

## A Drag Language in Art and Architecture

by Irene Campolmi

I first came across Luís Lázaro Matos' work in 2017 at an art fair. He was playing the role of a bizarre architect, commenting and drawing on architectural renderings of summer villas. He agitated his pencil, drawing sketches on a large piece of chequered paper, as visitors to the fair passed by. After a few pirouetting gestures designed to spark commentary on the architectural models, he assumed the role of a satisfied genius, hanging the revised architectural plan on the wall and beginning a new drawing. The series *Model for a Holiday Villa* (2017) comprises the drawings from this project, and forms one of the chapters in a two-part project that Matos has realised in collaboration with Madragoa in Lisbon. The first chapter, *Smile! You Are in Spain Studio*, was presented in January 2017 as part of Lázaro Matos' first solo show at the gallery, while the second was staged as a performance in Madragoa's exhibition booth at ARCOmadrid in March 2017.

Both projects represent a coherent expression of the artistic practice Lázaro Matos has developed over a number of years. By connecting architecture with perspectives on life and living, and by using architectural codes as a means of investigating these perspectives, Lázaro Matos' research and body of work explore two key aspects. On the one hand, he re-conceptualises the notion of architecture, rethinking the modernist inheritance of minimalism and envisaging a drag, neo-decadent aesthetic that re-evaluates ornamentation, fashion and the pleasure of forms. On the other hand, he continuously explores the interplay between organic and inorganic forms. His short film *The Nomadic City of Camela* (2017) depicts a mobile city built on the humps of a camel, while his *Super Gibraltar* (2015) series of extravagant drawings is based on the belief that Gibraltar will remain under British rule for as long as its monkeys remain on the peninsula. *Super Gibraltar* reflects on the irony of the aforementioned belief, where the political destiny of a peninsula depends on the continuing existence of a proto-human species. It is a curious paradox, Lázaro Matos notes, that the evolution of human history often means going backwards, that the destiny of a land relies on the reproduction of monkeys rather than human beings. Thus, Lázaro Matos' drawings depict the proto-human species conquering Gibraltar in what looks like a sexual act, with a giant monkey sat astride the Rock of Gibraltar in a sexually suggestive pose. The images unfold an exciting question about who holds the right to the destiny of the land. Is it the monkeys with their natural inhabitancy, or the humans with their imperialistic, colonial attitude? The artist has also realised works like *Clubbers* (2016), in which humans with animal heads dance together in a forest as if it were their natural habitat.

Lázaro Matos' artistic practice comprises exaggerated, thought-provoking gestures, which, through his use of organic imagery, propose a drag, sensual vocabulary of forms that rethink the mental and physical structures through which we traditionally experience beauty. This visual vocabulary has been part of the artist's practice since 2012, when he wrote, published and performed a manifesto *à la Marinetti* called *Voilà! Architecture Manifesto*, in which he used the political libretto as an artistic means to present his drag, neo-decadent architectural perspective. Drag because his architectural view is far removed from the conventional minimalism of the early modernist movement and its later stages. Neo-decadent because of the intrinsic pleasure experienced when witnessing the beauty of the ornamentation that the artist delivers with each expression. Lázaro Matos escapes the aseptic, neutral intervention of modernist architecture to return to architecture as a character and an individual. Just as

an individual surprises their peers with sudden changes in their outlook and attitude, so too does architecture, a “discipline of shapeshifting”.

For Lázaro Matos, the shape of architectural – and artistic – forms depends on feelings, and they are the material expression of the senses rather than the modernist embodiment of ideas and ideologies.

The following is a series of vibrant sentence taken from the *Voilà! Architecture Manifesto*:

*(...) the term “Voilà! Architecture” is the endeavour to transform the world of oneself in its reflection.*

*In the Voilà! cities, things are never what they are (...) Voilà! is the discipline of shapeshifting.*

*With this, Voilà! fundamentally becomes the architectural practice of surprise (...)*

*Voilà! Architects shall imply the word “Voilà!” at the moment they have conceived a new idea or a new project. There can be no Voilà! Architecture without the starting point of a Voilà! Sensation.*

*(...) Voilà! is the architecture of ornament. Style shall take the place of function in all its frivolousness. A fundamental question to all Voilà! Architects shall be: How can our avenues become a fashion show? The avenue is a passerelle...*

*Voilà! Engineering as super-modelling!*

*Voilà! Architecture as couture!*

*Voilà! Floors shall be covered with wallpapers!*

By reading these sentences, the reader acquires the knowledge needed to navigate the installation *Smile! You Are in Spain Studio*. The studio space is covered floor to ceiling with a handmade wall drawing that look like a wallpaper featuring the iconic images of Edvard Munch's *The Scream* immersed in a swimming pool. While the connection might not seem straightforward at first, it could be understood as an enigma to untie. Munch's *The Scream* is an iconic symbol that has, for decades, embodied the fear of solitude, death, the passing of time and the unknown. It is difficult to imagine this iconic figure taking a swim in a summerhouse pool, a place we associate with summer, vacation, carefreeness, relaxation and enjoyment. How can one enjoy these feelings when fear is all around us?

