
DOMESTIC GENIUS | Cynthia Francica

Based on the act of embroidery, **Chiachio & Giannone's** *Domestic Genius* exhibition – the first solo exhibition by the Argentinian couple in Chile – re-imagines the intimacy of the home as a force in perpetual expansion. The duo formed by **Leo Chiachio** and **Daniel Giannone** has been working with textiles since 2003, constantly looking into intimate spaces, dissident family imaginaries and queer affections. Throughout the years, these artists have done several self-portraits in distant cultures, spaces and times, together with their dog Piolín. Evoking Henri Rousseau's landscapes and colours, and the textile work of the gay artist Feliciano Centurión, among others, Chiachio & Giannone transform the embroidery technique with their baroque queer sensitivity.

In *Domestic Genius*, a series of recycled or low-cost everyday materials, such as curtains, pillows, cushion covers, sheets and blankets, make up their work. As part of their research on how to re-imagine and expand domestic boundaries, the artists reuse materials bequeathed by friends and family in a home recycling act equivalent to the garments passed on from body to body, acquiring new forms on the growing bodies of brothers and sisters, close and distant cousins. And it's precisely on these reused materials, full of marks and stories, that the work of Chiachio & Giannone begins to silently trace the bonds and affective networks of sociability and belonging based on domestic knowledge. The venue for the exhibition, a former house transformed into an art gallery, constitutes an ideal space for this inquiry.

In Roman mythology, *genius loci* was the protective spirit of a place, specifically in the form of a snake. The notion of 'domestic genius' can be associated with the lars or deities that take care of the home and the family inhabiting it. At the same time, the idea of genius evokes a gift or 'know-how' identified with domestic chores that, while proposing an ironic turn to the traditional notion of 'artistic genius', implies a specific type of knowledge for certain temporality and a relational mode; a practice that is also a way of life and a way of understanding art in close connection to the everyday experience. The aesthetic and affective thrust in the work of Chiachio & Giannone appears to be condensed in these figures. Retaking the image of the *genius loci*, like snakes shedding their skin, the artists rehearse the staging of identity as a practice of fluidity and becoming based on a constant transmutation: from a couple of indigenous people in *Los Herederos* to absent pigeons in *Paz (Tributo a Violeta Parra)*, Chiachio & Giannone explore cultural distances and playfully outline other possible ties and lineages. Thus, the search for identity seems to arise here in terms of a desire for community and an affectivity in perpetual expansion based on an intimate and domestic space.

By extending affectivity and a caring attitude embodied in the figure of the domestic genius on their dog Piolín, in pieces that refer to gay culture and iconography such as *Bomberos*, *Enlazados* and *HeArt Breakers*, Chiachio & Giannone's work expands the borders of queer intimacy, trying out other possible modes of sociability, filiation and kinship. The artists portray a universe in which, in the words of feminist critic Donna Haraway, queer extended families are glimpsed at, positioning themselves beyond normative models, while also taking shape in the interaction between humans and animals. In other words, the range of the artists' affective history is extended here, considering interspecies relational modes, reminding us that "we are not human alone but with many others" and that "species of all kinds are constituted by encounters" (*The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, 2003). In the current context of radical questioning of the 'human' category and its semiotic, ethical and ontological limits in the field of the Humanities, the question about the living seems to emerge with unusual force in a series of Latin American artistic works amongst which we find Chiachio & Giannone. The urgency of outlining a territory of inquiry beyond the human condition in order to think about gender and sexuality issues makes sense in the context of a renewed attention to the ways in which "the human standard [...] works by transposing a particular way of being human in a generalized model, which is categorically and qualitatively different from others that are sexualized, racialized and naturalized" (Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 2015).

