

Transcript: Jennifer Lauren Gallery talk with staff from the Debajo del Sombrero studio in Madrid, Spain

(NOTE: Luis Saez answered all the questions in Spanish and the translations below were done live by Gorka)

Jennifer: Hello, I'm Jennifer from the Jennifer Lauren gallery. I'm just going to pop again in the chat box the link to the live captioning, if anyone did need to look at that. There's also two BSL interpreters on this talk, which is British sign language interpreters. Currently, Siobhan is on and halfway through will be Alex who will swap over. If you need the interpreters, please go to the right hand corner of their box, and see the three little dots. If you click that, there's a thing that says pin. And you can pin them and they'll always stay on your screen if needed. So to introduce today's talk, I got some funding from Arts Council England to do a series of online exhibitions, and one of them is with an artist from the studio that we're talking to today in Spain, called Miguel Angel Hernando, which is probably pronounced pretty badly by me. But I'm sure I'll be corrected on that. So I'm joined by Luis Saez, who is the artistic director and Gorka, who's going to be translating for us because Luis is going to be speaking in Spanish. So for anyone that understands Spanish, then that's good for you for the rest of us then we have Gorka translating for us. So there'll be a series of images on the screen that will kind of go through. I understand that we have a blind artist with us today. So we'll be describing what the studio looks like, and those sorts of things along the way.

This is being recorded, so it will go on my website afterwards for anyone that has missed it. Oh, the other thing I wanted to say, if you wanted to ask any questions, then please pop them in the chat box, and we will get them asked to the relevant people. So the studio that we're talking to today is Debajo del Sombrero, which is based in Madrid. And as I say it's linked to my online exhibition, which is currently on my website for any of those of you haven't seen it at all. It's a studio in in Madrid, that works with intellectually disabled artists and their description on their website says that the studio is a platform for creation, investigation, production and dissemination of these artists. So I guess my first question to you Luis is, when did the studio begin. And what was the initial vision for the studio?

Gorka: As you say Jennifer the studio is for artists with intellectual disabilities. And it started in October 2007 and it's been going on now for 13 years now. It started for the necessity to give a voice to people who have intellectual disabilities and to have a platform to kind of project them and to develop their practice. They really thought it was important that this space was kind of like bigger space, which was open and accessible for the artists. This space for them is important because they wanted the space so that everything can happen in the space, so it is serving all these artists. They make a big emphasis in developing a place to communicate oneself. They understand that for some artists they will take a long time to communicate to

with their art practice and some others will be faster. So the staff know they have to be patient and they give the artists time to communicate what they want to do in a way suited to them.

Jennifer: Yes, it's very important actually to give the artists the time that they need to develop and to push themselves and grow. I guess before you carry on, could you maybe describe a bit about what the space looks like inside because from the images that I can see it looks a bit like a big open warehouse with lots of pillars in it so could you tell us a bit more about that?

Gorka: The place is quite big. It's called matadero, and also la casa encendida, and where they mainly work which is matadero, there are other artists in the building too, so it's like a big art environment and they are not necessarily disabled artists. There are some artists using the space from exchange programmes or they have grants or residencies to be there, like myself. There are some pillars and some other things inside the building – it has quite a character. But the professional artists have taken over the space and this rarely happens in public or private institutions in Spain. So it is quite a remarkable place.

Jennifer: Luis how many artists do you support within that program?

Gorka: He is quite not sure about a certain number but he says around 35 artists. It is a different number each day. The number of assistants in the workshop varies each day too. And because of Covid 19 it is quite reduced the number of artists that come to the studio.

Jennifer: the pictures that we see now, it kind of looks like again you're in a big open space. We just saw a photo of a room with like a still life set up in the middle of the room, and lots of artists sitting around the edge drawing those things. Could you maybe tell us a bit about the different kind of sessions that they run at the studio?

Gorka: we change the space to do different activities. The artists don't have a set place each time where they work. So they are located in different spaces and everything changes each time.

Jennifer: Can you explain what kind of building we see on the screen now?

Gorka: Yes, this building used to be a place where they kill the cows, you know,

Jennifer: Ah yes, someone's just said in the messages it's a big old slaughter house.

