



# ESTER PARTEGÀS REFRACTIONS OF THE REAL

Texas and New York-based artist Ester Partegàs teases out the poetics and histories of public space.

By Kim Brockett

It's the day before Ester Partegàs's wedding when we speak. There are a million things she could be doing, yet she is relaxed as we chat over Skype. It's a clear Friday morning in her second home of Marfa, Texas. It's warm, but the dry desert weather is perfect for the wedding outfits, designed by her long-time friends and collaborators Fiona Lau and Kain Picken of fashion/art label ffiXXed studios – a long, loose, pale dress for her, and a breathable indigo suit for him.

Perhaps more significantly, this moment represents the start of a new chapter with her family. After spending time in Marfa, Partegàs and her family will make New York their home, with summers and the occasional winter back in Texas. She is radiant as she speaks about her consolidating her life across these two cities, having recently left her Assistant Professor position at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond.

Movement has always played an important part in Partegàs's life. Born in Barcelona, she spent some time in Berlin before moving to the United States. She is also an honorary member of the Melbourne art scene, having shown multiple times since the early 2000s at the now-defunct Uplands Gallery, and most recently in 2014 at Neon Parc as part of a collaborative exhibition with ffiXXed studios. Melbourne's introduction to her work can be traced back to a group show of drawings at Uplands Gallery curated by Australian duo A Constructed World, who were then based in New York. It was through this exhibition that she was introduced to artist and curator Rob McKenzie, who like ffiXXed studios, would go on to become one of her oldest friends.

"It's a long story," she says of the time. "I think it was in 2002 that I received an email from Rob. It said something like 'Me and my friend Kain are students at VCA in Melbourne and Kain showed me your work [at Uplands] and said that if he was an artist, he would do the work you do'. That was the most beautiful compliment I've ever received," laughs Partegàs. "To me, compliments from fellow artists are much more heartfelt."

In June this year Partegàs presented a solo exhibition titled *The Passerby* at Chelsea gallery Foxy Production. This new body of work – featuring tarpaulins, buckets and other urban ephemera made entirely out of resin – represents a much more process-driven approach than has marked her previous output. "In a way, it came out of a frustration of not finding the right way of doing what I wanted. I had to invest a little bit more than I normally do to find the right material," she explains.

"I was frustrated because I started these ideas with different materials, and it wasn't working out. I wanted to be very economical and to use just one material or process to create this whole installation."

Over the course of two years Partegàs experimented with familiar materials like paper and canvas, but was dissatisfied with the results, which were either too similar to the original tarpaulin, or not light enough to capture its essence as a spontaneous, impermanent piece of architecture. Eventually, resin presented itself as the solution, pigmented ever so slightly to translate the creases and folds of worn tarpaulin sheets that are visible as viewers walk past.

In the wake of *The Passerby*, Partegàs is looking forward to the completion of her next project: a public sculpture called *fountain* at La Plaza de las Americas in the Washington Heights neighbourhood of northern Manhattan. The work will be installed in September and, after having worked on it for years, Partegàs is relieved to finally be on the home stretch.

"When you work with city council, so many departments are involved. You have to go through everyone for permission, and everyone finds different problems or concerns," she says. "[You're] defending the project in front of other agencies and meeting their interests and needs. It's really like being a businessperson – and it's constant meetings, meetings, meetings."

While dealing with the bureaucratic machine was trying, Partegàs remains positive: "Really, I've learned so much. I've done other public works before, but because they weren't so rigorous, I think I made a lot of mistakes with materials and how you build things to last outside, [and] defending and selling your ideas."

At just over three metres in height, *fountain* is a tall column on a solid base, with water faucets on each of its four sides. Partegàs intends the work as a practical public sculpture, as opposed to a public work repurposed by its community to become functional. "I was very interested in making something that has a functionality for the community, that people can use and that they don't necessarily at first sight, think, it's art."

The sculpture's cast concrete base features imprints of the ubiquitous plastic milk crate, its gritty finish a sharp contrast to the finely detailed column it supports. Each face of the column is covered in a different geometric mosaic inspired by Native American crafts. It's true that perhaps *fountain* could be construed as a council-supplied decorative water feature, rather than a site-specific public art commission that took years of development and revision. In fact, Partegàs' original idea was a collection of seats and benches as a comment on the lack of public seating in Manhattan in the 2000s. It's a note that makes her reference to milk crates as a temporary seating solution all the more pertinent.

To Partegàs, bringing together the then and now is a key element of the work. "As the plaza is called La Plaza de las Americas, I wanted to celebrate the Americas. The top celebrates the traditions and history of America, and the bottom is about present New York, where everyone is together. It's about connecting these two dialogues."

It says a lot about her wider practice. "My work has a lot to do with things on the street and public spaces. Inside the gallery, the work depicts real objects, and when [the work] goes outside I like the confusion that this real object has a function. The conceptual part comes after and only if you want to engage with that."

Partegàs takes delight in mining her surroundings for inspiration. As the conversation turns to Manhattan's distinct urban landscape – most memorably its curbside piles of garbage bags – Partegàs is reminded of one particularly severe New York winter. The ensuing 'polar vortex' rendered garbage collection impossible, creating frozen, immovable mountains of garbage. Covered in fresh snow, these large pillowy piles belied the trash concealed within: drink cans, shopping bags, dog turds and other bits and bobs left by opportunistic litterbugs.

"I have so many photos of those things because, to me, they are like sculptures. It would be funny to do a sculpture like that, but I think the snow does a better job," she deadpans.

Partegàs is never too far away from Australia and in the near future she is part of a group exhibition at David Pestorius Projects in Brisbane. Curated by McKenzie, *The Hammock Show* presents a number of artist-commissioned hammocks fabricated by artisans in Colombia. Partegàs' offering is a hammock with two opposing seats and the words "here and there" woven into its fabric. Complicating the typical design of a hammock by fashioning it after a *tête-à-tête* or conversation armchair, Partegàs explains: "A hammock is not a real Western object. It has an exoticism to it that brings you somewhere else."

"In a way, I think it's similar to *fountain*, in that it deals with the 'here' and 'there', as in, you are here but you also come from somewhere else. It's how your body carries these two spaces – two experiences that could be physical but also emotional and cultural."

Partegàs' work for *The Hammock Show* is worldly, but she is quick to proclaim its cheesiness if it were to be seen in its country of origin. Conceived in the US, made in Colombia and exhibited in Australia, the work poetically and invisibly seams together multiple contexts and backgrounds, much like Partegàs herself. **V**

**Ester Partegàs is represented by Foxy Production, New York.**  
[foxyproduction.com](http://foxyproduction.com)

Opposite  
ESTER PARTEGÀS  
*The Passerby*, 2015  
cast polyurethane,  
pigment and tape  
dimensions variable

Right  
ESTER PARTEGÀS  
*Untitled (Containers  
and Labels)*, 2015  
cast polyurethane,  
metal and acrylic  
on paper  
dimensions variable

Courtesy the artist  
and Foxy Production,  
New York

