



ISABEL QUINTANILLA'S INTIMATE REALISM

27 February to 2 June 2024

Curator: Leticia de Cos Martín

For the first time, the museum is devoting a retrospective to a Spanish woman artist, Isabel Quintanilla (1938-2017), one of the key figures of contemporary realism. The exhibition features 90 works spanning the artist's entire career and including her most important paintings and drawings. Many have never previously been seen in Spain as they are principally housed in museums and collections in Germany, a country where she was very successful and widely recognised in the 1970s and 1980s.

Quintanilla lived and worked at a time in Spain when women artists lacked the status and recognition accorded to their male counterparts, an issue that she herself confronted in her public statements with the aim of defending the significance of her work and that of her female colleagues.

The exhibition, which is benefiting from the collaboration of the Comunidad de Madrid, presents a survey of the artist's universe, filled with her personal possessions and with the intimacy of her different houses and studios. At the same time, these everyday settings and objects are part of the collective imagination and as such appeal directly to viewers' emotions, which was one of the artist's enduring aims.

Isabel Quintanilla's painting is the result of an absolute mastery of technique and of skill acquired at different art schools, but above all of a continuous working process. She always referred to the constant struggle involved in resolving the problems posed by painting to all artists who wish to make use of it in order to experience reality in a different way.

The selection of works on display spans the six decades of Isabel Quintanilla's career; from *The Table Lamp* (1956), the earliest surviving work by the artist, to *Still Life with Sienna Background* (2017), the last that she delivered to her gallerist shortly before her death.

Images from left to right: Isabel Quintanilla, *Glass of Pansies on Top of the Fridge*, 1971-1972. Private collection. Cortesía Galería Leandro Navarro, Madrid; *Tribute to my Mother*, 1971. Pinakothek der Moderne, Múnich; *The Door*, 1974. Private collection © Isabel Quintanilla, VEGAP, Madrid, 2023

More information: Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza. Press Office. Paseo del Prado, 8. 28014 Madrid. Tel. +34 913600236 / +34 914203944. prensa@museothyssen.org
<https://www.museothyssen.org/en/private-area/press/dossiers/isabel-quintanillas-intimate-realism>



THYSSEN-
BORNEMISZA
MUSEO NACIONAL

With the collaboration of



They are presented in the form of six thematic and chronological sections that move from still lifes to interiors, landscapes and gardens.



Isabel Quintanilla. *Self-Portrait*, 1962. Private collection

Isabel Quintanilla was one of a group of artists who lived and worked in Madrid from the mid-1950s and who were connected by both family ties and friendship. Known as the Madrid Realists, members of the group included Antonio López (born 1936), María Moreno (1933-2020), the brothers Julio (1930-1918) and Francisco López Hernández (1932-2017), Esperanza Parada (1928-2011) and Amalia Avia (1930-2011).

Like those artists, Quintanilla was familiar with the avant-gardes but she soon opted for the realism of the Spanish tradition, with which she closely identified. She painted her own surroundings: whether a still life, a domestic interior or a courtyard, the subjects of these works are her personal possessions, the rooms in her houses, and the trees and plants in her courtyard. Quintanilla was interested in everyday motifs and the ones she had closest to hand, such

as the drinking glass which is the subject of dozens of her works. In some cases her paintings and drawings reveal tributes to her mother, a dressmaker, and her husband, a sculptor, in the form of a sewing machine, sewing scissors, a mould or a bag of plaster.

Isabel Quintanilla was born in Madrid on 22 July 1938. During the Civil War her father fought on the Republican side and died in 1941 in a concentration camp in Burgos. Her mother was thus obliged to work as a dressmaker to support her two daughters.

Aged eleven, Quintanilla started to go to art classes in private studios, then aged fifteen enrolled at the San Fernando Higher School of Fine Arts in Madrid. There she met Antonio López, Julio and Francisco López and María Moreno, all fellow students in her year. In 1959 she obtained the title of teacher of drawing and painting and started to give classes as an assistant in a senior school. She also exhibited for the first time in a group exhibition organised by the Fundación Rodríguez-Acosta in Granada.



Isabel Quintanilla. *The Blue Table*, 1993. Private collection

In 1960 Quintanilla married Francisco López. They moved to Rome for four years as López had been awarded the Grand Prix for Art from the Academia de San Fernando to study in Italy. They met artists, musicians and creators and travelled around Europe. Quintanilla also continued her artistic studies and held her first solo exhibition in Caltanissetta (Sicily). After returning to Spain she resumed teaching but also continued to paint and in 1966 was the subject of an exhibition at Galería Eburne in Madrid, showing works principally executed in Rome, almost all of which were sold.

Success and recognition in Germany

In 1970 Quintanilla met Ernest Wuthenow, a collector and a founding partner of Galería Juana Mordó in Madrid who was also responsible for the promotion of that gallery's artists abroad.

