



# CELESTIAL VECTORS

## EARTH MEETS SKY

Rafael Vargas-Suarez, aka VSU (Vargas-Suarez UNIVERSAL) is always on the move. Following him on his travels and explorations over the past 20 years it follows that his approach is reminiscent of certain European traveling artists, beginning with the arrival of the Dutch painter Frans Post to Brazil in 1637, and continuing with the visits of numerous other traveling artists not only from Europe but also from the United States over the course of the 19th century, when national schools of painting began to emerge throughout Latin America. VSU differs, however, in that he is a 21st Century Latin American traveling artist that was born in Mexico and raised in Houston, Texas, very close to NASA. Living adjacent to NASA and having studied Astronomy and Art History, it is not surprising to observe his focus on our planet Earth in relationship to the Universe, and the ongoing space exploration that continues to animate his eponymous work and his signature style based on vectors that carry the information about magnitude and direction of physical quantity.

In his current series and exhibition of tapestries that can alternately function as rugs, VSU's visual sources derive from the ancient shorelines of planet Mars, from some 3 billion years ago. The two Rovers that cruised Mars (Spirit and Opportunity) launched in June and July of 2003 to search for answers about the history of water on Mars. The results have yielded information of past oceans that may have covered most of Mars' northern hemisphere and introduced the Next Green Sphere as Mars' new nickname, implying that after humans terraform the Red Planet into a Green Planet, Mars will have an oxygen-rich atmosphere with oceans and plants.

One of the main tapestries is befittingly titled, Next Green Sphere (2018-19), measuring in 84 x 134 inches and made with hand-sewn, dyed Tian-Shan Mountains sheep wool. This piece was inspired by VSU's 2013 trip to Lake Baikal, Siberia, which is the oldest and deepest on earth containing almost twenty-five percent of the entire world's unfrozen fresh water. Then, as of 2014 until 2018, VSU traveled several times to Lake Issyk-Kul (Warm Lake), which is 2,004 square miles in area and never freezes due to a slightly salty condition. One of VSU's concerns has always been water, without which no human life exists, and as is well known, makes up approximately sixty-five percent of our bodies. The color blue throughout our cultural and visual history is also central in VSU's work, with a couple of the most ancient being Indigo and Cobalt. In addition, the color red and its history leads to connections with Mars, oxidation, blood, life and death in addition to other binary relationships with which to seek out new variations on the Yin and Yang themes that connect the opposites in his compositions.

Since 2016, VSU has been working on and off in Kyrgyzstan on what he calls My Silk Road. After utilizing indigenous techniques in a site-specific silk painting and installation commissioned by the American University of Central Asia, Bishkek, followed by another trip to Central Asia where he began exploring ancient techniques and materials to further develop his own vector-based imagery, the artist was fortunate to have been introduced to the revered and respected local master, Meken Osmanaliev. He shared his knowledge and experience of the 9,000-year tradition of felt production, the oldest textile in the world, in addition to various techniques for wool rugs as well as yurts with the artist. After VSU visiting him in Barskoon, in the Issyk-Kul Province of Kyrgyzstan, the fabrication of tapestries (or rugs) made with the Ala-Kiyiz and Shyrdak traditional carpet techniques were initiated at various workshops in and near Bishkek. The resulting tapestries (or rugs) are here on view in the first-ever exhibition of AKA Editions in New York City.

VSU's journeys have over the years rendered a series of cartography-based works, replete with markings and lines that are executed on a rich assortment of support structures such as canvas, wood, paper, silk and now wool tapestries. In all of VSU's work the viewer can follow converging and diverging networks of lines, and whether apart or linked together, they are both in unity and in opposition. As VSU continues to uncover and discover, we anticipate that new knowledge of the indigenous visual art-making traditions will inspire and enrich the artist's future works.

**Carla Stellweg**  
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<sup>1</sup> The emergence of national schools throughout the hemisphere also led to the distinct art historical Indigenous art movements, from Mexico all the way south and in particular the Andean region. VSU has in his work demonstrated his interest in indigenous art forms and esthetics, however in his case it is an ongoing fascination with the survival of millennia-old indigenous techniques.

<sup>2</sup> A traditional yurt or ger is a portable, round tent covered with skins or felt and used as a dwelling by nomads in the steppes of Central Asia.

<sup>3</sup> It is an art that has lasted for over 4,000 years and AKA Editions, the company founded by Fabian Ortega and VSU, has decided alongside the Unesco who declared these traditions to be Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Safeguarding, to preserve and develop these techniques by inviting a curated group of international contemporary artists and commission limited edition art rugs in Kyrgyzstan.