In *Domestic Genius*, Chiachio & Giannone go even one step further. Insistently displaying pairs of animals that include deer, pandas, birds, elephants, cats and pumas in works such as *Picos Gemelos* (a re-interpretation of upholstery techniques based on embroidery) and *Pared Bordada* (a kind of bestiary or Noah's Ark in a domestic code, articulated in repeating patterns and formal variations), this exhibition looks into forms of affectivity and non-human sexuality while playfully suggesting the possibility of transmutation of the artist's own couple into pairs of animals, expanding and problematizing the self-portraiture that is in constant display in their work. Evoking the idea of 'inhabiting the skin of others', as well as the alchemy and magic behind the figure of another of the genius's iterations, the 'lamp genie', the transformation emerges in Chiachio & Giannone's production as an argument upon which to reconfigure the relationship between sexed bodies, the feminine and the masculine, the human and the animal. In this line, following the track of common affiliations between living beings and investigating the evolution of form, *El Refugio* presents a series of animals and vegetables whose contours are blurry at first sight: it is necessary to sharpen our gaze in order to detect the ways in which owls, birds, flowers, leaves and indeterminate life forms merge with and from the textile.

Thus, the materiality of the textile emerges in Chiachio & Giannone's work as a particularly fertile space for reflection on the body and the living. Embroidery, a genre often marginalized in the field of art history as a ritual of domestic reproduction and traditional practice of female seclusion and subordination, is rethought here in response to a powerful genealogy of women artists who have worked and re-imagined the potentialities of this medium. If embroidery is tautological by definition, in the sense that it intervenes a fabric's surface with thread, in Chiachio & Giannone's work it is presented as the propitious means to work the idea of surface both materially and conceptually. As a technique that collapses the thread's medium and material at a bodily level, embroidery always involves working with the texture dimension.

Thus, the analogy between embroidery and skin has a strong presence in the work carried out by these artists, manifested both in the metaphor of 'inhabiting the skin of others' upon which they conceive their pieces, as well as in their attention to dress, makeup, tattoos and shedding. As the art critic Cuauhtémoc Medina points out, embroidery, with its particular capacity for expressing material and bodily fragility, constitutes a scar-like gesture of weave over weave: "Sewing, suturing, darning and patchwork is - of course - the repairing of our second cultural skin" ("Hilos de contingencia", in *El hilo de la vida*, 2016). Here we can detect, in Chiachio & Giannone's unfolding of the embroidery technique and their constant work around surfaces, an impulse to rebuild and repair both symbolic and contingent ties and networks, as well as a gesture of recovery of memory and shared social and political life. This materialises, for example, in *Paz (Tributo a Violeta Parra)*, a work that, based on an intervened and then restored hessian embroidery, condenses both the tradition of Chilean hessian embroidery and the importance of this artist for the Latin American context.

In this way, Chiachio & Giannone's primary queer family is projected towards the world of art and culture, tracing lineages and aesthetic communities that have had an impact on their work. Women artists and, in particular, those who after working with painting focused on textiles, are protagonists of this extended family and the affective constellations drawn in this exhibition which, in works such as *Cortinas Homenaje*, *Picos Gemelos* and *Pared Bordada*, recovers the powerful figures of the German artist Gunta Stölzl, director of the Bauhaus textile workshop; the Argentinian artist Lidy Prati and the Peruvian Elena Izcue, among others. This expansion is due, according to Chiachio & Giannone, to an impulse to build their 'artist DNA', articulating a family tree that has, for example, Sonia Delaunay as their grandmother. The primary family expands, thus, fuelled by the queer gesture of re-organizing communities based less "on origin, affiliation and genetics but rather on destiny, affiliation and the assumption of shared social practices" (David Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy*, 2010), forming an affective constellation outlining an aesthetic and symbolic lineage.

What interpretations are provided by this affinity and affective kinship practice in order to think about the work of these Argentinian artists, and the networks to which they belong? For now, we can suggest that, for Chiachio & Giannone, exhibiting in a space implies creating bridges through art. The practice of embroidery, characterized by its accessibility, popularity, extended temporality and its close relationship with the domestic and with feminine social codes, emerges as a generative force for the construction of networks. Because embroidering is rehearsing a common language, a domestic language that here is reconsidered as a space that can also be masculine. And because embroidering is, for Chiachio & Giannone, delineating a brotherhood, an artistic sorority, a genealogical tree that, nourished by the senses of shared life, acquires the form of a weave rather than a tree. A weave where, following Haraway, "it is impossible to distinguish with certainty above from below, and everything seems to grow sideways", a weft in which the multidirectional flow of bodies, materials and everyday affections reveals the ever moving image of aesthetic, vital and affective networks.

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