

Cecilia Vicuña: Living Threads

7 October 2026 – 14 February 2027

Ticketed

Whitechapel Gallery presents the first major UK exhibition of **Cecilia Vicuña** (b.1948, Santiago, Chile) – one of Latin America’s most internationally renowned artists, poets, and feminist activists. Spanning six decades, the exhibition provides a unique opportunity to explore Vicuña’s interdisciplinary practice, which intentionally dissolves the boundaries between visual art, poetry, performance, ritual and activism, and encompasses painting, textile, photography, installation and film.

Born and raised in Santiago, Vicuña came to London in the early 1970s, where she self-exiled after the violent military coup against President Salvador Allende in 1973. London provides the starting point for this exhibition - Vicuña had a studio in Stepney Green when she was a student at the Slade School of Art (1972-1974), and her time here marked a key moment in her development. In the early 1970s, London was a hub for politically engaged artists from across the globe, providing a nexus for resistance and liberation movements, where artistic experimentation and political organising were deeply intertwined. As a creative and personal response to the situation in Chile, Vicuña’s practice became more explicitly political during the Allende period (1970-73), a process that intensified in London reflecting her experience of displacement, loss, political violence and instability.

A key facet of Vicuña’s work, evident from the 1960s onwards, is her deep commitment to honouring and preserving ecosystems and indigenous systems of knowledge. She regards the destruction of the natural world and erasure of indigenous communities as interconnected forms of violence and sees their recovery and preservation as the only way to imagine and create alternative futures. Many of her installations function as acts of remembrance for cultures, languages and ways of being that have been suppressed by dominant Western models and colonial systems.

The exhibition opens with *Quipu Menstrual* (2006–2024), a dense sculptural installation of unspun wool in vivid shades of red and brown suspended from the ceiling. Vicuña has been creating ‘quipus’ (knots) for over 50 years as striking embodiments of an ancestral, non-alphabetic communication system rooted in Andean culture. Traditionally used in pre-Hispanic civilisations, quipus were used to encode knowledge and transmit messages or stories through intricate systems of braiding and coloured threads. Vicuña reclaims and reactivates this ancient language as a living symbol of memory and resistance, often producing quipus through collective making processes adding a distinctive communal dimension to the works. *Quipu Menstrual* grew out of *The Blood of Glaciers / La sangre de los glaciares*, a performance on Chile’s El Plomo Glacier in 2006 in which Vicuña carried red wool threads and laid them at the foot of the striated glacier,

drawing a symbolic parallel between menstrual blood and melting ice – both vital, cyclical, and under siege.

Another key aspect of Vicuña's artistic language are the series of works titled *precarios*. She began making these small sculptures in the mid-1960s, crafted from hand-bound booklets, newspaper cuttings, papers, prints, fabric, feathers and other found materials. Originally laid out on the beach for the high tide to erase, these fragile 'spatial poems' are defined by their ephemerality and challenge conventional understandings of sculpture as fixed or permanent, offering instead a poetic counterpoint to the extractive logics of colonisation and capitalism. Vicuña's only surviving *precarios* from her time in London, *Precarios: A Journal of Objects for the Chilean Resistance* (1973–74), will be shown alongside archival documentation of the 400 lost works from the same collection.

Although widely recognised today for her *quipus* and *precarios*, Vicuña is a poet and painter and conceives her sculptures and installations as poetic acts. The sculptural works in the lower Gallery are placed in dialogue with a selection of paintings from Vicuña's time in London in the 1970s. These are shown alongside other paintings from the same period that were lost and have been subsequently repainted; and a recent series that continues her engagement with Indigenous knowledge and cultural memory.

Also on display are a series of works dedicated to Vicuña's performances and interventions in public spaces which she has been developing from the 1960s to the present day. These include the short film *What is Poetry to You?* (1980). Filmed in the vibrant streets of Bogotá, where she was based from 1975 to 1980, the work presents a series of intimate encounters where Vicuña asks various individuals, from children and street performers to scientists, artists, and sex workers, the same question: 'What is poetry to you?'. The responses range from deeply personal reflections to broader political statements, highlighting poetry as a vital, communal, and transformative force.

The exhibition continues with a key contextual element, a dedicated display on Artists for Democracy (AFD), the organisation Vicuña co-founded in London in 1974 with David Medalla, John Dugger and Guy Brett in solidarity with Chile and other liberation struggles worldwide. This section brings together never-before-seen documents, photographs and printed materials, offering insight into both the collective's activities and Vicuña's formative time in London.

Visitors will also encounter Vicuña's *Palabramas* series, including the 28 pencil and paper *AMAZone Palabramas* (1978) that bring together drawings, collages and textiles. The works emerge from the fusion of two concepts: words (*palabras*) and weapons (*armas*) and language is broken apart and reconstructed to reveal hidden or new meanings. Vicuña started this series in 1974 in London, when military dictatorships gripped Latin America and she imagined that these nonviolent, linguistic tools might

combat the brutality of that era. Her poetic proposition of ‘words as weapons’ remains relevant today, offering concise, powerful messages of struggle and hope.

