibliographic

notes and translation dates, clarifies the meaning of words in Mapudungun, and presents cultural objects' meaning. Faced with a lack of knowledge and the invisibilization of indigenous history and contemporaneity, Calfuqueo responds with clarity.

### Lawen

It is the night of the opening, and in the performance space at Valerie's Factory, Seba Calfuqueo walks slowly around the room, wearing a garment woven out of blue ceramic seeds that produces a pitter-patter recalling the sound of rain. In the Mapuche worldview, blue is a sacred color, alluding to the day's beginning; the artist's last name, in turn, translates as blue flint. As she walks, the blue seeds break and scatter. The action takes place in *Guardo mis semillas para el futuro*, a performance that emerged from historic records according to which indigenous peoples brought seeds with them in the attempt to attain a possible future wherever they went, having been displaced from their lands.

In Mapuche culture, the natural world is not only an inhabitable space, but a territory of wisdom, continuity and spiritual reciprocity. It is also a space of equilibrium and healing. This relation between nature and the body permeates both the *Natura* series of performative photographs, in which the artist's hair is interwoven with the natural surroundings, and *TRAY TRAY KO* (2022), a video performance situated in the sacred Aracuanía forest in southern Chile. There, wrapped in a very long swath of blue fabric, Calfuqueo enters a waterfall, or trayakanko, giving herself over to the waters' flow in a gesture that alludes to freedom and to the territory as part of one same vital principle.

These works echo the structural consequences of territorial dispossession and its impact on communities and their sacred ecosystems. Recent political deeds, such as the privatization of water in Chile, imposed by the Pinochet dictatorship in 1981, come on top of historical displacements. In these pieces grounded in performance, the artist submerges herself in the sacredness of the environment, underlining the connection between life, defending ancestral territories and identities' fluidity.

In Seba Calfuqueo's work, the body is a mediator, a filter and a channel, metabolizing history in order to reconstruct it within a contemporary subjectivity and context. Her work gives visibility to the complexity of indigenous culture and the expanding waves of colonial impact that continue to be relevant. In response to a memory that has been attacked, mistranslated and marginalized, Calfuqueo proposes narratives that are simultaneously inclusive and transformative, re-situating her body and identity within the natural world.