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## Luana Vitra Elevates Minerals to Spiritual and Political Agents at SculptureCenter

With “Amulets,” the Brazilian artist creates a ritual site of inorganic memory, reimagining minerals as agents of resistance.

By [Elisa Carollo](#) • 06/25/25 3:52pm



*An installation view of “Luana Vitra: Amulets” at SculptureCenter. Courtesy the artist and Mitre Galeria, São Paulo and Belo Horizonte. Photo: Charles Benton*

There is something profoundly ritualistic and fascinatingly alchemical in the way Brazilian artist Luana Vitra engages minerals and organic materials in her practice. For her New York institutional debut that coincided with a solo presentation at Frieze New York with Mitre Gallery, she transformed SculptureCenter into a ritual site where enigmatic totemic forms channel ancestral energies, charging the space with an uncanny, sacred presence. These auratic sculptures hover in a dialectic, animated by the tension between transcendence and groundedness. Mineral sedimentations spread across the floor like devotional offerings—amulets of ritual gestures marking a threshold between the physical and the spiritual.

Vitra's practice is deeply rooted in her native Minas Gerais, a mineral-rich region of Brazil historically shaped by the violent extraction of gold through forced labor and, today, dominated by the iron mining industry. Growing up in that environment allowed her to form an intimate relationship with minerals—especially iron—that would come to be at the heart of her work. “I truly see the presence of iron as ancestral, and being close to it led me to move away from the idea of perceiving it merely as a natural resource,” Vitra tells Observer. Iron is not simply a material at her disposal but a companion to her artistic language—“one with which I build the world.”



*Luana Vitra. Photo: Vicente Otavio*

Through her relationship with the material, Vitra began to recognize a deep kinship between human beings and the behavior of metals. “Observing the movement of iron led me to reflect and develop a more critical perspective on my own history,” she says. “Within this relationship, I began to think of iron as the material closest to the Black body—associating rust with melanin and understanding both as elements, in the body of iron and the human body, that return them to an idea of origin.”

Vitra engages with materials holistically. “Before I begin creating a sculpture or installation, it’s essential that I understand the materials in terms of their chemical, physical and spiritual movements. As I engage with the space and begin to sense how these materials will organize themselves within it, all of that is taken into account.”

In “Amulets” at SculptureCenter, Vitra focuses on the continuous transformation of matter, evoking a sense of perpetual flux—energies and substances in constant states of becoming, dissolving and re-forming. “I was thinking about what a ritual of the minerals for the minerals would look like,” she explains. “This body distanced from coexistence with humans, these materials in a relationship of self with self—because, to some extent, when we relate to other forms of life, we always place them at our service.” For Vitra, the process begins long before the work takes form: “It is always essential to understand the materials in terms of their chemical, physical and spiritual movements. As I engage with the space, I begin to sense how these materials will organize themselves within it.”



At the same time, Vitra's use of colors like white and blue—tones traditionally associated with the sacred across cultures—is deeply intentional and aimed at enhancing the symbolic and spiritual aura of the works. The sculptures in the installation embody a dynamic tension between ascendant and descendant motion, charged with the interplay of unearthly transcendence and earthly rootedness. According to Vitra, the specific shade of blue found in the feathers is linked to the spirit of metals, while white, on a more personal level, evokes an idea of rebirth.



*Vitra's practice is rooted in the philosophical and spiritual traditions of the Afro-Brazilian diaspora. Courtesy the artist and Mitre Galeria, São Paulo and Belo Horizonte. Photo: Charles Benton*

The compositional structure of the works reflects her vision of how minerals might undergo spiritual ascension: “When reflecting on these materials, I think the process of mineral ascension is not necessarily upward. I imagine it as a truly multidirectional movement—one that takes root, that rises, that spreads, that moves in all directions.” This vision was deepened through her engagement with the work of Brazilian researcher Tiganá Santana, who studies Bantu cosmology. From that, Vitra learned that spiritual ascension is not oriented toward the sky—a concept inherited from European thought—but is instead understood by Bantu people as multidirectional. “I believe that’s how it would be for minerals,” she says. “In further conversation, Tiganá told me that capoeira is precisely this gesture of listening to the spirituality that rests upon the ground. I believe this work carries the desire to listen specifically to that spirituality which, for the Bantu, is the highest form of spirituality—the one that lives on the earth.” Her sculptural compositions are a way of imagining, manifesting and often directing what such movements might be.

Drawing on minerals' metallurgical symbolism and transformative potential, Vitra conjures a vision of perpetual flux—matter and energy in continuous states of becoming, dissolution and reconstitution. As she describes it, in her practice, she seeks the “spirit in matter,” activating these minerals as vessels for receiving, storing and transmitting energy—a medium of spiritual communication and metaphysical presence. “In this exhibition specifically, I was thinking about what a ritual of the minerals for the minerals would be like,” she reflects. “A body distanced from coexistence with humans, these materials in a relationship of self with self, because, to some extent, when we relate to other forms of life, we always place them at our service.” This, she puts forward, is the kind of anthropocentric habit her practice aims to disrupt. “I never view material through that lens.”



*The exhibition expands on recent projects focused on materializing the energetic force and symbolism of natural matter such as stone, clay and sand. Courtesy the artist and Mitre Galeria, São Paulo and Belo Horizonte. Photo: Charles Benton*

To achieve this, Vitra emphasizes the need for what she calls “a sensitive and, at the same time, intellectual imagination of matter”—an approach that moves through study but also through intuition and imaginative projection. “From this imagination, I began to think about some flows of the Earth,” she notes. “It also comes from my own delirium about the material and my imagination.”

