

# Pulque: The drink of the gods

Erika Servin

Pulque in Spanish= Octli, from the late-18th century Nahuatl. /pktli/

My research is based on ideas from Mexican popular culture, and through my artwork, I translate the concepts from symbols into narratives. Printmaking contains a political aspect, and it has an important role in societal change.

My interest in this theme starts with the revival of pulque, a drink that in the past ten years has recreated a relationship with the community and modified social traditions, and with the visual symbols contained in contemporary and pre-Hispanic culture. Pulque is an alcoholic beverage made from the fermented juice of the maguey plant. It is traditional in central Mexico, where it has been produced for thousands of years. In Aztec times, the drink had a rank in society, being served to warriors destined to be sacrificed. Pulque was used only as part of festive and sacramental celebrations, and it was denied to the common people. Those who drank it were put to death. (Orford et al., 2005, p.48)

The drink of pulque was consolidated over 200 years; after the Spanish conquest, it was not only for the gods or warriors but was available to all. After the Mexican revolution, it was catalogued as a symbol of poverty. The fall of the pulque industry came at a point when the government was trying to modernise and allow the beer industry in, which then started branding pulque as an antihygienic beverage related to criminality and social degeneration.

In the past few years, pulque has been seen in a new light. Valued for its high levels of nutrients, it is almost considered as nourishment in certain regions of the country.

I have childhood memories of the pulquería (a place that sells pulque) on the corner of my street. It was just in front of the tortilleria (the place you buy tortillas), where my mother used to send me to buy fresh tortillas every day before we sat down

to eat. As a child, I was always intrigued by what happened behind the doors of that derelict place, where painted murals of maguey and pre-Hispanic symbols in bright colours decorated the outside of the joint. Later, on my trips back home, I noticed that Mexican drinks such as tequila, mezcal and pulque had strong commercial marketing. I wanted to see what was left of the old pulquerías and check what was the excitement of the new ones.

Alongside the revival of the drink comes the investigation of the visual elements, the outside and inside decorations of pre-Hispanic symbols such as the god of Pulque Octli and Mayahuel (the female deity associated with the maguey plant), which have been present from ancient times until

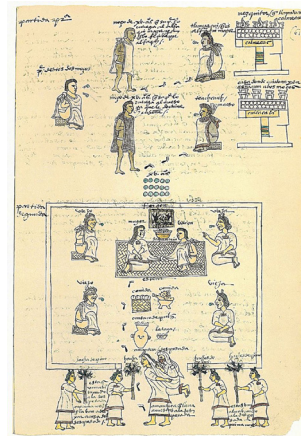


Figure 1

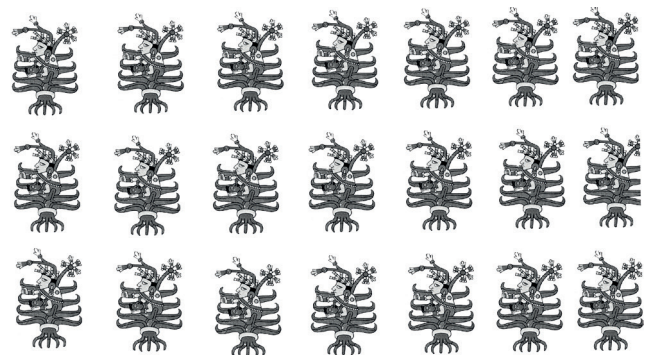


Figure 2

Figure Titles and Information

Figure 1: 'Octli'

Figure 2: 'MAYAHUEL'. Erika Servin, diverse dimensions.

now. I want to research the popular imagery it contains in a practiced manner to produce artwork. Mixed elements of cultural values from Spaniards and indigenous are still part of our social and political atmosphere, which is constantly evolving together with Mexican popular culture.

The pulquería in principle could have two categories for analysis: one as a medium itself, the second as an artefact or object of representation.

