



GRIMANESA AMORÓS

BY KATY DONOGHUE, PORTRAIT BY RAFAEL Y. HERMAN

The popularity of Grimanesa Amorós's work has really exploded in the past few years. Just last year you could see her elaborate installations of bubble-inspired, LED-programmed sculptures in Times Square, at the Venice Biennale, in several other international exhibitions, at select Issey Miyake stores, and even on the cruise ship *Allure of the Seas*. The LED programs in each sculpture are incredibly elaborate, shifting colors and patterns with precision, their glow and scale creating a unique viewing experience. The inspiration behind the changing colored lights was the aurora borealis. Lately, Amorós has been focused on a recent trip to the Uros Islands in her home country of Peru (she's lived in New York for decades). We met her in her expansive studio in Tribeca, New York, late last year to discuss the evolution of her work and her latest sculptures.

WHITEWALL: You began as a painter but then moved on to sculpture, the medium in which you currently work. How did that transition take place?

GRIMANESA AMORÓS: Well, I always wanted to sculpt, but you do need space. At the time I was sharing a studio with a lot of other artists and it was a process. Finally, when I had my studio, which is the one that I am in still, that's when I started.

I was experimenting with handmade paper. Then in the 2000s I transitioned from paper to the materials that I use now.

In the middle of that I had my daughter. I don't remember anything about psychology except for one thing: how important the time you put in is from the time you are pregnant until your child is five years old. I thought if I put my dues in, then Shammie, my daughter, is going to be well set.

WW: So did you take a break from your work to focus on raising her?

GA: Yes. I nursed her for three and a half years. I thought I was finished as an artist; I had no creativity for that time. People were saying, "Grimanesa, you are crazy to get out of the art world," but I'm not the kind of person that listens to what people think you should be doing. I think at the moment what was important for me was my daughter, Shammie. After that it took me another two years to come back and discover my essence [in my artwork]. That took a long time.

WW: How did your work evolve from the time you took away from creating art to raise your daughter?

GA: That's a very interesting question. I think it definitely made me a better human being, that's for sure. Having Shammie gave me a good concept about time. It made me a much more balanced person in general. For me to be balanced, that is happiness.

WW: Do you think it changed your work? Do you think it changed the concepts that you were exploring?

GA: Yes, of course. Coming back to work, I did a piece called *You Cannot Feel It ... I Wish You Could*, and it was about male pregnancy. And it was a cast of myself one week before giving birth, and then the head was of a man. It was because my husband had a lot of questions. Men also have a lot of curiosity. Then the

Twin Towers fell and since I live so close, I saw everything. After that you had to evacuate and leave for a while; my studio was closed. So I went to the Santa Fe Art Institute residence and I created another set of work and it became *Avalanche*. *Avalanche* was about body parts; it was all my own body parts. But it was really a way to take away everything, what I have experienced through September 11. I did see the body parts coming down. So that was the work I did after being pregnant with Shammie.

WW: Your recent sculptures include a very technical lighting element. How did you start to work with light?

GA: I started working with theater lights. Now I work entirely with LEDs and programs.

WW: So it was more lighting within the space rather than within the sculpture.

GA: Yes. I transitioned to LED lighting, because of technical issues. When you work with theater lights, there are a lot of maintenance issues for the person that is commissioning, the collector, the institution, the foundation. When you are working with an LED system, the minute you finish the installation, 34

years pass, and you don't have to do anything else. I always use the best LEDs that there are in the market because this way I guarantee [longevity], and this way I finish.

WW: Tell us about the "Uros Island" installations you've been working on and that we saw in Times Square last year and at the Venice Biennale last summer.

GA: I knew since I was 13 I wasn't going to live in Peru, that I was going to live abroad. Because I knew people were going to ask me a lot about my country, I wanted to travel a lot very much inside. The only place I didn't go for whatever reason was the Uros Islands. It is fascinating because it was in January 2011 that I had the opportunity. From the plane I went straight to these Uros Islands. And it was a fascinating. The people that live there have lived there for many generations; right now there are only a few hundred left alive. They are disappearing little by little, because they have to maintain their islands. The islands are human-made, made by these long . . . what they call totora reeds. Every day they have to maintain them, and so what happens is the young generation doesn't want to live this harsh life — they go to the main town.

One of the things for me that was fascinating wasn't only the islands, but the houses, the boats, the watch towers — everything was made from these totora reeds. They even eat them. When I was there, I started photographing, filming, because that's what I do. It made a very big impression on me. Then I was approached to do a proposal for Times Square [in March of 2011]. I said, what could I do that is very, very close to me? I thought I just came back from the Uros Islands so I am going to do an Uros house; that's how all these project started.

WW: The Uros house and the installation you did in Venice was a sculpture made up of large and small bubbles with LED lights within. When did you start working with the bubble shape?

GA: I started when I was pregnant. I made a lot of drawings and then I started doing the body parts. I did breasts, nipples, and so that is how I started, actually. Then I started working with silicone, and then the silicone progressed to the type of work that I'm doing now.



WW: And the patterns on top of the bubbles, what are those of?

GA: The patterns are the totora reed.

WW: Your exhibition "Remolino — La Maleta Del Immigrante" [2009] was a video projection with a suitcase in front of it. The suitcase was filled with marbles, serving as a metaphor for the idea that we are what we bring with us. And that what you do with what you bring with you is what is important.

When you were talking earlier about knowing you would live abroad and not stay in Peru, that reminded me of this work. Do you think early on you tried to block that part of you, the "what you bring with you"?

GA: I think so, because you want to become more a part of the world. I always feel very proud of my Peruvian roots — my daughter, Shammie, for example, speaks perfect Spanish, she writes it and reads it, because I always talk to her only in Spanish. And of course now for me, after I was 40 it was the best time of my life. Every year that passes it only gets better. You know who you are; you are very comfortable with your essence, at least in my case.

WW: So do you think you're finally comfortable to working with "what you bring with you," which I think is really apparent in your "Uros Island" works?

GA: Of course, of course. I know what I want to do. I know who I am.



Clockwise from left:
Installation view of
Grimanesa Amorós' "Uros Island" (2011) at
La Biennale di Venezia,
54th International Art
Exhibition, ILLUMInazioni
- ILLUMInations, Collateral
Event Future Pass.

Grimanesa Amorós' light
sculpture from "Uros" series
installed at the Tribeca Issey
Miyake store in New York,
NY in 2011.

Grimanesa Amorós installing
Golden Uros (2011) at the
Chapelle de la Preseverance
in Tarascon, France.

All images courtesy of the artist.