Together with the gallerists Hans Brockstedt and Herbert Meyer-Ellinger, Quintanilla was able to exhibit her work throughout Germany in the 1970s and 1980s in group exhibitions such as *Art after Reality: a new realism in America and in Europe* in Hanover (1974) and at Documenta 6 in Kassel (1977). She also held solo shows in Frankfurt, Hamburg and Darmstadt, among other German cities. It was in Germany that the artist sold most of her output.

Quintanilla also exhibited in Paris, New York, Helsinki, Rotterdam, Munich and Spain, where she participated in the major exhibition held at the Fundación Marcelino Botín in Santander entitled *Another Reality: colleagues in Madrid* (1992). In addition, her work was presented at the Museo de Belas Artes da Coruña (2005) together with that of Amalia Avia and María Moreno, and in a group show at the Museo del Prado (2007).

In 1996 she was the subject of a retrospective at the Centro Cultural Conde Duque and a solo exhibition at Galería Leandro Navarro, both in Madrid. Twenty years later, in 2016, Quintanilla's work was presented at the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza in the group exhibition *Madrid Realists*. The artist died a year and a half later, aged 79, in October 2017.

1. An early declaration of intent

The exhibition opens with around ten early works that herald Isabel Quintanilla's style. *The Table Lamp* (1956) reveals elements which would reappear throughout her oeuvre: a selection of small, everyday objects presented from a frontal, slightly raised and close-up viewpoint against a neutral background. *Still Life in front of the Window* (1969), dating from her final year at the Higher School of Fine Arts, presents another of her recurring themes and one common among the realist painters, namely the depiction of objects in front of a window.



Isabel Quintanilla, *The Table Lamp*, 1956.
Private collection

Dating from Quintanilla's Rome period are the pencil *Self-portrait* (1962) and the oils *Rome (The Red Building)* (1962) and *Delphi* (1963), city views that employ a structure which she maintained in all her landscapes: a raised viewpoint and the horizon line half-way up the composition.

2. Paintings of familiar objects



Isabel Quintanilla. *Lilies in a Green Vase*, 1979. Kunststiftung Christa und Nikolaus Schües

On her return to Madrid, Quintanilla abandoned dark colours, textured supports and flat light and her paintings became filled with vibrant colours and light that models the volumes in works executed with a mastery deriving from intense work and dedication. The inclusion of everyday household items and her own possessions in her still lifes gives these works an autobiographical nature. This is evident in the second section of the exhibition, which features around thirty depictions of fruit and vegetables and fresh and cured meats, as well as gloves, a purse and a nail varnish. To these she added other familiar items such as medicines, kitchen cleaning products, foodstuffs and well-known brands of domestic appliances of the time.

Dressmaking and the memory of her mother's work are present in some works in an implicit manner through objects such as the sewing machine, scissors and thimbles, as in *Still Life with Newspaper* (2005), or explicitly, as in *Tribute to my Mother* (1971).



Isabel Quintanilla. *Window with Rain*, 1970.
Private Collection

In order to present the still-life elements in her compositions Quintanilla habitually showed them on a table, although she also used a windowsill, as in *Glass* (1969), a kitchen worktop, as in *Kitchen I* (1970), or a fridge, as in *Glass of Pansies on Top of the Fridge* (1971-72).

One of the artist's favourite motifs were Duralex glasses, which were very popular in Spain in the 1960s. Over the years she produced more than fifty small-format versions of this subject in oil or pencil, twelve of which are included in the exhibition, from *Pansies and Watch* (1964) to *Still Life with Lilies* (1995).

3. The emotional experience of absence

This section focuses on Quintanilla's meticulous representations of domestic interiors. These empty, uninhabited human spaces are the rooms in her house or studio: the bedroom, the living room, a corridor, a window, the bathroom, etc. By simply moving her easel, the artist was able to multiply the pictorial motifs, reproducing the same room from a different viewpoint, as seen in *Interior. Paco writing* (1995) and *Interior at Night* (2003).

Different lighting conditions also allowed Quintanilla to transform the same motif into another painting. The window and table in *Dusk in the Studio* (1975) reappear nearly fifteen years later in *Nocturne* (1988-89). Although some elements vary, what most distinguishes them is the light, which is natural in one work and artificial in the other. The table belonged to the artist's father-in-law, a goldsmith, and Quintanilla returned to it in 1995, making it the key motif in another nocturnal painting, *Night* (1995).



Isabel Quintanilla. *Nocturne*, 1988-1989. Kunststiftung Christa und Nikolaus Schües

Despite being empty we can imagine who inhabits these spaces through the elements chosen by the artist. One example is *Interior at Night (Corner of the Workshop)* (1971), a drawing which not only shows Quintanilla and her husband's art utensils but also a baby bouncer, a reference to her son Francisco, or *The Sewing Room* (1974), another evocation of her mother.