Concluding the exhibition is *Ciudad Geométrica* (2025), a new large-scale installation presented in the UK for the first time. Composed of ephemeral materials such as driftwood, feathers, shells and bones, the installation brings together elements collected in Belgium, Chile and New York, forming a minimalist ‘geometric city’. Vicuña originally trained in architecture before turning to art, and these structures echo the sculptural logic of Andean pre-Hispanic architecture as well as offering an alternative form of world-building. These works speak to cycles of disappearance and resurgence, fragility and endurance. As Vicuña notes, they offer a way to ‘see the unseen,’ illuminating the interconnectedness of all life.

Cecilia Vicuña: Living Threads is presented in partnership with the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin where it was on display 7 November 2025 - 5 July 2026.

Notes to Editors

- *Cecilia Vicuña: Living Threads* runs 7 October 2026 – 14 February 2027.
- *Cecilia Vicuña: Living Threads* is curated by Leila Hasham and Carolina Jozami.

Press Contacts

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Listing Information

Cecilia Vicuña: Living Threads

7 October 2026 – 14 February 2027

Galleries 1, 2 & 3

Ticketed

Visitor Information

General Gallery admission: Free

Ticketed shows: £16.50 (Standard ticket) / £9.50 (Concessions)

Opening times: Tuesday – Sunday, 11am – 6pm; Thursdays, 11am – 9pm

Whitechapel Gallery, 77 – 82 Whitechapel High Street, London E1 7QX

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About Cecilia Vicuña

<https://www.ceciliavicuna.com/biography>

About Whitechapel Gallery

2026 marks Whitechapel Gallery's 125th Anniversary, providing a unique opportunity to celebrate the Gallery's groundbreaking history and set a bold agenda for the future.

Founded in 1901 with the aim to bring 'the finest art of the world to the people of East London' the Gallery has been responsible for bringing some of the most radical, innovative and influential artists of our times to its East End home. From the outset it pushed the boundaries of what a locally embedded cultural institution could do: giving voice and platform to local, national and international artists at all stages of their careers; presenting diverse practices, forms and ideas; exemplifying sector-leading learning and community outreach programmes; and being at the forefront of the global cultural scene.

From ground-breaking solo shows from artists as diverse as **Barbara Hepworth (1954)**, **Jackson Pollock (1958)**, **Helio Oiticica (1969)**, **Gilbert & George (1971)**, **Eva Hesse (1979)**, **Frida Kahlo (1982)**, **Sonia Boyce DBE RA (1988)**, **Sophie Calle (2010)**, **Zarina Bhimji (2012)**, **Emily Jacir (2015)**, **William Kentridge (2016)**, **Theaster Gates (2021)**, **Nicole Eisenman (2023)**, **Zineb Sedira (2024)**, **Gavin Jantjes (2024)**, **Peter Kennard (2024)**, **Lygia Clark (2024)**, **Sonia Boyce (2024)**, **Donald Rodney (2025)**, **Hamad Butt (2025)** and **Joy Gregory (2025)** to thought-provoking group and thematic exhibitions that reflect key artistic and cultural concerns, the Gallery's focus on bringing artists, ideas, and audiences together remains as important today as it did over a century ago, and has helped to cement the East End as one of the world's most exciting and diverse cultural quarters.

The programme for our anniversary year continues to give space to a range of perspectives from the local to the global, with priority given to those systemically under-represented, especially women-identifying artists and artists of colour. Our mission is to ensure that Whitechapel Gallery continues to claim a distinctive and radical position in the wider social and cultural landscape, building on its pioneering history while translating and animating it for our time.

About The Colwinston Charitable Trust 30th Anniversary Fund

Established in 1995 by its Founder and Chairman, Mathew Prichard CBE, The Colwinston Charitable Trust distributes grants to UK Registered Charities delivering high quality work in the Live Performing Arts and the Visual Arts. The Trust derives its main income

from royalties from *The Mousetrap*, the murder mystery written by Mathew's grandmother Agatha Christie, and since 1995 the Trust has supported more than 180 arts organisations across the UK awarding grants totalling £11,776,735.

To celebrate their 30th Anniversary and more than 30,000 performances of *The Mousetrap* since the play opened on the 8th of June 1952, The Colwinston Charitable Trust launched a special £1,000,000 fund to celebrate creative expression and the art of storytelling, innovation and excellence in the Arts, and to support projects designed to achieve ultimate impact and enjoyment for audiences.

"My grandmother spent her life being enthralled by the Arts. She wrote to entertain and loved being entertained by so many different art forms. I remain grateful to all the Arts practitioners who continue to bring her work to life and have enabled The Colwinston Trust to be involved with projects that I think would have been close to her heart. The Colwinston Trust is delighted to celebrate 30 years of working with many high-quality arts organisations across the UK by awarding a special Anniversary Grant to Whitechapel Gallery to support *Cecilia Vicuña: Living Threads* during Whitechapel Gallery's 125th anniversary year in 2026." - Mathew Prichard CBE, Chair of The Colwinston Charitable Trust.

Cecilia Vicuña: Living Threads has been generously supported by:

Principal Supporter:



The Colwinston Charitable Trust 30th Anniversary Fund

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