



AD MINOLITI  
AT TATE ST IVES

# The Power of Play

*Ad Minoliti's art will transport you to a parallel universe. Tate Etc. visited the artist at their home and studio in Buenos Aires, Argentina to discuss alternative realities, toying with painting traditions and their immersive show at Tate St Ives, in which everyone is invited to take part*

**TATE ETC.** Your paintings and installations draw on a rich tradition of modernism and geometric abstraction in South America, but look and feel very different to these influences. Are you trying to challenge some of the artistic or cultural legacies of modernism by using geometry in the service of softness, tenderness, even cuteness?

**AD MINOLITI** That great question is what inspires me to try out different projects. I want to open doors to all those qualities, but without the sarcasm or cynicism they are often associated with. I want to challenge patriarchy, adultism, racism, ablist, and all the other ugly legacies of modernism that appropriated and mutilated abstraction and geometry from many different cultures. When certain people get mad about what I do – like those who demand the return of the traditional white cube gallery, or others who are bothered by my ‘feminist propaganda’ – I know I’m on the right path.

**ETC.** The boundaries between the handmade and the digital, between the human and machine, are often blurred in your work. How do digital media help you to imagine and create alternative realities?

**AM** In many of my paintings, I attempt to apply some of the principles of Donna Haraway’s *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), in which she explores the cyborg – ‘a hybrid of machine and organism’ – as an entity that disrupts rigid categories and boundaries. When I first tried to do this, it became clear that I had to use whatever tools or techniques would help me break the binaries that determine the coding of tradition: like original vs copy, handmade vs industrial, talented vs amateur. Digital media multiply the possibilities open to me, offering me a big banquet. They also help with collaging, which is at the base of my practice. Hybridity is collage as a queer technique.

Previous and next spread: Ad Minoliti and their dog Max at their home and studio in Buenos Aires, Argentina, photographed by Lila Llunez, February 2022

**ETC.** Your paintings often include references to toys and cartoons, while plush, anthropomorphic animals (which you call ‘Furries’) often populate your exhibitions alongside gallery visitors. What interests you about these products designed primarily for children?

**AM** I believe that these products, like forms of discipline, are designed to make childhood. I was shaped by the toys and cartoons I grew up with, and I’m still looking to translate and subvert their effects, which we all do all the time. Toys can be ageless tools if we want them to be – if we change how we use them. I once found a picture of a kid playing with a cow inside a dollhouse, making it part of the family, resting on the couch. We can be oppressed into putting the cow in the cage and shutting down our feelings, or we can be encouraged to pursue empathic worldmaking. We can make that decision for ourselves. Toys are powerful, no matter what age you are.

**ETC.** Where did the title of your new exhibition *Biosfera Peluche / Biosphere Plush* come from?

**AM** *Biosfera Peluche / Biosphere Plush* is the animalist, queer version of Biosphere 2, a study launched in the Arizona desert in 1984 to determine whether humans could create and sustain life in artificial environments, such as space stations. The eight people chosen to take part in this failed experiment were almost all white Americans, with one white European. In this way, Biosphere 2 combined colonial values with the principle of Noah’s Ark. My exhibition is an alternative rethinking of this, hoping to spread care and tenderness as political values. The impetus to combine the idea of plush with the concept of the biosphere came about during the Covid-19 pandemic, as both Biosphere 2 and the pandemic have been discussed similarly in terms of isolation and dystopia.

**ETC.** This exhibition was first made at BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead and will be re-presented at Tate St Ives this summer. What can people expect when they visit?

**AM** *Biosfera Peluche / Biosphere Plush* will be adapted to the space at Tate St Ives, with the shapes painted on the walls designed according to the architecture of the gallery. As well as two recent series of paintings – one inspired by the character Sarah Kay, created by Australian artist Vivien Kubbas in the 1970s, and another called *Space Playset* 2021 that represents a space fantasy in the form of a giant dollhouse – the exhibition will include a selection of transfeminist and queer fanzines and independent publications from Argentina and the UK, colouring books, the sixth edition of *The Feminist School of Painting*, and different spots for hanging out. I hope people will enjoy the exhibition not only as a traditional painting



Beth © Ad Minoliti. Photo: Reb Harris © 2021 BALTIC

‘I hope people who come to the exhibition will enjoy the space not only as a traditional painting show, but also as a place they can use – for reading, learning, resting or just getting together’

Left and above: Ad Minoliti’s exhibition *Biosfera Peluche / Biosphere Plush* at BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, 2021

show, but also as a place they can use for reading, learning, resting or just getting together.

**ETC.** *The Feminist School of Painting* is a space where visitors can take part in free experimental art workshops led by local collaborators. What led you to set up this alternative art school?

**AM** I believe that art education should be for everyone, not only for artists. *The Feminist School of Painting* is an accessible and safe space that uses painting as a lens through which to digest and rethink art history, and culture more broadly, with the tools that queer theories provide. It is experimental because it acknowledges error as part of the learning process. Education must be free and open to people from all backgrounds, and a classroom can be a safer space if it rewards critical thinking and the capacity to fail. The visual arts as a language also helps people to develop in any vocation and is a useful means of personal exploration.

**ETC.** What are some of the most captivating things you have learned from the writers, academics and activists who have been a part of the school so far?

AM I have to thank the feminist science studies scholar Martha Kenney for her class about landscape painting, which she gave at the first edition of the school. Her class opened my eyes to alternatives to the historical white male gaze, leading me to reimagine the tradition of landscape painting from the position of other planets, from other human or nonhuman species, and from other time periods when humans didn't exist. Her ideas really helped me to go deeper into the sci-fi possibilities of my own imagery and, really, it was working on two subsequent series of paintings about space stations and the planet Mars that led to the exhibition *Biosfera Peluche / Biosphere Plush*.

ETC. What can we learn by looking at landscape painting through a different lens?

AM At the school, the theme of landscape seems to open up a spectrum of possibilities and interpretations – a great platform from which we can go off in any direction. However, historically, in museums and in popular imagery, the genre of landscape has tended to be framed narrowly, by European standards. Nature is presented as something to be colonised. In her class, Martha Kenney made a parallel between 18th- and 19th-century landscape painting in the United States, contemporary holiday and travel advertisements created for white tourists, and the 3D renders and designs of proposed Mars colonisation: all of these share elements of Man vs Nature. This binary treatment of any landscape also privileges a certain type of body.

ETC. You have an ongoing series of work called *Queer Deco* in which you alter images from 1960s, 1970s and 1980s interior design magazines, replacing the people originally photographed in elegant, plush surroundings with abstract geometric characters. Why do you choose to repopulate these environments with different types of bodies?

AM The goal with *Queer Deco* is to change the meaning of a design by changing the users of the space – for example, by replacing the heteronormative couple that is so recurrent in advertising and lifestyle magazines. Now, for *Tate Etc.* I have collaborated with my friend, the photographer Lila Llunez, to challenge the traditional picture of the artist in their home/studio, collaging elements from some of my other work onto these photographs to add a little speculative fiction. Mostly, because portraits of artists are often themselves works of historical fiction.

*Ad Minoliti: Biosfera Peluche / Biosphere Plush*, Tate St Ives, 28 May – 30 October. Produced by BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, curated by Irene Aristizábal. This presentation has been created in collaboration with Anne Barlow, Director, Tate St Ives with Giles Jackson, Assistant Curator, Tate St Ives. Supported by the Ad Minoliti Exhibition Supporters Circle, Tate Americas Foundation and Tate Members.