4. Female colleagues



María Moreno. *Still Life*, 1996. Private collection

The Madrid group of realists was the first in Spain in which women not only outnumbered men but occupied a position of equal importance to their fellow artists. Due to the group's unity and cohesion it is difficult to separate Isabel Quintanilla's life and work from that of her female colleagues, family members and friends. For this reason, this section presents twelve works by the three women artists with whom Quintanilla shared a profession, friendship and interests: three still lifes and a nocturnal landscape by Esperanza Parada, two interiors and two gardens by María Moreno, and four domestic scenes by Amalia Avia.

Parada and Avia met in 1953 and although they did not enrol for official Fine Arts studies they had links with students at the San Fernando Higher School. After her daughters were born Parada abandoned painting for decades, allowing her husband, Julio López, to devote himself full-time to sculpture. In contrast, Avia continued with her career and regularly exhibited in Germany and Spain in the 1970s and 1980s.

Moreno and Quintanilla met in 1954 while preparing for the entrance exams for the Higher School of Fine Arts and after graduating both became teachers. From 1970 onwards they both regularly went to Germany with their husbands, Antonio López and Francisco López, and took part in exhibitions. Moreno partly abandoned her career after she married but resumed her artistic activities at various moments.

5. Cherished landscapes

The fifth room in the exhibition is devoted to landscapes and urban views. Away from the city, Quintanilla identified with the sweeping, open countryside of Castile, Extremadura and the mountain ranges near Madrid, to be seen in *Wood Pasture Landscape in Santa Cruz de la Sierra* (1976), *View of Riaza* (1990-91) and *Sierra de Guadarrama* (1990-91), but she was also interested in the sea. In *The Cantabrian Sea* (1973) and *The Sea* (1980) the water occupies almost the entire pictorial surface



Isabel Quintanilla. *Rome*, 1998-1999. Galerie Brockstedt, Berlin

and the shore is not visible, leaving only the horizon line to spatially orient the viewer. This section also includes various views of Madrid, San Sebastián and Rome.

6. *Hortus conclusus*. Domestic nature



Isabel Quintanilla. *Garden*, 1966. Private collection

When Isabel Quintanilla painted nature she focused on the close at hand. The courtyards of her houses and studios are more modest than the Impressionists' gardens but they include the flowers and fruit trees that she grew and then depicted in her paintings. As such, they were an important inspirational and working space for the artist.

The earliest examples date from the Rome period when Quintanilla produced various views of the gardens of the Spanish Academy where her husband was staying and which she visited every day to see him and paint, as in *The Academy Garden* (1963). This section includes fifteen depictions of Isabel Quintanilla's courtyards and gardens from the 1960s to the 1990s, featuring lemon trees, stock, pansies, grapevines, fig and cypress trees, as well as a bust by Francisco López, *Portrait of Isabel* (1972).

The approach Quintanilla employed outdoors is similar to that of her interiors and the artist moved the easel and modified the distances that separated her from the motif in order to make the same subject quite different. This is evident in *Wall outside the Calle Urola Studio* (1969) and *Calle Urola Courtyard (the Scaffolding)* (1968), two comparatively closed and open views, the former showing the wall and the latter extending to the façades of the adjoining houses.

The exhibition concludes with Francisco López's sculpture *Figure of Isabel* (1978) and an audiovisual featuring previously unpublished material recorded with Isabel Quintanilla while she was working in her studio in the 1990s.

EXHIBITION DETAILS

Title: *Isabel Quintanilla's Intimate Realism*

Organised by: Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza

With the collaboration of Comunidad de Madrid

Venue and dates: Madrid, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, 27 February to 2 June 2024

Curator: Leticia de Cos Martín

Number of works: 104 works; 90 by Isabel Quintanilla, 4 by Amalia Avia, 4 by María Moreno, 4 by Esperanza Parada and 2 by Francisco López

Publications: Catalogue with texts by Leticia de Cos Martín. Educational guide and audio guide (Spanish and English).

VISITOR INFORMATION

Address: Paseo del Prado, 8. 28014, Madrid. Temporary exhibition galleries, ground floor.

Opening times: Tuesday to Sunday, 10 am to 7 pm; Saturdays, 10 am to 11 pm. Closed on Mondays.

SÁBADOS UNIQLO: Free entry on Saturdays, 9 to 11 pm.



Ticket prices: Single ticket: Permanent collection and temporary exhibitions. Standard: 13 €; reduced price ticket: 9 € for visitors aged over 65, pensioners and students with proof of status; Groups (7 or more people): 11 € per person; free entry: visitors aged under 18, officially unemployed Spanish citizens, disabled visitors, Large Families, currently employed teachers, and holders of the Youth Card and European Youth Card. Advance ticket sales at the museum's ticket desks, on its website and on tel: (+ 34) 91 791 13 70.

More information: <https://www.museothyssen.org>

PRESS INFORMATION:

<https://www.museothyssen.org/en/private-area/press/dossiers/isabel-quintanillas-intimate-realism>