I see the pulquería as an object of representation that refers to the space and its sociocultural surroundings. Pulquerías as means of inspiration are represented through artistic manifestations such as painting, printmaking, literature and film. Throughout the years, we find these representations through perspectives that relate to popular art and have specific elements of national identity and use pre-Hispanic symbols. (Ramírez Rodríguez, 2007, p.140)

My focus was channelled into characterising the space as a contemporary study through printmaking techniques installed in the expanded field. Here are some of the pulquerías I have been researching:

La Reina Xochitl, La Victoria, Las Duelistas, La Gloria, La Risa (said to be the oldest, built in 1903) and Los Insurgentes (the most recent one). It is important to mention the new Museum of Pulque and the pulquería underneath in the city centre near the city's alameda.

The aim of the exhibition in 2020 was to show through art the concept of popular culture through a millennial beverage (pulque). This expression of interdisciplinarity works is an axis of contemporary culture in Mexico as it promotes the beverage outside its original context and history in an outside environment.

The exhibition was intended to be presented in a pulquería and alongside the Museo of Pulque, both in Mexico City. It comprised:

- A series of prints and other media inspired by visits to pulquerías in Mexico City, by photographic and video sources from the internet looking into pulquerías, and by drawings and installations inspired by photographs from the 1950s by photojournalist Nacho López.
- Conversations between artists and consumers of pulque were something to be touched upon.

This work was meant to be exhibited in Mexico City in the summer of June 2020. Due to the pandemic, I was left with the artwork and with no possibility of exhibiting or showcasing the work physically in Mexico or abroad at that point.

The new notion of presenting work not in person but through digital technology was now the only option.



Figure 3



Figure 4

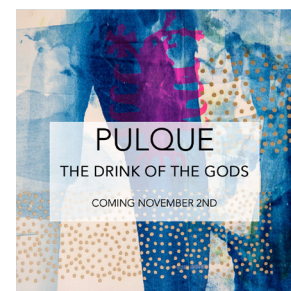


Figure 5

Figure 3: Pulqueria Rayuela. Erika Servin, 56 x 76 cm

Figure 4: Reina Xochitl, Digital Image Figure 5: Social Media, Digital image

The idea of presenting the exhibition to show how the space relates to the work and how each piece responds to the other had to be reconfigured. If I was going to show the work it would have to be in a new context and for a different audience with new outcomes. The work became a representation or interpretation of a pulquería and its relationship with a new digital audience.

My new proposal was to set up the exhibition in the Ex Libris Gallery at Newcastle University, which at that point was closed to the public, and once the exhibition was set up, to have a professional photographer and filmmaker document it digitally. I was then going to work with a digital media programmer to develop an online platform to share with audiences nationally and internationally.

The new exhibition project comprised:

First, an installation of a series of prints and other media, inspired by visits to pulquerías in Mexico City, by photographic and video sources from the internet looking into pulquerías, and by drawings and installations inspired by photographs from the 1950s by photojournalist Nacho López.

Second, the development of new online exhibiting proposals that can reach the physical presence in the spaces where conversations around pulque happen. The output will feed into interdisciplinary media and audiences to allow the investigation of a new way of delivering to an international audience, along with a book catalogue printed and available worldwide.

The first thing I realised was the difference between the conversations I had with the people I worked with to make the online exhibition happen, as it was all done in the UK and the people involved would need to learn the meaning and context of the work. As the artist, I had to express my intentions of engaging with the new audience about a subject matter that was probably unknown to most of them.

First, it was clear that the subject matter had to be placed in a new context outside its natural setting. I needed to explain the historical and social background and clarify the visual identity within the pulquerías and how I represented it through contemporary art.

The idea of presenting an online exhibition had to be studied not only aesthetically but also by looking at the possibilities within the technology and a budget.

