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Ad Minoliti: Biosfera Peluche / Biosphere Plush

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Ad Minoliti: *Biosfera Peluche / Biosphere Plush*

by Daniel Sturgis • 15.09.2021

In the exhibition *Biosfera Peluche / Biosphere Plush*, at BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, the Argentinian artist Ad Minoliti (b.1980) has transformed one of the gallery's cavernous halls into a colourful interior. The palette is a high-octane one of pinks, greens and purples; walls have been painted with bold hard-edged murals; bean bags are scattered on abstractly shaped carpets [FIG. 1](#); and there is a grouping of Verner Panton classic 'S' chairs in moulded yellow plastic placed around a table [FIG. 2](#). The room itself has been divided into specific areas through the use of temporary walls, some of which have circles and triangular voids cut in them, as well as wooden strutted armatures that display Minoliti's paintings [FIG. 3](#). In one such area at the back of the exhibition space, a classroom has been set up, complete with a flat-screen television and a growing library of current LGBTQ+ zines [FIG. 4](#).

The sweeping curves of the Panton chair date from 1967 – just one year before Roger Vadim's sci-fi kitsch film *Barberella* was released, and *Biosfera Pelucha / Biosphere Plush* nods to the camp interior design, retrofuturism and queer decor that this film helped popularise. The exhibition title is a direct reference to Biosphere 2, an American Earth system science research facility, which was launched in 1984 and is located in Oracle, Arizona. The first mission at Biosphere 2 sought to determine whether eight people – seven white Americans and one white European – could live indefinitely in an artificial environment; the project failed and the wording of Minoliti's title points to its limits. Minoliti's installation seeks to offer an alternative environment – one that is non-Eurocentric and open to all. Indeed, as emblems of non-gendered and non-binary identities, a number of mannequin 'Furries' inhabit various spaces [FIG. 5](#). These life-sized human presences, with their plush (*peluche*) animal heads and clothing designed by the artist, speak not only to a contemporary role-play subculture, but also to the freedom and artistic feminism of an earlier age – to Sonia Delaunay's porous style of modernist painting, for example. Delaunay's system of belief, whether expressed on a stretched canvas or clothing, was based on the pleasures of abstraction, the body and liberation – a position shared here by Minoliti.

The true beauty of Minoliti's project lies in the conceptual twisting together of reflections on the legacies and limitations of modernist

painting and thinking. Minoliti's desire to engage with societal issues resonates with the history of modernist painting in Latin America, which through utopian and left-leaning internationalism was originally embraced as universal, 'non-elitist' and progressive. Although important differences should be noted in the enthusiasm of the civic and private reception of such work in the 1940s and 1950s across Mexico, Brazil and Argentina, today this predominantly abstract and concrete language is often seen in the region as privileged, bourgeois and inextricably connected to the West. Minoliti recognises the contested nature of this legacy and through their expanded painting practice opens up and reclaims elements of this history – specifically, the importance of playfulness for the Arte Madí group, which was founded in the artist's home city of Buenos Aires in 1946. This group, known for its irregularly shaped canvases, rejected empiricism and rationalism – traits that they saw in the work of their European Constructivist and Concrete art and contemporaries.

Minoliti's paintings – of which fifteen are included in the exhibition – recognise and update these histories. With a subversive openness, they collide an ergonomic type of geometric abstraction with a friendly iconography of flowers, leaves, faces and cartoons. When on canvas the paintings have an appealing immediacy and lack of preciousness. When presented as gigantic wall murals, this language both echoes the decorative mid-century modern murals in public spaces and shows how geometry can become representation: how a composition of overlapping circles can signify the eyes and mouths of a docile cartoon face **FIG. 6**. In Minoliti's hands geometry becomes a tool for political and social thinking. In this instance, and throughout the installation, rationalism and order give way to pleasure and innocence. In earlier works the artist focused more explicitly on political emblems and colours. A recurrent motif has been the green triangle, which is a campaigning symbol in Latin America for women's reproductive rights. Perhaps most dramatically, Minoliti painted a gigantic version of it on the stark white exterior of the Sala de Arte Publico Siqueiros in Mexico City in 2018.

Biosfera Peluche / Biosphere Plush is an exhibition but it is also a site for education and change. The classroom at the back of the exhibition space is home to Minoliti's Feminist School of Painting. Here, a series of fortnightly workshops and classes take place, and previous activities and discussions can be broadcast on a display monitor; everything is open for everyone. In each session, Minoliti invites a speaker to discuss a subject, which is then followed by participants working individually or collectively to make a painting. In each city where the school has been active, Minoliti has reached out to the local community, bringing artists, activists and academics together in the action of painting. This is the project's third iteration; previous editions have taken place at KADIST, San Francisco (2018), and in Buenos Aires at the Museo Moderno

(2019–20).

One of Minoliti's 'Furrries' wears a sweatshirt designed by Lam Hoi Sin, which bears the slogan 'contemporary art lacks love' **FIG. 7**. *Biosfera Peluche / Biosphere Plush* attempts to address this lack through the recognition of identity and sexual pleasure and the universality of painting, playfulness and colour. Whether Minoliti's non-hierarchical compositions and educational safe spaces achieve this aim, and we do indeed feel loved, is a moot point. Minoliti's intention is more nuanced, targeted and progressive than the goal of many early modernist utopias, pointing as it does to the imbalances in past narratives and hierarchies. What the artist has achieved in this exhibition is to show the generosity of a very contemporary position, and its interconnections with the histories of abstraction and desire for social change.



Fig. 6 Detail from *Ad Minoliti: Biosfera Peluche / Biosphere Plush* at BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, 2021. (© BALTIC 2021; photograph Rob Harris).



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Ad Minoliti: Biosfera Peluche / Biosphere Plush* at BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, 2021. (© BALTIC 2021; photograph Rob Harris).

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