Gorka: I didn't know how to say this, but now it has a really modern design, you know, Luis says that it reminds him of a British train station. Their space is quite enormous i mean i have a

residency over there and this space is huge. It is very modern and has all the facilities that you need to create and that you need to be an artist. It is a comfortable place.

Jennifer: it has very tall ceilings and big, big windows on the sides of the brick

Gorka: Yes, the light is quite important for artists in matadero and we have amazing light there. It is amazing to have this comfort and to get this light.

Jennifer: And in this photo we can see on the screen now there's big sheets of plastic along the sides, is that because of the COVID virus - is that why they've been placed up?

Gorka: No no it is just put up to separate the groups – it was there before covid. I've never viewed it like that now you've said it. But this is an old picture so this is from a long time ago. is a separation between the different parties inside there. Normally there were around four people inside this workshop at once. We learn more and more about the artist slowly over time.

Jennifer: So they come in and they get taught different skills in different techniques so we can see here someone leaning over a printing bed. He's obviously just done an etching, it's a hand powered printing bed and they're looking at the result of the etching that they've done on the paper.

And so now on the screen we can see what looks like a large room with very big windows letting in a lot of light again with a lot of pillars across the screen, can you tell us what's happening in this photo?

Gorka: This space belongs to the University of Fine Arts in Madrid. And the artist who appears in the photo. His name is Miguel, and yeah he's working with the wood sculpture at the moment.

Jennifer: So you can go into the university, and they allow these artists to be in there to either carve wood, or carve stone or something like that. So, what sort of relationship have you got with the uni for this to be able to happen?

Gorka: They have been working in the university of fine artists in Madrid for 10 years but now the relationship has stopped. There was some misunderstanding with the people in charge of the university and the direction it was going and they didn't seem to have any comprehension of what it meant to our artists to be there and be accepted alongside these university students. I think the university tried to understand the project in a way like they are giving a service to the local sombrero studio, but it's got lost along the way. For the debajo del sombrero artists it was

so important that these disabled artist were integrated into the university with others, but the university decided they didn't want the disabled artists to be integrated anymore.

Jennifer: well that's really very sad.

Gorka: Yes for a period of time it was fundamental and an enrichment. It was like a really beautiful period of time when they were there. There were such great facilities they could use. Like there were greek sculptures there and still life classes with naked models and not they can't do these things in the studio space as there is not as much space as there was at the university.

It's very sad that they lost this opportunity to do this kind of activities, and in the space of matadero is impossible to do this, so of course, they miss a lot in this program in their program to have these activities removed and now they're losing out a lot. But you can always learn new things and reinvent yourself.

Jennifer: Very true. Just to describe what's on the screen now there's a man, looking at an easel with a drawing of a sculpture and behind him is a large white sculpture of a man, that's naked without any arms like a marble sculpture on a stage. So it looks like a session where the artists have gone with easels in front of them, and they're looking at the sculptures on the stage, and doing their own interpretations. So lots of people are asking how your group is funded and sort of do the artists pay to come along and do you get funding from the government or how does that work?

Gorka: They are looking for constant aid like support economically. They get support from like a local petrol company. But they are constantly looking for support. Sometimes they ask artists to pay but it is quite symbolic. They would prefer not to charge the artists. They want to be as clean as they can. And not be ruled by other institutions. They are trying to enrich the artists by working with them and doing different activities with them.

Jennifer: So I guess you don't get any funding from like the public funds like government funding or Arts Council, some form of funding, like that?

Gorka: no, no. It's more complicated. It's difficult to get support for institutions from the government. One studio gets some support from them and we are grateful. Like our concert, as you say, a party they have a great support of this institution called like a something NIDA, and they they've been like a main support for them. They are really grateful. There is a foundation I mean it's like an art space, and they do some exhibitions and events, and it is ruled by a bank here. Their profits come to support the studio.

Jennifer: That's really good to know. And because you work with these sort of 35 artists that you said, how do you choose which artists become part of the program, you know, do artists approach you and then you look through a portfolio, or how does that work?

Gorka: They receive portfolios. From there they study them and look at the possibilities of their artistic practice, they the artist drive. From then they make a selection ... from the selection they can attend for two years to develop their practice. From then they decide if they stay or they have to maybe stop going there.

