

Partial Versions

Bitter Cornices

Esther Gatón at Partial Versions

Partial Versions is delighted to present the first solo exhibition in the UK by Madrid and London based artist Esther Gatón. Spanning sculpture, video and painting, Gatón's practice is concerned with states of ambiguity and intensity; particularly their material, spatial, and socio-political effects. Working with intuitive processes and unexpected materials (such as bioplastics, phosphorescent paint, and doll clay), the artist utilises artifice and ornamentation, often alongside spatial intervention, to construct unsettled objects and environments. Previous works take ordinary yet destabilising experiences like watching a horror film, riding a rollercoaster or falling in love as starting points for exploring political, religious, and material histories in contemporary Spain.

For Partial Versions, Gatón turns her attention to the conventions of domestic space, focusing on bookshelves, cupboards and skirting boards across the ground floor of the building. Discrete interventions shift and disrupt protocols of display, concealment and maintenance throughout the space implicating the artist, residents and visitors in a series of architectural and social transgressions.

Plastic sheets suspended from floor to ceiling alter three alcoves in the living and dining rooms. These spaces, an architectural bi-product of the need for fireplaces in each room before the advent of central heating, have gradually become sought after, decorative details in most modern homes. Gatón has concealed them in favour of the illusion of a continuous, blank wall. Books, lamps and ornaments, housed on retrofitted shelves in the alcoves and often displayed to express the identity, taste or status of the resident become partially hidden. The other walls of the space have similarly had any decoration, such as wall based artworks, removed and holes or cracks have been filled.

Running throughout is *They ring true* (2025), layers of phosphorescent paint added to the skirting boards. A typically overlooked architectural feature, here they are transformed into a surface that emits a gentle and peculiar glow that makes its presence more or less known depending on the time of day. Cardboard has been used in place of painting directly on to the boards themselves, a renter friendly gesture that speaks to a common yet uneasy relationship between the house, its inhabitants and its decoration.

The original Victorian fitted cupboards are left ajar, emitting an unexpected but enticing glow of their own. One of the doors blocks the route and view through to the back of the house, forcing visitors to contort through a small gap to access the next room. Within each cupboard, Gatón has fixed works from a series of paintings, each created over several months as a daily, additive practice that takes place at her home in Madrid. Illuminated by spotlights, their presence and status as artworks draws visitors into the hidden recesses of the home. Revealing mismatched crockery, cleaning supplies and other paraphernalia one prefers to keep out of sight, the gaze of the visitor is a welcomed but uncomfortable act of trespass.

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Esther Gatón

They ring true, phosphorescent paint on cardboard. Dimensions variable
2025



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They ring true
2025

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They ring true
2025

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Esther Gatón

They ring true
2025

Bitter Cornices

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Detail.



Bitter Cornices

Esther Gatón

They ring true
2025



Bitter Cornices

Esther Gatón

They ring true
2025

Bitter Cornices

Esther Gatón



Overjoyed, The pens
2025



Bitter Cornices

Esther Gatón

The pens, They ring true, The tobacco
2025

Bitter Cornices



Esther Gatón

The tobacco
2025

Bitter Cornices

Esther Gatón



The tobacco, oil on cotton, 18 x 14 cm
2025

Bitter Cornices



Esther Gatón

Overjoyed, The pens
2025



Bitter Cornices

Esther Gatón

Overjoyed, The pens
2025

Bitter Cornices

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Overjoyed, oil on cotton, 33 x 24 cm
2025

Bitter Cornices

Esther Gatón



The pens, oil on cotton, 18.2 x 23.5 cm
2025

If, in principle, transparency and masking are to be considered antithetical concepts, because the former allows us to see what is behind, while the latter tries to make it invisible by placing an opaque and impenetrable element in front of it, on some occasions they can come so close together that they become confused.

Writings on Invisibility: Architecture and Concealment
María Teresa Muñoz, 2018

Partial Versions offers artists a space in which, accompanied by Amy Jones, we can revisit earlier moments in our practice. The project space presents a specific critique of the frequent demand for novelty and change in contemporary art production.

In one of our first conversations, I joked with Amy about “really looking to the past”. I described to her the little drawings that were hidden around my parents’ house, like tiny graffiti: on the lampshades, under the table, in a corner, behind the bed, and on our dolls. They were marks that my siblings and I had scribbled with different utensils and without much intention. Often, they were discovered by our parents long after they had been done, dissolving the authorship and, therefore, the direction of the reprimand. The adults got annoyed, but they didn’t know who to blame. Whilst we, the kids, didn’t even remember who had done it, nor did we understand that it was a serious matter. Such circumstances created a sort of collective stratagem, whereby signatures, stickers, chewing gum, notes and drawings of hearts and stars sprouted up around the family house, almost as if by chance or magic.

