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# Death and the Artisan – the art of Noé Bermejo

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What makes Spanish art seem so expositive and yet so elusive? Does it hold the key to a better understanding of the ‘Spanish identity’? In the first of a series of profiles on Spain’s artists, I attempt to explore this and other intrigues...



## The artist

[Noé Bermejo](#) (32) was born in a village in the municipality of Santa Martas in the landlocked province of [Castile-León](#). One of four brothers, his father cultivates cereal crops, and, Bermejo says, were it not for the support of his parents he may have felt pressure to follow in the family footsteps. Bermejo’s solo show, [... de un color sufrido: alivio de luto](#) was held at Tasneem Gallery in Barcelona in June – July. This coming September, artworks travel with the gallery to the [Estampa art fair](#) in Madrid.

Bermejo creates aesthetically-accomplished installations of vibrant colours and contrasting textures that together form a highly-theatrical scene. Yet beyond the physical drama there are more profound, manipulative forces at play. In his chosen mediums of photography, textiles and performance, such as that held in June’s inauguration in which visitors were encouraged to sit with him to sew, Bermejo interweaves the ethereal and the organic, the abject and the homely with a sophisticated black humour sourced in the Bermejo family taste for tragicomedy.



### **Suffering ... and life after death**

*Un color sufrido*, the artist explains, is a colloquial expression that refers to a stain-resistant fabric, dark in colour and easy to clean. Yet it can also be applied to the resilient character of [Castilian women](#): “I was brought up surrounded by survivors, women whose characters were a complete counterpoint to the gender stereotype. My mother, my aunt Carmina... she was a seamstress, so my use of textiles conjures up her presence yet also evokes that sense of community generated by the act of sewing.” *Alivio de luto* refers to another gender-associated tradition, marking the end of a period of mourning when Castilian women add splashes of colour to their black clothing, “like white polka dots on a black garment”. Both expressions refer to a form of ritual, he explains, “a predefined code that is in part emotional.”

This is Bermejo’s first solo show in what he calls a “mainstream gallery” setting. “I feel more comfortable on the independent circuit, on the peripheries of the art world”. The first part took place in artistic incubator [El Palomar](#), a tiny top floor space in Barcelona that was originally the building porter’s home. Such alternative spaces offer the intimacy and security of a public up for getting involved, yet they also have limitations, addressing an audience that is often a localised in-crowd.

Bermejo’s apprehension towards the ‘established’ commercial art world is not unusual. He is currently studying a doctorate in art in [Valencia](#), the financially stricken heartland of official corruption, and the art scene in the city is severely limited. The physical and psychological obstacles that Bermejo faces are those confronted by many young Spaniards struggling to develop careers in any profession. In the Spanish art world, in particular, differing value systems seem at best to co-exist, and much less often coerce.



### **Possession**

Given this, though, the degree to which Bermejo's exhibition completely possesses the gallery space is impressive! He had complete freedom to design the show himself, he says, and it turned out the least like an installation that he had produced, yet it still displays a confidence in artistic vision that pays off in terms of narrative qualities and atmosphere.

Tasneem Gallery is just below street level so stepping in you literally submerge yourself in a multi-sensorial haze. The show is haunted by presences, embodied and disembodied, as if life and death, absence and presence, passion and aggression compete in a kind of visual and metaphorical game.

Pearls on a jet-black cloth background amass to form a human head only to dissipate again like stars in the cosmos (*Luto – Mourning*, 2014). Three nightgowns hang in the heavy air, quotidian, as if on sale in the market place, spooky, like ghostly apparitions; move closer, and you notice 'intestinal reliefs' padded-stitched into their stomachs.

Below, an ornate sofa perches on four cava glasses as if wearing stilettos, its pale, bloated cushions are beautifully decorated yet motifs are grotesque: wriggling beasties and slithering offal (*Te siento en mis entrañas – I sense you in my gut*, 2014).

Moving through the gallery is a kind of living room / shrine, where dozens of ceramic pups stare upwards with simpering eyes. As a centrepiece, Bermejo has photographed himself Cindy Sherman-style in the rubber-faced guise of an invalid in pyjamas and his elderly wife. The couple offer a range of medicines to us, like contemporary alms, all the stalwarts of the Spanish bathroom cabinet represented: Almax for indigestion, Frenadol for flu... Like the photograph itself, life is preserved by artificial means.



“I’m fascinated by those archetypal family photographs,” says Bermejo, “the sort that make all albums essentially the same. I use that format to slip in the deleted scenes of our lives: sexuality, illness and death.” Bermejo’s engagement with Sherman’s iconic images, in which she posed in scenes straight out of cinema, interrogates the now almost inseparable relationship between public image and our private selves, suggesting authenticity itself is a kind of social drama: “The type of people I inhabit are real, the sort of people who live in my village.” Bermejo explains, “Everything in these photos belongs to my own background. Even the imagination I use to reconstruct them is my own.”

### **Distance and presence**

It is the familiar and the ubiquitous that attracts Bermejo, it seems: drawn to the photograph and the way it tells stories, the self-image also creates a relationship of distance with our own bodies and emotions. Distance as a physical and psychological state is acutely experienced in regions such as Santa Martas, which, like many in Spain, is suffering the loss of its young population. “Everyone has left as there’s no work,” says Bermejo, who stresses that the “act of working” is crucial in Castile. “When I began to show interest in art it was considered childish, I needed to reassure my parents that I was passionate about it, prepared to work incredibly hard.”



And Bermejo's artwork is intensely, elaborately laboured, so much so that its aesthetic 'skin' becomes transparent and its inner workings revealed. Processes of production, more commonly seen these days in art through the rough and the ready, the unfinished, the scrawl on scrap of paper, appear like veins in Bermejo's work, visible through a painstaking perfectionism.

This seems best epitomised in a prominent motif in the show, that of the *embutido*: the iconic Spanish sausage! In *Vuelta al Hogar (Return Home, 2014)* pig intestines shrink-wrap a model of the artist's family home: "I made it at a time when I returned home from Valencia. What seemed interesting to me was to turn the whole thing inside out, to expose the guts on the outside and evoke the idea that I was returning." This nurturing, stifling image refers too to the slaughter of the pig, another family ritual that informs Bermejo's work: "There is always violence in my art," the artist admits. "Where I come from, delicacy and brutality are inseparable."

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Noé Bermejo (on the left) & friends

<http://noebermejo.blogspot.com/es/>  
<http://tasneemgallery.com/es>