

Carlos Bunga

Citizen of the World



5 July – 27 October 2024
Exhibition Guide

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The New Art Gallery Walsall is delighted to present a major exhibition of new and previously unseen work by Barcelona-based artist, Carlos Bunga (b. 1976, Porto, Portugal). It is Bunga's largest UK solo exhibition and a rare opportunity to appreciate the artist's wide-ranging practice in depth. Through painting, drawing, video, and sculpture Bunga explores themes of home, transformation, possibility, and adaptation, and the relationship of these to his nomadic perspective on the world.

Carlos Bunga is known for his site-specific process-led installations, which are constructed in response to the spaces they occupy and often involve the use of cardboard and secondhand furniture as building materials. The exhibition opens with an immersive gallery installation composed of common household objects altered by paint and transformed by the architectural cardboard structures rising from them. Some objects are positioned on the floor while others appear in places or configurations that jar with social conventions. The effect is one of disrupting our perception of the Gallery space, of prompting us to pause and adapt to the interior of a strange house that the artist has choreographed for us.



Carlos Bunga, *I always tried to imagine my house*, 2022, cardboard, latex, paint, tape, glue, furniture, site-specific installation. Photo: Mark Krause. Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, Germany, 18 February – 22 May 2022.

The chair has been a recurring motif in Bunga's work, appearing in installations, drawings, videos, and performances. Within the installation, a group of early drawings (*Chair No.14*; *Chaise Longue No.313*; *French Terrace Chair*, each 2008) show found images of modernist chair designs onto which the artist has sketched architectural forms. In each drawing Bunga includes handwritten descriptions of the designs, drawing attention to the history and materials of functional objects that define the places we inhabit and call home. Always present in the language we use to describe the chair (legs, back, arms, feet) is a relationship to the body. When we are seated, we take weight off our body and forget about the function of the chair beneath us, turning our attention instead to more mindful activities (reading, working, talking, watching). Further to these bodily associations, the empty chair is suggestive of human presence, and of feelings and memories we attach to objects in a house.

Home is an idea explored elsewhere in the exhibition with a newly commissioned sculpture modelled on a house. The suspended fabric walls are composed from various scrap textiles more commonly used as cleaning and polishing rags in factories, garages, home projects and artists' studios. This material selection is typical of Bunga's process-orientated approach, where the 'background' materials necessary to prepare, protect or handle artworks (heavy duty furniture moving blankets, cleaning cloths), become integrated into the work itself. The floating walls of the house encourage movement through the structure and are suggestive of temporary and ephemeral forms of dwelling. The malleable quality of the fabric points to the fragility of architecture while the artist's involvement of natural hair alludes to the idea that the walls of a house act like a second skin. They offer protection, but this house might also be a moving, living organism, in the unstable process of a metamorphosis.

Bunga's longstanding interest in the built environment and ideas of home relate to his childhood experience of moving between temporary dwellings that were often unsafe or vulnerable to collapse owing to the perishable materials involved in their construction. The artist's family were part of the exodus of refugees caused by the Angolan War of Independence (1961 – 1975), who were taken to Portugal along humanitarian corridors set up by the Red Cross. Bunga's mother was forced to flee her country, Angola, in 1974 when she was pregnant with him and, after beginning life in a refugee centre and former prison, the artist lived in low-grade prefabricated social housing and a Religious Reception Centre for families at risk.

Bunga visually explores this part of his life through to 2018 in a large series of drawings (*Nomad*, 2018) depicting the recurring character of a nomad in different poses with a house for a head. Each drawing represents a place where the artist has lived, beginning with his first home: the womb of his mother.

Right:
Carlos Bunga, *My first house was a woman*, 1975, cut and pasted printed paper and ink and pencil on tracing paper and paper, 2018.
Image courtesy of the artist



The final drawing in the series depicts Bunga's studio in Mataró, Barcelona, the place that, since 2017, is the artist's home most of the time and the home of his head. As well as being a pictorial journey through the artist's life in architecture, the drawings record the transformation of Bunga's identity, from refugee to nomad. A central motif in the artist's work, the nomad is defined as a character who is always on the move, always trying to adapt and feel at home in any place. In early adulthood, Bunga had the opportunity to affect change in his own life through work and university education. At this moment, he chose the status of nomad, meaning the desire to feel a citizen of the world. As the artist further explains:

"The nomad is neither a coloniser nor a colonised, he is a fruit of it. He is neither a human or an animal, he is a hybrid, he isn't white or black, he's a mixture. It is proof that the fusion exists and should also have a place in a polarised world like ours, so we are talking about a citizen of the present and hopefully the future."