I've been working with them and collaborating with the debajo del sombrero workshop. I mainly met the organization because I got a grant as a resident in matadero called 'ranchito', so I spent like two months in matadero and after with the artists. After that I went to Beirut, with a organization similar to matadero and I did their residency for two months. I approached the debajo office quite organically because my desk was in front of them. I always saw the artists working in front of me and the matadero is such a big open space and I guess I was walking around, feeling really curious. They are the heart of what is happening there and everyone was themselves. Many artists are doing many things at different times and everybody is themselves you know and they engaged with each other. So maybe they talk to you as well. So one day I approached debajo and said there was about three artists that I was so enthusiastic about their work, and see if I could collaborate in any way. So Luis was really generous, and took the time to explain to me about the studio and invited me to participate. And so I started to go there and integrate myself there, and I like it the way he introduced me to the group because it was quite friendly, you know like, he never imposed me any way of teaching. He made me choose which artists I want to spend more time with or develop things with, so for me as an artist, this is fantastic. You know because I don't want to be constrained by anything. So, I am one of the artists. I started to work with Miguel angel hernando who as a person is quite charismatic and a lovely person. Really soon you start to love him because he's such a lovely, lovely person, and he's quite smiley. He loves to spend time with you. Sometimes we dance with him, and he come back to do his throwaways, or things like that. He has quite a characteristic – he is really obsessed with the day you are born, your birthday. He always then remembers when your birthday is, sometimes even my parents don't remember my birthday but Miguel will. He likes to remind you. He likes always celebrating birthdays.

There's also thing this with calendars. He will always say can you bring me a calendar. So, we all know that in the workshop, if someone new comes in he will ask for a calendar, but we know we have to commit as he will keep following you around and chasing you for it after that if you've said you will do it.

It's such a huge thing for him. Someone he waits a week to get a calendar and if you've promised him he will keep asking and running round asking you where is my calendar. But when he gets it he just puts it in his bag – he doesn't do anything with it and you may never see it again!

Jennifer: Fascinating: I just wanted to come back to one more point before we talked any more about Miguel because a couple of people have asked about it. You said that people come with a portfolio, and then they kind of look at it. so if they're intellectually disabled artists, who's helping them to put that portfolio together and then who are the people that are looking at it to make the decisions on who comes to the studio?

Gorka: As I understood it people who support you, or tutors or family or people from the employment office will help you to put the portfolio together. Luis and Lola then look at all the artists and make a selection where they think the practice is interesting enough to develop further over the course of two years at debajo del sombrero.

Jennifer: And you said that after two years, if they weren't up to a particular standard, would you then pinpoint them to a different studio to maybe go to instead of yours, or what happens after the two years?

Gorka: No. If after two years they feel they can do no more they do not have the capacity to pinpoint to other places. But some people might stay there longer than two years and some have been there many many years.

Jennifer: David you've just raised your hand, did you want to say something?

David: Oh yeah, I just wanted to ask a sort of similar similar question. Do the artists need any support when they're working in the studio to do the work or are they self reliant, you know, do you give them support if they need it?

Gorka: Staff are there to help but we help them as little as possible. We don't want to interfere in the work, so if there is something they really help with, then we will be about. I find it really one of the best things because nothing is imposed or anything on the artist and we know it is coming from them. We do teach different techniques if the artist wants to learn them though.

Jennifer: so yeah, most of them kind of have their own practice and then if they want some extra support, you're able to kind of offer guidance on particular techniques

Gorka: Yes. This is correct.

Jennifer: And in terms of like you said there's 35 artists, how many facilitators might you have with them at any one time and are they all artists as well?

Gorka: Most of the facilitators are connected with the art world. But most of them, they are volunteers - they really work there because they like the art and the people.

Jennifer: great. And just flicking through there's lots of questions I'm very impressed with the people that are asking questions in Spanish, which I'm not even going to attempt to read. There's a question around if the artworks sell does a certain percentage go to the artists and then some go to the studio or does it all go to the artist?

Gorka: 50% to the artist and 50% to the studio

Jennifer: That's very similar to lots of studios in England.