During the lockdown, I received an immediate response from museums and commercial galleries all over the world to find ways of resolving how to move from real physical engagement into the digital world. We saw the Museum of Modern Art and the Louvre present their exhibitions with high-quality technology that allows us to move around the virtual space and see the exhibitions from home. Going

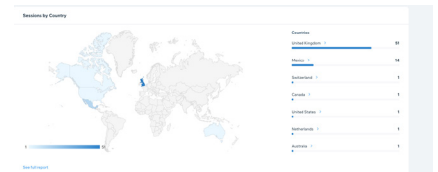


Figure 6

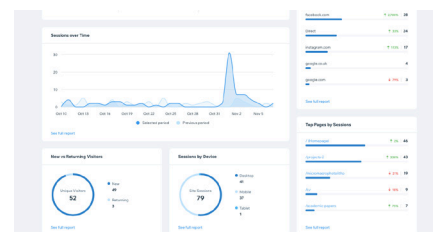


Figure 7



Figure 8

Figure 6: Countries Report, Digital image of webpage  
 Figure 7: Sessions Report, Digital image of webpage  
 Figure 8: Gallery space, Digital image of webpage

back to the idea of a pulquería as an object of representation that refers to the space and the sociocultural surroundings would have a new meaning in the digital world.

This new relationship between the exhibition and the exhibitor would need to be approached with care, as I was not interested in the virtual reality programmes to present the exhibition. I was more interested in its aesthetics and outcome.

I spent a lot of time trying to find how I could make the exhibition accessible to be seen through a screen with a smaller budget. I also made sure I would be comfortable navigating the work without too much hassle.

I found one example of what I thought was a good solution, a Picasso exhibition. The Picasso and Paper virtual exhibition tour from the Royal Academy, a video that shows the space and how the work sits in the space, allows text to be read and offers a closer view of the images. I enjoyed the exhibition much more than having the option of “moving” along with the cursor; the virtual reality option of pressing points to move closer was not an option for me as I found it distracted me from the artwork.

I also found galleries that presented their artists with what they called viewing rooms. Examples are:

<https://www.galleriesnow.net/shows/gazelli-turns-10/>

<https://www.galleriesnow.net/shows/mattia-bonetti-murano/>

I decided to use my webpage as the platform where I was going to exhibit the work, and following the type of exhibitions and viewing rooms, I chose to have a short video at the top of the page showcasing the work within the space and giving a general feel of the exhibition.

Then I placed the text written by Christian Mieves, who kindly agreed to interpret the “audience” in the physical space and with whom I was able to talk about the context. The text Christian wrote offers his insight into what the exhibition proposes and suggests a new perspective for the audience.

A paragraph that sums up ideas of representation and use of print within the work:

Similarly, in many of the other exhibits, Servin shows an overlap of image and pattern, ‘naturalistic’ representation, and abstraction. The image of a young woman standing in front of a pulquería, for instance, overlapped with the colour pattern of the typical wall design of the tavern. This can be understood as ‘pressing’ two modes of representations together, arguably a key part of the print process, which becomes here also a conceptual tool. The concept of flattening

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emphasizes the elasticity and fluidity that often confounds notions of difference: the differences between Northern European and Mexican culture, the amalgamation of abstracted patterns merges with photographs capturing experiences of fragmentation and flux. Art theorist Leon Wainwright has suggested, the idea of a 'hybrid compound', for him as the place of production 'in which tourism and the tropics collide at the locus of vision and the painted, printed and photographic image' (Wainwright 135).<sup>1</sup>

The text is a crucial part of this work as it gives the online exhibition an anthropological voice, and it was written in English and Spanish as these are the languages I consider my audience would know. After the text as you scroll down, an offer appears to go into "viewing rooms". The rooms are divided into certain areas that contain a specific body of work. These were presented as still photographs and a video. At the bottom of the page are the option for the catalogue and the comments box.

The online exhibition was publicised on social media including Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn and directly through email and reached over 3,000 people worldwide. The opening day had 120 viewers from all over the world, reaching audiences outside the UK and Mexico, as shown in the graph below. The following days continued to bring new audiences in smaller numbers.

I was quite surprised to find interest in countries like Switzerland or Australia, where I do not have many links. It is important for me now to acknowledge these new possibilities of hybrid physical and digital. They are an important option for reaching new audiences.

