

Sadie Coles

Georgia Gardner Gray
La Morosa Española

HQ

1 Davies Street London W1

11 May – 15 June 2024

Private view: Saturday 11 May, 6-8pm

In her second exhibition at Sadie Coles HQ, Georgia Gardner Gray presents a group of new paintings that look to a peculiar Spanish institution, the *cobrador del frac* (translated as the 'frock-coated debt collector'), to examine universal notions of social performativity. Throughout her multidisciplinary practice that incorporates painting, sculpture and theatre, Gardner Gray constructs a boundless world of carnivalesque scenes that host a spectrum of characters lifted from capitalist archetypes, internet subcultures and beyond. Her distinctly contemporary *mise-en-scènes* reach back into art history and upend its codes, with figures rendered in kaleidoscopic colours exhibiting an anxiety and detachment from their surroundings that speak to a fragile modernity.

The *cobrador del frac* are a curiosity in Spanish culture. Popularised in the late 1980s and still practiced today, the surreal industry sees debt-collecting agencies sending men (and it is only men – as one *cobrador* put it, women are not considered "imposing enough") dressed in eccentric costumes to draw attention to and embarrass debtors into paying up. Working with a theatricality that would likely not be tolerated elsewhere, the *cobradores* arrive with a sombre expression to stalk their appointed target, dressed in frockcoats, top hats and brandishing a black briefcase with 'COBRADOR DEL FRAC' written across its side. *Cobradores* might also dress as matadors in elaborate bullfighter costumes, as monks, clowns, or even the fictional masked vigilante Zorro. They follow their targets in the street, wait outside their homes and work, sit at the next table in restaurants... Wherever the debtor goes, so does their assigned long shadow a few steps behind. Upon observing the bizarre performance, onlookers will inevitably shift their gaze ahead to identify the red-faced debtor who will be desperate to avoid the unwanted attention.



Taking the *cobrador del frac* as her narrative cue, each painting in the exhibition exists as a chapter or scene within an open-ended narrative that unfolds across an unspecified Spanish town. As if caught in a hallucinatory fever dream, *La Morosa Española* is haunted by a troupe of brightly coloured matadors and austere, frock-coated men, seen loitering in the street or observing her through windows. The social performances that play out across the exhibition are highlighted through one costume or another – explicitly the debt collectors in their exhibitionist uniforms, but also other supporting characters in the theatre of life: the Policia Local law enforcement officer in neon tactical apparel, the sunburnt tourists in strappy tops enjoying a glass of wine, the laughing little girl wearing a Mickey Mouse t-shirt... In one work, *Están Calientes (They Are Heating Up)*, four figures are seen dressed as 'on the clock' matadors, whose traditional clothing goes back to the flamboyancy of 18th-century bullfighters. As they seek shelter from the blazing sun under a pharmacy awning, one man is depicted wearing sports shoes rather than the customary *zapatilla* slippers worn by the rest of the group – a conscious slippage that decidedly roots the scene in the contemporary, exposing the artifice of the performers' costumes and undermining any perceived authenticity. In another work, *Vestida y Desunda (Clothed and Unclothed)*, the body as a site for performance is further suggested through the depiction of two mannequins in a shop window – a liminal space of commerce and display – flanked by a police officer whose authority is, essentially, denoted only by her uniform.

Gardner Gray's painterly language sits somewhere between figuration and abstraction, with a psychedelic, hazy palette that recalls the uncanny compositions of Goya and the drama of Turner's skies. Ghostly silhouettes appear out of intoxicating backgrounds, seen in *Que viene el Coco (Here comes the bogeyman)*, where figures illuminated in emerald tones by a television screen playing sports emerge out of an interior darkness. References to art history are further recoded through a subverting of traditional hierarchies. *¡Tragalo perro! (Swallow that, dog!)* features a matador standing in *contrapposto*, the art historical pose depicted across classical and Renaissance figuration, with three yapping terriers circling at his feet. The painting mirrors European royal court portraiture, whose aggrandised subjects were portrayed as noble and strong, often pictured with domestic animals that acted as symbols for fidelity and duty. Here however, the glorified subject is known to be an administrative clown, a faceless private agent dressed in a farcical costume being harassed by far from passive dogs.

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"I always like to present [situations] in a way that destabilizes them, in a way that makes them seem surprising again...I will take a subject matter that almost feels stereotypical and then reimagine it so that it feels particular again. Or I will take something that I directly observed and make it heightened to draw out the tension. I am not altruistic, but I am trying to push and also to entertain. If I ever feel like I am being moralistic, I will do something to destabilize that too. I don't search for any resting place outside of the resolution of the work itself. There is a humour there..."

Georgia Gardner Gray in conversation with Meike Behm, 2018

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La Morosa gathers her family on the balcony to look down at what has become a constant fixture in their life: a middle aged man wearing a frock-coat tuxedo and top hat in their town's consistently 90-degree weather. She walks the family, grandmother and children, onto the balcony, to witness the star of a performance that they've all inadvertently become a part of. He carries a briefcase with the words, "el cobrador del frac" ("the dress-coat collector") written across it plainly. The same words are taped onto the side of his car. He has been hired not only to collect a debt, but to manifest it, as a miasma that will follow the debtor silently from their work, to the café, to their home.

But despite their dandyish appearance, it is the cobrador who is humiliated, as they are the ones who wear the debt, and turn themselves into the besmirched of society by wearing something more akin to a dunce's cap, or the beggar's rags than a uniform. In recent years the performance has expanded, with cobradores now dressing up as a variety of characters, like monks, Zorro, and matadors. They've become increasingly like street performers, having more in common with buskers in Times Square than those they portray.

Similar to the characters they roleplay as, the cobrador has become an archetype, like the Harlequin, only instead of relief, they offer a constant reminder of delinquency. Painting these significant figures, like the matador, in their new role as window-dressing, shows society's shift away from a culture based on concepts like honor, to one based solely on performance. The cobradores are the star, waiting their turn, in an endless auto-da-fé where the performers are the audience themselves...

Patrick McGraw, 2024

Georgia Gardner Gray (b. 1988, New York) graduated with a BFA from Cooper Union, New York, in 2011. Recent solo exhibitions include *NDE*, Sadie Coles HQ, London (2022); *Works 2015 – 2018*, Kunsthalle Lingen (2018); *Concorde*, UKS/Kunstneres Hus, Oslo (2017); and *Precious Provincials*, Kunstverein Hamburg (2017). She has participated in recent group shows, including *Before Tomorrow*, Astrup Fearnley Museum, Oslo (2023); *WHAT DO YOU SEE, YOU PEOPLE, GAZING AT ME*, Sadie Coles HQ, London (2021); *Lose Enden*, Kunsthalle, Bern (2021); and *Mercury*, Tallinn Art Hall (2019). She has also staged performances with the Volksbuehne, Berlin; (2018) and with Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin (2019). In 2018 Gardner Gray was awarded the Lingen Art Prize, dedicated to emerging artists who work in the medium of painting. She lives and works in New York.

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