Just to let David know the image that I just had on my screen was very similar to the one that Harry audio describes on the website. So, it had the same colors that Harry was talking about, and on the left it had that elephant bird type creature that Harry talked about, and on the right of the picture if you were looking at it there is a bird in similar sort of colors with a long body.

Gorka (sharing his screen with miguel's images instead): So we can see in Miguels' images in the something that is enchanting to us, you know, with a combination of kind of like niceness and sweetness. Like this kind of character, the one in the corner. It's nice to look at and then they kind of disturb us like they are dressed in costumes. They feel kind of familiar then they feel totally strange, you know it's like almost like when you watch a horror movie and something looks really cool, then there's some creepy character there with a frozen smile you know.

Jennifer: Can I just say that it's a large black and white image, and in the bottom right corner if you're looking at it, what Gorka is saying is there's this kind of cat type creature with short pointy ears, and it has four legs facing downwards with kind of claws pointing towards the floor, but it almost looks like the cat's got a suit on, or something along those lines, and it's just a pen drawing in black pen with the white cat behind it.

Gorka: Yes, I mean in the first glance, everything looks fine and then they have certain little things that confuse your view. I mean his work is predominantly flat, you know like we don't see perspective in the work. He draws the characters and places them in interesting places on the page but quite often draws things in profile and has like eyes looking sideways etc.

Jennifer: To describe this piece - it's a white piece of paper with an outline of a character that if you're looking at the piece of paper it's looking to the right, with its mouth open almost like a beak with kind of purple jagged teeth along the edges and a long pink tongue in the middle, and then two legs stood on a rectangle at the bottom, and all inside the body is tiny little black lines kind of almost looping over and over and then some of them are colored in very bright colors like very bright greens and lemon yellows and kind of bright reds, and that sort of thing but only now and again so most of it is black and white with these colors dotted in.

Gorka: Just to kind of finish you know like my explanation so yes like when you see like two characters they kind of like go together they kind of like have a symmetry, but they don't engage with the eyes, or look at each other. You don't know what is happening. And I questioned myself you know if they these characters belong with our reality. For me they definitely do not belong to the earth for me, they kind of like remind me of sea animals. Or they belong in the air – so flying or swimming. I also wanted to say that they kind of like remind me of those cut outs in black paper, like when you do these silhouettes with them. You have black paper, and you cut it up.

Luis: Jennifer I wanted to know what was the characteristic or what was the thing that made you interested in Miguel's work?

Jennifer: Well, I only saw Miguel's work for the first time this year when it was submitted for an online exhibition call out that I had. And I was immediately drawn to the work because it's, it's nothing like anything I've seen coming out of studios, or from any artists, in particular, and I think I loved, just that that they were these hybrid creatures like it was part bird part you know something like a cow's part or something else and just the fact that he's imagined up these weird creatures was really drawing me in, but also all the tiny detail that he puts into them. And like someone said in the chat, like somehow they just make me smile every time I look at them. It's a lot of joy. And even though you said some of them might be a bit sinister. I don't look at them in that way that because they genuinely make me happy when I look at them and I wanted to share them with everybody else because I just think they're wonderful artworks that just have so much character and so much about them that I felt like more people needed to see them.

Gorka: They're similar to his personality which is his personality is lovely. It is quite amazing when you're seeing his work. It is something he has made with love and I think this stands out.

Jennifer: So we're going to have to wrap it up there but I'm sorry to everyone that we've gone slightly over but I thought it was important to keep talking about Miguel a bit. So thank you to you Luis and Gorka for sharing about the studio and Miguel. And thank you to Siobhan and Alex for the interpretation today and I hope everyone's enjoyed it. I'm sorry we didn't get round to everyone's questions. But there was a lot to cover I still had about five more questions I wanted to ask, but I'm hoping that everyone has learnt a little bit about this artist and the studio, and of course you're on Instagram, and you've got a website, where people can learn much more about what you do and more about lots of the artists that you work with. So thank you very much.

Luis: Thanks Jennifer for your interest and for the nice things. We're really proud.

Jennifer: Well thank you to everyone for coming today, and enjoy the rest of your evening. And I'll say goodbye.