As an artist, I find it a priority to have a live audience visiting the exhibition. Nothing can resemble the physicality of the materials and the techniques chosen for the ideas that one wants to develop. Nothing is more satisfying than offering an experience that appeals to all the senses. I learned new things by translating the work to a digital format on a computer screen or telephone screen, but most of all it gave me a completely new insight into how a theme can relate to different contexts and offer new perspectives on the subject.

As mentioned, before, my subject matter relates to my Mexican identity and in this, I also study the way popular culture and its imagery has developed through time. As a result of this experience, I was able to have new conversations with artists about how the visual symbols of a pre-Hispanic culture can be maintained in a contemporary setting of a Pulquería, and how they can be represented in the contemporary fine art world.

It is also interesting for me to see how a digital presence is permanent in the digital world and can be revisited over time. New outcomes such as the invitation to do #WIP for Printmaking Today's Journal have helped me publicise the artwork and present this reflective paper and exhibition at Impact 12. I am sure this will bring a new dialogue within

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1. Christian Mieves. [www.erikaservin.co.uk](http://www.erikaservin.co.uk).

the contemporary printmaking community and the international artists involved.

<https://www.erikaservin.co.uk/projects-2>

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Sábado de Rayuela En La Victoria Colectivo el Tinacal: <http://pulquenuestro.blogspot.com/2012/>

Aquí nos toca vivir la Reyna Xochitl. Canal Once TV 13/07/20: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQ0cRL9BUH4>

## AUTHOR

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I was born in Mexico City in 1972. I am a professional printmaker and I exhibit frequently, nationally, and internationally. In 2000 I obtained a Master of Arts degree in New York University. I am a Lecturer in Fine Art and Technician in Newcastle University and Trustee of Northern Print. As well as producing my own artwork I am interested in exploring the potential of printmaking to engage with communities, and the relationship between visual art and the development of a social, political and/or personal voice. I have exhibited in Mexico, United States, United Kingdom, France, India, Australia among other places.

IMAGE GALLERY

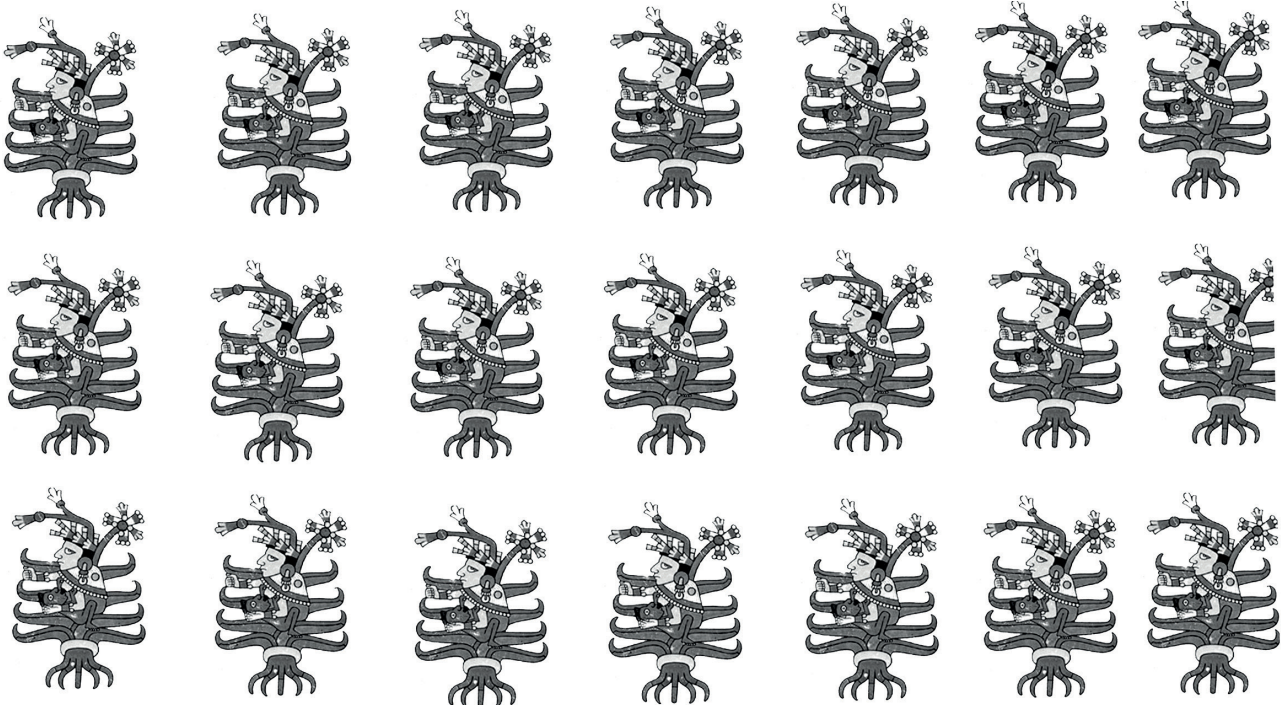
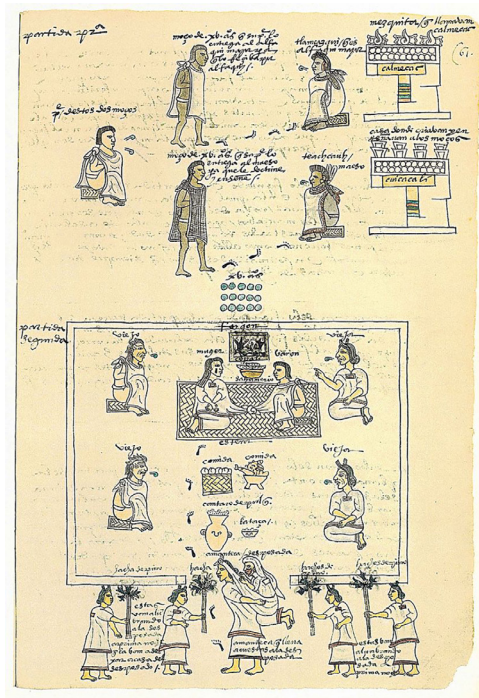