It can therefore be said that my first steps as an artist were taken within the home. Now, at Partial Versions, it seems as if the house has become the theme of the work. This exhibition may give the impression that the art responds to, subversively questions or intervenes in this residence, creating another type of habitability. However, I prefer to write about this exhibition as unrelated to the idea of home. I would say that the work has landed here, coincidentally at Amy and Josh’s house, the place where I stay when I come to Cambridge; a typical English terraced house for workers. It so happens that the exhibition’s setting is steeped in history and connotations. However, what underpins the work has less to do with this house, or any other, than with how it is used. The house, the interior, the furniture and the rooms – the appearance and foreground – are the means by which the body of work seeks to express itself. The work of art does not think or calculate; it simply acts.

The exhibition is not concerned with the things or objects themselves, but instead with *what those things do*; how they *interrupt, present, hide* and *prompt other things to do things* through specific modifications. We have slightly changed the perceptual order of objects, covering what is often displayed, and giving shine to what tends to go unnoticed. We have been grooming the background, decorating what serves to conceal defects and revealing what we do not want to show. This exhibition is not so concerned with objects or living rooms, but with the verbs applied to them, most often in their

gerund form. Here, things are indifferent and interchangeable, as language –the symbolic meaning of the actions taken on the spot– anticipates them.

We pay attention to the skirting board, a somewhat outdated functional ornament that serves to conceal the edge of a defective wall, as well as to protect walls from marks from people’s shoes, or dirt on the ground. We also open a couple of built-in cupboards which, facing each other, now display their contents diagonally. In that same gesture, one of the doors obstructs access from the living room.

Leaving the cupboard door half open, entails that the exhibition begins by frustrating the welcome into the house. Situated opposite the entrance, anyone visiting for the first time encounters a visual barrier. With the door ajar, it is likely to cause a collision. At first glance, something is amiss or not quite in order. I also recall some spiritual beliefs that advise against leaving doors open, because energy escapes through them and unwanted elements enter.

I think the exhibition produces and plays with a tender discomfort. It gives me the impression that it is concerned with creating that shy, prying gaze that enjoys taking a peek at what should not usually be on view. Amy and I have discussed the word “obscene”, which first referred to the violent or hurtful episodes that were performed “out of the scene” (*ob skene*), in Ancient Greek theatre. We could say that Bitter Cornices nods to the original meaning of the word, utilising “obscene” not as what’s morally offensive to one’s sense of decency, but rather as what takes place outside the main stage. Here, the gestures that glide over private surfaces and the gazes that are invoked are relatively calm, even considerate –no need for dirty laundry to be exposed.

The house, as a format in itself, is another space of exhibition, with its own categories of vision, tricks, and disguises. Even within it, secrets are kept, veiled beyond the threshold of the door. The house and our idea of the interior are modes of decoration, where the scenography of the ordinary entertains our family and acquaintances. The home is occupied with simulating a life.

And yet, the places we live in have not always had as many ways of showcasing themselves to their guests, nor as many objects acting on their behalf. In his essay *Some Urgent Notices on Interior Decoration and Collecting*, Ángel González García warned us that furniture is a relatively recent, modern, bourgeois invention: “In the aristocratic living room, everything had to be movable and was practically limited to chairs and tables, often simple, removable boards. (...) Let’s say that before this bourgeois revolution in furniture, interiors were filled with cheerful people in society. In contrast, later they would be filled with things, arriving in droves to occupy the void left by people. In reality, the change took place on a larger scale, and here the palace model that culminated in Versailles, with more indoor public space than interior assembly, is relevant. Contemporary accounts reveal the lack of comfort in the king’s palace, an unforgivable flaw in a modern interior. (...) But the fact is that the new bourgeois interior is much broader and more complicated in meaning, implying not only a demand for cosyness that was not even planned for at Versailles, but also a certain intimacy, and even almost

hermit-like solitude.¹”

The house in which Partial Versions takes place would be heir to these values, dating back just a couple of centuries, centred on comfort and private space. The curious fact about this very ordinary home is that it not only adopts such homely values, but also their simulacra. It is no longer necessary for space to be so comfy, as long as it appears to be. For example, the fake plaster fireplace, painted with a metallic effect, that presides over the living room.

Performing artistic gestures in a home means navigating the visual ploys and perceptual orders that are already at play, and to which we have become accustomed. It is not advisable to intervene in a single direction, as the house and its contents conduct themselves in multiple ways. Like a restorer, we must begin by paying attention to what the space is already stating. And in my case, deciding whether to enhance its tendency, turn it around, interrupt it, or insert something that comes from the studio, from outside. This exhibition is concerned with peeling away, removing, and proposing a replacement. The additions (artworks) seek to enter into the conversation, camouflage themselves and behave like grafts. What is finally on display is the concatenation of several exchanges.

