

*In Tracing the Order of Things:*  
An Interview with Visual Artist, Vanessa Donoso López



**Interview by Fiona Cashell**  
Visual Artist/Educator, Dublin

## Abstract

*Catalonian artist Vanessa Donoso López has been living and working in Dublin for much of her professional career. She exhibits widely, with successful solo shows this year in Kevin Kavanagh Gallery, Dublin, and Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast. Her practice is interdisciplinary and developed within a dialogical framework; exploring a variety of media and mechanisms as she moves from project to project, working with ceramics and paper, site-specific installation, sculpture, electronics and low-tech wearable technology.*

*Conceptually López attempts to negotiate the tension between cross-cultural identities and narratives, their instabilities and complexities, and their potential for the loss of identity and language. Her work is deeply connected to something that connects within us all; highlighting the movement of time as viewed through the lens of the metaphysical self—manifested, changed, reinvented or forgotten. Her creative approach showcases a sensitive awareness for the experiences she encounters as both migrant and researcher: one who moves between the familiar and the unknown, between landscape and history, and between the varying points of origin that shape and define us. <https://www.vanessadonosolopez.com/>*

**Fiona:** How has living in another country, and interacting with another culture, impacted your work?

**Vanessa:** My work is a reflection and interpretation of my experiences and interactions with other humans and places, so the fact that I am based in a different culture to mine, in some sort of intercultural/multicultural scenario, has dramatically affected the work—formally and conceptually.

The yearning to learn a new language came unexpectedly from the learning and understanding of experiencing a new culture. The interaction with this new world shocked me from head to toe. It opened up the main door to a tower full of rooms still being investigated.

**Fiona:** Typically, how does a project begin for you?

**Vanessa:** I see my work almost as an ongoing project. I feel like I started it long time ago, and it just keeps evolving through time; responding to the external factors or realities I encounter. As I do my research and experiment, new subject matters and approaches grow like branches on a tree. I often go back to these 'branches' to develop them further. It's some sort of conversation that goes back and forth between my past and present self.

**Fiona:** *I Shall Change the Way Things are Ordered* went on display at Kevin Kavanagh Gallery, Dublin, from March – April 2018, featuring drawings and small clay scenes that explored the Mesopotamian epic of *Gilgamesh*. Here, you used clay that you had collected from three different locations in Spain, even using it as a painting medium for your illustrations. Why was this important to you? How did you manage to move and relocate all the materials? And can you tell us about the locations that you chose in the end?

**Vanessa:** Re-Discovering clay as a working material has been a wonderful experience. Soon after I started to work with commercial clay, I understood that I was actually manipulating a piece of a location between my hands.

Being a foreigner for so many years (16 for me) forces you to change the perception of multiple things. Location and origin have now become more relevant.

Digging soil from a specific land creates a direct link to the place. With this action, there is no one single barrier in-between body and location. Then the idea of being able to play with it and make it physically travel with you makes it dramatically more stimulating and moving. Sometimes in my suitcase, some times via courier.

Manipulating a bit of Barcelona in my studio in Dublin is conceptually mind-blowing. It feels like you own a bit of that place somehow. Then the idea of someone acquiring one of my works made with that clay, and having it displayed in their homes—gives me Goosebumps. They have a bit of that land, and they don't even know it.

Mainly I chose three locations. One was Catalunya, the area where I am from. The second one was from an area in the southern part of Spain where my mum was born, and the third location was where my dad was born. He actually helped me with the process of getting the clay out of the soil. This made the process very special, and emotional. It also made me think about the future of that work.

In the current political situation that Catalunya is going through, and as a Catalan person, I was particularly interested to move around to different areas of Spain. It was actually very complicated, and I had many conversations about the situation. Not always pleasant.



Above: *I Shall Change the Way Things are Ordered*, 2018. Exhibition featuring figurines made using clay sourced from Soria, Girona and Sevilla, Spain, and works on paper. Kevin Kavanagh Gallery, Dublin. Images: Courtesy of the artist/Kevin Kavanagh Gallery.

**Fiona:** One recent reviewer for the Irish Times<sup>1</sup> described the work that featured in *I Shall Change the Way Things are Ordered* as “doll-like” and “charming”. Would you say that you think about innocence actively as you make? Or rather, is it a subconscious manifestation?

**Vanessa:** I think my work and my observations about certain creative processes originated at a very early age. As the work evolved I became more and more interested in subjects around multicultural identity, language, and acculturation processes. Often I have the need to go back to those early questions, when I was 'multicultural' free and didn't need to question any identity or cultural issues.

Using materials that I discovered at an early stage has helped me to link these two characters together: the one with just one identity, and the other one with two. Often it is a conscious decision, but sometimes I surprise myself by selecting items, concepts and materials from the past.

**Fiona:** A key feature in much of your recent work has included repetitive object making. In your exhibition of 2013—*eye before e except after see*—you presented a vast array of handmade objects, displayed in the style of multiples. Could you tell us a little more about this show? What do these objects represent?