Lázaro Matos' image reads as a *rebus*. It can potentially be explained with the following interpretation. Sometimes, scary scenarios, such as a global economic crisis, can be underestimated by a nation, with governments choosing to promote a distorted image of reality. By creating this enigmatic, ironic image, Lázaro Matos refers to and comments on the case of Spain, which was severely affected by the economic crisis in 2008. *The Smile! You Are in Spain Studio* project is inspired by a five-year-long advertising campaign identified by Juan Miró's sunny national emblem. The latter was promoted by the ministry of tourism between 2003 and 2004 to re-launch the image of Spain as a nation characterised by bright landscapes, white, sandy beaches, historical monuments, festivals, cultural attractions, sports facilities and “fiesta”. The campaign emphasised the slow-paced and pleasant lifestyle of the sunny southern region, and depicted a series of stereotypes and clichés traditionally associated with the country. Yet the full story of this glamorous moment is well known. After only a few years of the successful campaign, the number of tourists and the construction of summer residences rapidly increased, particularly in the south of Spain near Murcia. But the 2008 stock market crisis forced a recession of the market, and the huge speculative investment bubble that had driven the region's economy suddenly collapsed. By inverting the historical reference of Miró's emblem – an iconic symbol

of pleasure – with that of the scream by Munch – an emblem of fear – the artist subverts the visual structure and composition of the campaign with an ironic, sarcastic touch that needs no further explanation.

Here the reader is brought back to the moment I encountered Lázaro Matos' work in the booth at ARCOmadrid. The whole box was a performance space, covered floor to ceiling with a drawing decorated with the iconography of Munch's *The Scream* immersed in a swimming pool. Matos stood inside the booth in front of his architect's desk during the show's opening hours. He grabbed an architectural drawing of a summer villa and left a comment on it inspired by the "less is more" idiom, famously adopted in 1947 by architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe as a precept for minimalist design and architecture. His comments included "fewer palm trees", "more local trees" and "less Bermuda". In a conversation with Lázaro Matos, I asked "why 'less Bermuda?'" and he immediately replied: "They are totally out of fashion!".

By playing the role of a "starchitect" at work, Lázaro Matos stereotypes the *esprit* gesture that characterises the *Voilà! Architecture Manifesto*. He adds organic forms to the tedious and monotonous summer villas designed by other architects, and... Voilà! He creates an audacious building that feels like something from the future. Architectural structures are transformed into landscapes filled with surprises.

However, by twisting the iconography of the Spanish advertising campaign and creating a drawing for the Voilà! starchitect's studio, Lázaro Matos also presents a meta-reflection on his own architectural and artistic view. The subtle touch of the drawing transforms the architect's studio into a fictitious space that reminds the artist and the architect of the controversial situation in which they are operating. The Munch-inspired wall drawing is also a *memento mori*. By surrounding the starchitect's studio walls, the scream from Munch's famous painting reminds the architect about how, in times of crisis and speculation, he is, nonetheless, designing bizarre, ambitious and hyperbolic minimalist buildings that are not functional. To some extent, Lázaro Matos' humorous approach is – whether intentionally or unintentionally – embedded with ethics. Is it ethical for architecture and art to not be just functional but rich with details, visions and inspirational forms, ornamentation and features? According to Lázaro Matos, when they embody a character, art and architecture are ethical, and thus portray the complexity and unexpected surprises of human life. His architectural and artistic perspective is a paradigmatic quest for drag expressions of beauty in a modernist world and context that deny it. The artist envisages the architectural building as a site for repeated epiphanies, where decorative elements manifest suddenly, in an almost animistic way. Inspired by the visionary architecture of futurist Antonio Sant'Elia and feminist Susan Sontag's critical approach, Lázaro Matos explores how to bring architecture back to its decadent roots. He re-converts art and design into a continuous series of decorative gestures that elegantly visualise ideas of femininity and extravagant and unconventional beauty in a world dominated by colonial, masculine and minimalist gestures.

In many of her testimonies, feminist philosopher Judith Butler suggests that drag artistry does not imitate any original or primary gender.<sup>1</sup> In the same way, Lázaro Matos' artistic practice does not imitate any original or primary artistic or architectural language. Lázaro Matos has his own unique way of unfolding new, surprising and unconventional artistic and architectural styles.

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<sup>1</sup> Butler, Judith (1990). *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge: New York, pp. 13-14.