

Peluche Express Text

- By Jenn Ellis

Memory, as something nostalgic, temporal, but that's also fraught with indignation, preservation, play and protest; its endemic pluralism and emotive elasticity. 'Peluche Express', at Somers Gallery', is an exchange between four artists - José García Oliva, Lucia Vera, Daniel Greenfield-Campoverde and Maria Helena Toscano - who through their connection with, to and from Venezuela, expand on the possible angularities of 'memory' and the country they no longer live in that's still 'home'. Through sculpture, installation, painting, sound and collage, they compose a complex and layered articulation around place, community, association, joy and longing.

To step into this dialogue it's important to understand the context of Venezuela; we know the facts - a large country in South America, currently navigating a major political transition. We know that 7.9 million Venezuelans have fled their country in what has been recognised as the largest refugee and displacement crisis in the Western hemisphere¹. This exodus is a generational one, where the artists hold memories of childhood, which in the face of exit and distance create ground for on the one hand a form of anthropological preservation, and on the other a deeply emotional longing and articulation of another way of being.

This interrelation with childhood is at the heart of the show, as evidenced in the title itself. 'Peluche' means, in Spanish, a teddy bear. As a word, it is more tender than simply 'oso', which means bear, the word itself is playful, kindred - it sets you immediately in a domestic, intimate setting where warmth is central and comfort is sought. 'Express' a Spanglish native term, refers on the one hand to an urgency but also refers to the Latin American plight of express 'secuestros' or 'kidnappings'. Plaguing Venezuela, Colombia and other neighbouring countries, these quick abductions of individuals are targeted at shocking and extracting money, people and their lives becoming means to an economic end. In 2005, Venezuelan film director Jonathan Jakubowicz released an award-winning film of the same name, 'popularising' our global knowledge of this harrowing reality.

Put side by side, the title refers to a cultural ripping and taking, the emotive and familial fracture caused; it sets the ground and references the context upon which we stand to better understand where the work by these four artists, living and creating abroad, comes from. On the left most wall when you enter the gallery we are met by the sculptures of Jose Garcia Oliva. Made of Venezuelan mahogany wood, they resemble in their structural geometry works by modernist masters such as Brancusi. They are, however, reconfigurations of a traditional Venezuelan childhood game called 'perinola'. Played by holding the stem and flicking the balancing component and recatching it again, it's a game that can be played solitarily, or around a group; Oliva used to play it with his father². The sculptures, entitled 'Games People Play' (2026), however, are impossible structures, ones that cannot be played or as such enjoyed. On a shelf,

¹ UNHCR, Updated January 2025

² Conversation, May 2026

they're presented as used toys, yet in their non-instrumentality act as play-referencing monuments to a mix of pain, joy and futility. Abroad since the age of 17, the works speak to Oliva's focus on participation and interest in migrant economies, exploring a heart-wrenching triangulation between friction, tenderness, and the subversive act of play.

Speaking to humour and play, and the tension with sadness, longing and recollection, is the sensitive painting work of Lucia Vera. A large painting on the central wall shows a scene from her hometown and street; the tiled floor, the gentlemen on those iconoclastic white plastic garden chairs, lightly shaded by a tree, playing dominoes. In our conversation, Vera speaks of 'things', 'scenes' and 'flavours'³; there is an intrinsic viscosity to her painting, one that not only expresses a memory of a cherished yet commonplace moment, but a sense. With her second child on the way, and having recently had my first, we speak of these paintings acting as postcards to her kids but also all Venezuelans. Scenes that were left behind, scenes that might never be seen, or known. It's another form of nostalgia, which is articulated, expressing a past memory while being conscious of the future - ones that will not be made, at least not in the same way.

The work is ultimately linked to a feeling of freedom, and community; how children could just walk down the street and have someone there, looking over them; yet that world existed in tension and in contrast with the country-wide level of usurpation, and distress. It is a feeling one does not have growing up in London, conversely; yet is comparatively present on a national level - that very duality. This examination of freedom is further expanded upon by another accompanying body of work, 'claytings', works that - as the artist-formulated word suggests - are paintings made of clay. Interested in their materiality, use, and the friction between craft, fine art, and everyday life, they open an angle to the exhibition around what is used to express; an unrequested permission to act, and use - a claiming of freedom through medium.

While Vera's work exists in the past to the future and Oliva's work nods to his childhood and as such an 'immediate' past, the pieces by Daniel Greenfield-Campoverde work with an archival sense of prior. Collecting images from personal memorabilia, his general map collection, queer magazines, to a found photobook of Venezuela in the 70s, Greenfield-Campoverde's work jumps to his parent's generation, a mnemonic probe that suggests the question: where did he and his peers come from? What was the Venezuela of then? The images are systematically collected, cut into circles, and collaged - the result, a patchwork of nostalgia, an orbital assemblage of windows into absent histories. This series of work started in December 2025, when Greenfield-Campoverde could not go home; his visa was being renewed, and this approach to his practice - which started following a residency in Berlin the previous summer - came out of his fascination with what was before him but also a sensitive evocation of longing. To be with family, loved ones, the gesture of cutting and uniting something intimate, and a new language of his practice that delves into the limbo between departure and arrival.

³ Conversation May 2026

In our conversation, Greenfield-Campoverde and I spoke of manuals⁴. With a background in architecture, he holds a fascination with and appreciation for technical drawings, whether it be for planes, buildings, or objects as a whole. There's a correlation between existence, and function. This utilitarian sincerity speaks to the work of Maria Helena Toscano, or more precisely how she turns such functions on their head. 'Antenas Sonoras, Traces of Dissent series' (2025) is in many ways the pulse of the exhibition. Translated into English, 'Antenas Sonoras' is 'sonorific antenas'. They are composed, however, of 'cacerolas' or 'pots'. With allusion to their specific 'manual', their use extends beyond cooking and feeding: during moments of celebration, or uproar and dissent, these are used in Venezuela - and other parts of the world. In 2024, massive, coordinated pot-banging demonstrations erupted across Venezuela following the contested July 2024 election. From 2013-9, 'Cacerolazos' became a nightly soundtrack during periods of severe inflation and shortages. Conducted from home, the work alludes to the other side of the domestic coin - alongside the infant play and the older gentlemen on the streets. In their form and presentation, there is a first glance reference to Latin American percussion - Toscano's sonic structures stand, however, as antennae, vigilantes, one at a time expressing sentimentality laced with rage, each pot bearing the trace of vigorous piercing clangs. In their standing, individual yet united, Toscano speaks to the diasporic protest - its singularity, its one-ness - a position, which in this exhibition, feels extended to a four.

Ultimately, 'Peluche Express' is a vulnerable and pluralistic approach to processing, each artist expressing in their language a shared commonality - that of not being able to go 'home'. In their works they share how in distance and fracture, memory becomes the biggest currency, something to hold, express and crucially share - so it's not just in their and their people's collective knowing or feeling, but a wider community's too - an sensitive invitation to care, and play our parts in this deconstruction of nostalgia.

⁴ Conversation May 2026