**Vanessa:** *Eye before e except after see* was the first show since art school where I used clay. In 2012 I received a studio and bursary award from Fire Station Studios in Dublin, and this gave me the opportunity to experiment with clay in a way I had never done before. I had access to a ceramic kiln and a big space, so I could really mess around.

I bought regular clay in a shop and started to experiment physically with the material. My research allowed me to create these basic clay shapes—or *tokens*—called *Bulla*. These were first made 5,000 years ago, and are considered to be the first expression of the written word, and the beginning of written language.

I wanted to feel the experience of making basic shapes to see where this action would take me. The act of repetition gives me time to think about the material and object, and to understand it on a much deeper level. I wanted to test it and force it to show me how much it could seduce me.

All the clay work you see on show is the result of an infinite number of physical experimentations using the material, through both hand manipulation and firing. This exercise took me to a much more immersive place with the clay, and helped me with my investigations on other succeeding projects.

**Fiona:** Is collaboration something that interests you? Or do you prefer to work alone?

**Vanessa:** Collaborative work is becoming more and more interesting and necessary in my work. My interest in sourcing my own clay in different locations has brought me to a more involving level of investigation. Digging clay has enabled me to interact with local people, making the work a much more layered project; with content more deeply rooted.

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<sup>1</sup> Dunne, Aidan. “Vanessa Donoso Lopez’s Venture into the Epic.” *The Irish Times*, The Irish Times, 3 Apr. 2018, [www.irishtimes.com/culture/art-and-design/visual-art/vanessa-donos-lopez-s-venture-into-the-epic-](http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/art-and-design/visual-art/vanessa-donos-lopez-s-venture-into-the-epic-)

In the last few years, art residencies have become very valuable to my practice, and the process of installing the work in different locations with new people has become an important part of the whole process. I feel very open to participating in collaborative projects, either with other artists or interested people/public.

Some time ago, I came to the conclusion that the experience of life is much more pleasurable—and makes much more sense—if it is shared with other humans.



Above: *eye before e except after see*, 2015. Installation using different types of clay, porcelain, wood and string. Limerick City Gallery. Images: Courtesy of the artist

**Fiona:** In *quotidian tensions between the domestic and the unexpected* (which exhibited at Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast, earlier this year), you showcased a selection of clay objects, handmade utensils and plants, as well as hosting a dinner and serving food that you had cooked. Can you elaborate on the tension you see between the domestic and unexpected? How did your show and the events that followed, answer that inquiry?

**Vanessa:** The title of that show came to me after reading *Familiarizing the Unfamiliar*, by Martin Bauer<sup>2</sup>. On the opening day I cooked lunch for the gallery staff. I brought the ingredients from three different areas in Spain – the same three places where I sourced the clay for the plates, cups and bowls. The dishes I cooked were the most traditional dishes I could think to make.

Only one member of the staff seemed happy about what was happening at that table. They were not comfortable with the food I served them. They found it unexpectedly unfamiliar. Even the wine was left untouched.

So it was at the end of that day that I realized how appropriate the title was. We had encountered tension between plates/bowls/cups and the flavours and textures of the food where I come from. An action that I would personally find entirely familiar and stress free in its original context—became uncomfortable and impossible to translate.

These sorts of situations still amaze me. At first it was a bit upsetting, but the following day, with a bit of perspective, I was able to savour the confusion.



Above: *quotidian tensions between the domestic and the unexpected*, 2018. Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast, UK. Images: Courtesy of the artist

<sup>2</sup> Bauer, Martin: "Familiarizing the unfamiliar", *Public Understanding of Science*, Vol. 4, no. 2, 1995. pp. 205-210.



Above: **Greenhouse** (from, *a painful excess of pleasure*), 2013. Installation using wood, paper and glass. Kevin Kavanagh Gallery, Dublin. Image: Courtesy of the artist



Above: Time-lapse, *no fixed color continuum*, 2017. Paper, ink, water. Candyland, Stockholm, Sweden. Image: Courtesy of the artist

**Fiona:** Could you tell us a little bit about your next project?

**Vanessa:** My clay work is part of an ongoing project, so I am intending to broaden and continue research on it for a while until I feel it has reached its conclusion. I am doing a collaboration with a local ceramist over the summer as part of an artist residency in Nau Coclea, in Girona, Spain. Really looking forward to it.

**Fiona:** What would your best survival advice be to emerging artists?

**Vanessa:** I am no one to give advice, but if I had to give advice to myself, I would say to keep faithful to what you really believe in, and to enjoy it. We are here for a very short period of time, even if we live a long life. Nothing is indispensable. Nothing is too serious or too important. Try to spend time with nice people, whatever you do.

**Fiona:** Thank you so much for contributing to the *Studies in Arts and Humanities Journal* Vanessa. Looking forward to seeing your next show!

**Vanessa:** Thank you so much for your support and for inviting me to take part in this generous project.

*For more information, please visit <https://www.vanessadonosolopez.com>, or contact the artist: [vanessadonosolopez\[@\]gmail.com](mailto:vanessadonosolopez@gmail.com)*

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