Here, we need to treat the art object as a flexible entity, capable of adapting to the language and movement of space, as well as to the currents of air, light and humidity, that change rhythm and intensity as they pass. The work of art does not behave like a central body, before which the rest of the space bows down, but rather as a fragment of the visual machinery of a subjective, but common and arrhythmic mechanism, which is already spinning around. The artwork is what punctuates a relatively coordinated chain of stealthy movements. Several types of encounters are constructed: from behind, in secret, in the thread of a glance. Possibly, Bitter Cornices can never be seen as a whole or in the same way.

It also happened that, while I was working on this exhibition, I began making some small paintings in my room in Madrid. They are made on small boards, with a few oil colours. Like so many children of my generation, my early years in art class were academic, looking at the classics and loving their technique and its deviations. Without realising it, while preparing the exhibition, I was also returning to my beginnings in formal learning (shortly after drawing those tiny graffiti in my family home). The first time we do anything, we need someone to almost take us by the hand, and help us bond with what is new. The first time can also refer to the first return. Perhaps that is why this exhibition, inevitably cosy and among trusted ones, is the ideal setting to give voice to what speaks of one before, and also of now. To the new comebacks.

The paintings are installed inside the built-in cupboards. In the interior of the interior. I suppose I chose to do this because I still feel somewhat shy about such fresh comebacks. Or maybe because they are better suited to a corner space in the shadows, similar to my room in Madrid, which has a

window that overlooks an interior patio. Unlike in the United Kingdom, homes on the Iberian Peninsula tend to be darker, with windows protected from the sun by wooden shutters, and are often located in bustling multi-story buildings. Inside these cabinets, the paintings now almost appear like miniatures in a dollhouse. Seven years of coming and going between the two territories – with their contrasts in temperature, space, and lighting– could not fail to influence my practice. Today, exhibiting begins with committing to the simplest questions: the conditions of vision and arrival at a place –how much light is needed, what type, and at what times? Where to look?

You no longer get anywhere without, surely, returning as well. Writing is facing many returns. From the Latin *tornāre*, to return, is related to the Spanish word *trastorno* (disturbance, disorder); to the action and effect of turning, spinning or returning to a place, reversing the regular order of things and displacing them. All these deviations and work, without us even realising it, to create a reunion with a house and with us. With that which cannot be repeated.

Esther Gatón

¹ González García, Ángel. *Roma en cuatro pasos seguido de algunos avisos urgentes sobre decoración de interiores y coleccionismo*. Madrid: Ediciones Asimétricas, 2011.

FLIGHT WITHOUT SHORES

I abandoned the shadows,
the heavy walls,
the familiar noises,
the friendship of books,
the tobacco, the pens,
the dry ceilings;
to take off flying,
desperately.

Below: in the half-light
the bitter cornices,
the desolate streets,
the sleepwalking lanterns,
the dead chimneys,
the tired rumours;
but I kept flying,
desperately.

Now everything was silent,
simulated catastrophes,
great pools of shadow,
downpours, lightnings,
islet vagabonds,
of unsettled riverbanks;
but I kept flying,
desperately.

A naked flash,
a scorched light,
intervened in my route,
I was captivated by death,
But I succeeded in escaping
of its lethal influence,
to keep flying,
desperately.

Still the destiny
of expired worlds,
disoriented my flight
—of astronomical certainty—
with its vain parabolas
and its false auras;
But I kept flying,
desperately.

Heaviness filled me,
the massive clarity,
the crystal emptiness,
the inaudible distance,
the soundless hollow,
the asphyxiating repose;
But I kept flying,
desperately.

Now nothing existed,
nothingness was absent;
neither darkness nor light,
—not even celestial hands—
no, life, no destiny,
no mystery, no death;
But I kept on flying,
desperately.

Oliviero Girondo

Biography

Esther Gatón lives and works in Madrid and London. Recent exhibitions include: Affiliate, WIELS, Brussels (2025), Tetillas, Pauline Perplexe, Paris (2024); Asleep on a feather bed with black curtains around him, an inverted torch (the earth was full of poppies), C3A, Córdoba; Emil Lime, CA2M Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo, Madrid (both 2023); –White, The Mud. Softest Sun Machine, Raccoon, Barcelona (2022); Le Club du Poison-Lune, CAPC, Bordeaux; Eu Tinha poucos anos e já era rigorosamente ancià, Verao, Lisbon (both 2021).

Gatón’s writing has been published in Materiales Concretos, Nero, A*Desk, editorial concreta and Urbanomic. In 2022 she was in residence at WIELS, Brussels. That same year, she founded abierto, a non-profit project for small poetry encounters, based in South-East London.

About Partial Versions

Partial Versions invites artists to revisit an existing work or return to an idea they’ve already had. The programme currently unfolds in a Victorian railway cottage in Cambridge, UK and is organised by Amy Jones and Joshua Lowe.

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Photography by Stephen James.



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