Right: Carlos Bunga, *Freedom (The New Art Gallery Walsall)*, pencil on paper, 2022-24. Image courtesy of the artist

The nomadic figure continues in a sculpture representing the artist as a boy (*Nomad, House No.17, 2022*), modelled on the physical dimensions of his daughter. The house is a model of a prefabricated dwelling where the artist lived from 1983-1995, one of many houses built by Portugal's Housing Promotion Fund for the poorest Portuguese families and a small percentage of refugees from former Portuguese colonies. These houses were built with prefabricated materials intended to last a decade. Owing to the perishable materials used, inhabitants experienced increasingly unacceptable living conditions. By 1996, the buildings were 64% degraded, both inside and out. Nineteen years after their construction, the structures were finally demolished to make way for new social housing. Here, the nomad looks outwards through the window, escaping his surroundings in search of new possibilities.

These works are complimented by a film (*More Space for Other Constructions, 2007-2008*) made a decade earlier showing the artist vigorously erasing drawings of real and imagined buildings to make way for other constructions. In this performative act, Bunga reminds us of the impermanence of manmade constructions, and the ease by which they can be destroyed and even erased from history.

Elsewhere in the exhibition, the artist connects manmade constructions with the houses that animals build in nature. Two newly commissioned cocoon sculptures refer to themes of metamorphosis and transformation, specifically the complex biological process that the caterpillar undergoes involving the creation of a chrysalis house. Bunga's pointy bean-shaped forms utilise skin-like latex and human hair, pointing to the interconnectedness of humans and animals who both share a need for a home and protection.



Bunga has likened his approach to that of a bird building a nest, the species he feels closest to. Like the bird, the artist's work process is led by intuition, the accumulated experience of manipulating materials with his hands, and a direct contact with his surroundings. Like a nest, his sculptures can be simple or carefully engineered structures. Increasingly, since the Covid-19 pandemic, Bunga has involved many of the bird's nest building materials in his work: sticks, leaves, hair, and plant stems.

A new large format painting in the Gallery's ground floor Window Box involves dried organic material foraged from the artist's neighbourhood entwined in household paint. The painting is at once a still life and a representation of the fusion between man, nature, and the debris of contemporary life.

The motif of the bird appears elsewhere in the exhibition, in a selection of drawings from the larger series *Freedom (The New Art Gallery Walsall)*, 2022-24, and in a colouring book by Carlos Bunga showing various birds in flight. The birds are suggestive of freedom, of the possibility of more open futures for humankind. As an animal that is always in movement and always adapting to new surroundings and environmental challenges, the bird inhabits the spirit of the nomad.

Zoë Lippett
Exhibitions and Artists' Projects Curator

About the artist

Carlos Bunga studied Fine Art at the Escola Superior de Arte e Design in Caldas da Rainha, Portugal 1998-2000. He currently lives and works in Barcelona. Recent solo exhibitions include *Performing Nature*, Fundación Helga de Alvear, Cáceres, Spain (2024); *Reassembling Split Light: An Immersive Installation*, Sarasota Art Museum, Ringling College Museum Campus, United States (2023); *Against the Extravagance of Desire*, Palacio de Cristal, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, Spain (2022); *I always tried to imagine my home*, Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, Germany (2022). He has also participated in international biennials, including the 29th and 35th Bienal de São Paulo, Brazil (2011/2023); the Chicago Architecture Biennial, Chicago, United States (2015); Manifesta 5 and 15, San Sebastián and Barcelona (2005/2024); and as a finalist for Artes Mundi 6 Award, Cardiff, UK (2014-15). The artist is represented in collections worldwide.

Carlos Bunga is represented by Galería Elba Benítez, Madrid, Spain; Galeria Vera Cortês, Lisbon, Portugal; and Nara Roesler, São Paulo, Río de Janeiro and New York.

A large print version of this guide is available on request.



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Cover image: Carlos Bunga, *Nomad, House no. 17*, 2022, varnish on plasterboard and latex on wood.
Photo: Joaquín Cortes y Román Lores. 'Against the Extravagance of Desire', Palacio de Cristal, MNCARS, Madrid, Spain, 8 April – 4 September 2022.



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