In the central piece of the installation at SculptureCenter, Vitra reflects on the movements at the Earth’s core. There, iron and nickel spin together constantly at a temperature of roughly 2045°C. “It’s a process of reflection on this flow of energy, this constancy that, at some point, might perhaps be shared with us through a volcanic eruption or an earthquake. It is the movements of the Earth that inspire me to think about how sculptures should be arranged in space.”



By attuning to and accommodating these forces, the exhibition becomes a site where one thing turns into another, engaging and manifesting a continuous alchemical flux. “It is always about the magic that already exists within the Earth,” Vitra says. “I seek other ways to express this through my encounter with certain materials.”

A recurring element in the exhibition is the pendulum—an instrument traditionally used to measure the energy of the body and objects, but here employed by Vitra as a thermometer of the space’s energy. Using it in this way allows her to consider mercury and its dynamic influence on her creative process: how it multiplies will ultimately affect how she constructs the composition. “Things are made through these crossings, but also through objective elements,” she clarifies, pointing to the stones—specifically iron ore—which function as stable elements that regulate the flow and articulation of forces.



These stones are always the first element Vitra places in her works, forming the foundation through which she thinks about the choreography of forces, energies and bodies. At the same time, in the installation, Vitra has also included sodalite, kyanite and selenite. “Some of these stones are oriented toward mental balance, others toward spiritual cleansing,” she says. “This also relates to the kind of energy I want to create in the space and the way the compositions, to some extent, choreograph the body of the visitor who walks through the exhibition and observes it all.”

*Vitra sees minerals as mediators between secular and spiritual worlds and as mediums for “receiving, storing, transforming and settling energies.” Courtesy the artist and Mitre Galeria, São Paulo and Belo Horizonte. Photo: Charles Benton*

In this sense, Vitra appears to channel energy through materials in a process that feels, at times, almost shamanic in its approach. As she acknowledges, while the energetic dynamic of the exhibition is primarily shaped by the properties of the materials she selects, the symbolic direction constructed through them is equally essential. “There are moments I want to feel denser and moments I want to feel lighter—and all of this is orchestrated by the symbols, in addition to the materials themselves,” Vitra explains. “Some materials carry an energy that grounds, pulls downward; others elevate, and all of this is considered when I’m developing an installation.”

A similar philosophical and aesthetic proposition animates Luana Vitra's works currently on view at the Sharjah Biennial in the U.A.E., where the artist explores the behaviors and affinities of minerals using magnets to trigger reactions and attractions that can even replace soldering. These magnets—composed of iron themselves—create ephemeral bonds between ferrous metals through their natural pull. In this context, Vitra humanizes minerals, suggesting they share behaviors with humans: falling in love, drawing together, drifting apart. Her work reflects on the possibility of building structures not through force, but through mineral desire.

At the same time, through this particular approach to practice and materials, Vitra reclaims a ritualistic dimension that has accompanied artmaking since its earliest origins. The works in her installation at SculptureCenter evoke both totemic presences and devotional offerings as the exhibition unfolds into a ritual site and a spiritual experience in which viewers are invited to take part.

As the title of the exhibition suggests, Vitra's central aim with this exhibition is to invite viewers to recognize the magnitude of minerals and break away from the reductive notion of natural resources. "I want them to see minerals instead as presences that set a series of much more complex things in motion," she says. Although, as she clarifies, the show contains only one literal amulet—deliberately hidden—each piece becomes an amulet in its own right through the way it was made: shaped by spiritual practice, rooted in the traditions of her hometown, and informed by ancestral knowledge. "My work, in general, is a way of understanding how gesture and form can become presences that activate healing," she reflects. "The gestures and the materiality speak from a place where the relationship with the material is spiritual," Vitra emphasizes that this emerges above all from the ways she interacts with matter. "Presence moves energies. And in this sense, I shape a gesture of understanding—how the energies of the hands and of repetition generate energy around things, and how these energies become visible in the material through my relationship with the sculptures. In a way, perhaps all of my practice can be understood through this gestural matrix."

Only within this ritualistic framework of "spiritual gestures" and energetic dynamics are these materials truly respected and understood in their full magnitude—not reduced to products or resources serving functional roles in society. "My desire to work with materials from this perspective comes from the fact that I always want to maintain a relationship of respect with minerals," Vitra reflects. "My wish is for this mineral life to be respected, for mineral desire to be acknowledged, and for us to create a healthier coexistence with these presences."



*In "Amulets," Vitra invites visitors to look beyond the material properties of minerals and their circulation as commodities and to envision the spiritual dimension to which they belong. Courtesy the artist and Mitre Galeria, São Paulo and Belo Horizonte. Photo: Charles Benton*

From this foundation, each installation carries meanings that extend beyond the spiritual, opening onto political and economic dimensions that confront the social and environmental violence implied in mineral extraction. "I have been deeply shaken by the dynamics of mining—how violent and unbalanced it all is," Vitra explains, noting that the mineral industry continues to reflect enduring colonial dynamics. "When we look, for instance, at mining practices in Central Africa before the period of enslavement, we find that these presences were not exploited in the unchecked way they are today. There was a concern for maintaining balance between the forces and presences of the world. I feel that colonization led us to establish capitalist relationships with nature, which in some way caused a distancing from this idea of balance." In this sense, Luana Vitra's work becomes an urgent invitation to reflect on how we might relate to other forms of life—even the inorganic and the mineral—with a different kind of respect.

Luana Vitra's "Amulets" is on view at SculptureCenter through July 28, 2025.