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Figure 2: 'MAYAHUEL'. Erika Servin, diverse dimensions.





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Figure 4: Reina Xochitl, Digital Image

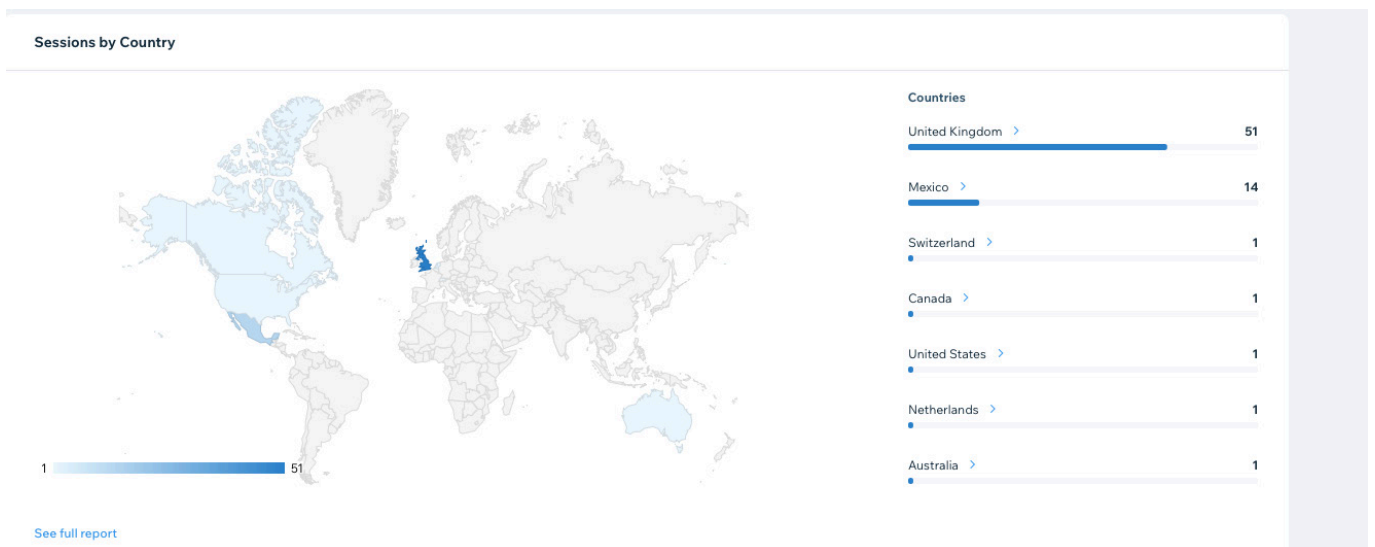
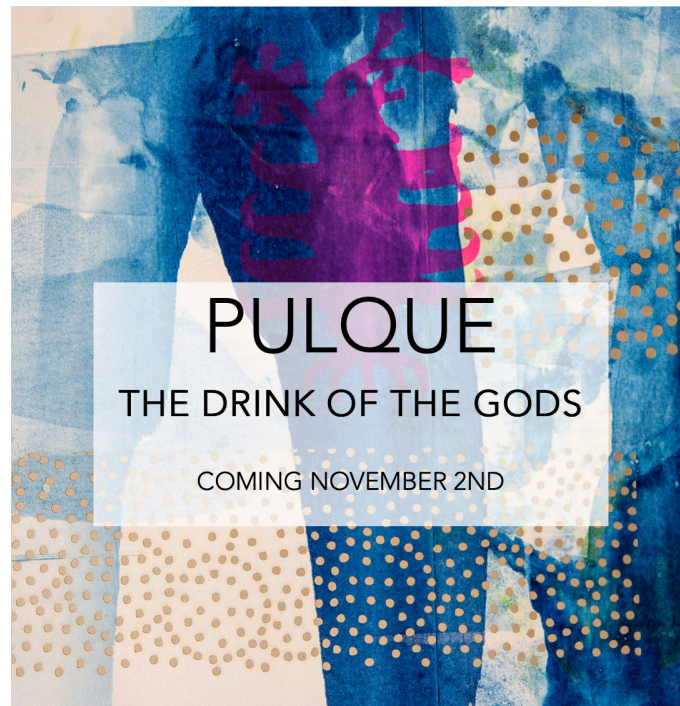


Figure 5: Social Media, Digital image  
Figure 6: Countries Report, Digital image of webpage

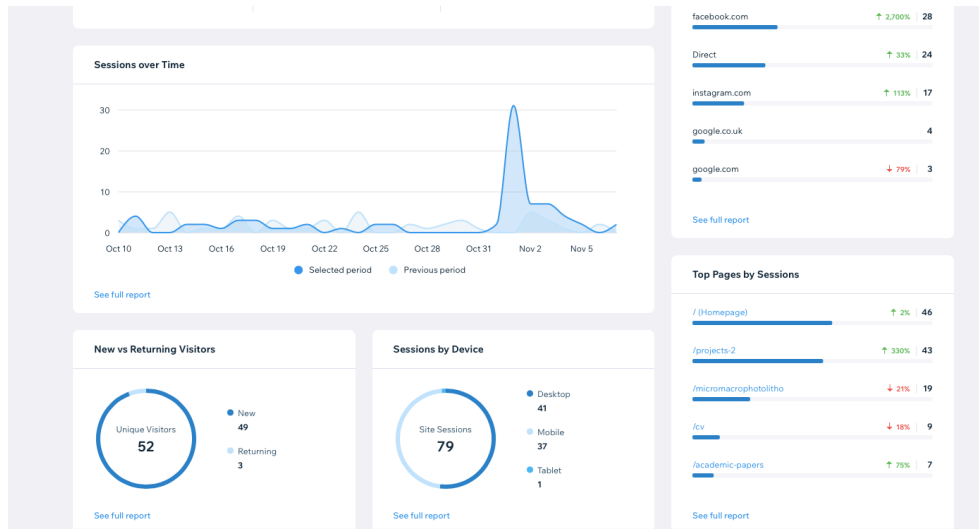


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