

# Susan Hobbs

## Ella Gonzales

### Biography

- 1994 Born in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia  
2016 BFA, Studio Arts Honours, Art History & Criticism Minor, Western University, London  
2021 MFA, Studio Arts, School of Fine Arts & Music, University of Guelph, Guelph

### Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2025 *Sleeve: as that surface fluctuates*, Mercer Union, SPACE Billboard, Toronto  
*A Room's Proportion*, YYZ Artists' Outlet, Toronto  
*Sleeve: A YEAR IN REVIEW*, Mercer Union, SPACE Billboard, Toronto  
2024 *Home Office*, Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden with Unit 17, Vancouver  
*Twofold*, Unit 17, Vancouver  
*Sleeve: which cannot be reduced*, Mercer Union, SPACE Billboard, Toronto  
2023 *Temporary lacework*, Galerie Nicolas Robert, Toronto  
2022 *Reflection of a window*, Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre, Kingston

### Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2025 *Ambrosia*, presented by Unit 17, Cooper Cole, Toronto  
*Dear atmosphere*, Visual Arts Centre of Clarington, Bowmanville  
*a clear veil*, Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY  
*Inside. Outside. Of.*, Art Gallery of Mississauga, Mississauga  
2024 *HOUSE BOAT GOOD WATER*, Goodwater Gallery, Toronto  
*HOHOL (Hang Out Hang Out Lang)*, grunt gallery, Vancouver  
2023 *Cruel to be Kind*, Pictura 2023, Stewart Hall Gallery, Pointe-Claire  
*in parallel*, The Power Plant, Toronto  
*a series of actions or steps taken in order to achieve a particular end*, Xspace Cultural Centre, Toronto  
*The Louvre*, Unit 17, Vancouver  
*Suggested Reading*, Christie Contemporary, Toronto  
2022 *appairage, peering, pairing*, AXENÉO7, Gatineau  
*goodtime, the plumb*, Toronto  
*Tattarrattat*, Hunt Gallery, Toronto  
*X Marks the Spot: Filipinx Futurities*, Gales Gallery, Toronto  
*A Rhythm, Not a Plot*, Galerie Nicolas Robert, Toronto  
2021 *Coverture/Cover Story*, Art POP, Montreal  
*Fractal Exotica, Floral Erotica*, Pumice Raft, Toronto  
*Grass Taps*, the plumb, Toronto  
*Personal Space*, Patel Brown East, Toronto  
2020 *No Name*, Boarding House Gallery, Guelph  
*As the snail takes the shape of its shell*, the plumb, Toronto  
*Wanderer*, Zalucky Contemporary, Toronto  
2019 *Preface*, Boarding House Gallery, Guelph

### Residencies

- 2025 International Studio & Curatorial Program, Brooklyn, NY (currently)  
2024 Annandale Artist Residency, Annandale, PEI

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Selected Bibliography

- Kruger, Nestor. *Ella Gonzales: Layerer*. Mercer Union, September 2024;  
Lauder, Adam. *Errant Abstraction*. Esse, May 2025;  
Mecija, Casey. *Sleeve: as that surface fluctuates*. Mercer Union, June 2025;  
O'Quinn, Danny. *Ella Gonzales, Crossovers*. Border Crossings, no. 164, April 2024;  
Rigg, Heather Canlas. *Naaaninag*. Mercer Union SPACE, January 2025;  
Weeko Martin, Bianca. *Synchronize*. YYZ Artists' Outlet, February 2025;



Ella Gonzales, *Temporary Lacework, first floor* (detail), 2024, Acrylic on piña silk. 122 x 91 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Unit 17.

# ELLA GONZALES:

## Memory's Architecture

By Trey Le

How do we map our memories in the spaces we call home? Do we trace the architectural components that order our habits and routines? Or the furnishings, possessions, and people that fill the space? Ella Gonzales is a Filipina-Canadian artist based in Toronto whose practice suggests that memory moves as fluctuating fragments surging and receding upon each other as they move across the slippery surface of the mind. Gonzales uses abstraction as a technique in her paintings and installations to encompass the complicated and elusive narratives of home and the ideologies that both shape and disrupt it, such as migration and diaspora. By deconstructing forms and sensitively selecting the materials in her work, she creates poetic assemblages to rethink how we understand place and identity. Gonzales traces a personal journey of finding home that echoes the parallel movements of Filipino migration and the histories of colonialism, imperialism, and globalization. Here, individual memories latch onto collective ones. While her work draws from personal and familial memories, she presents them as speculative and fragmented rather than following timelines built from departures and arrivals. She uses geometric forms that surpass their surfaces or never fully take shape to contemplate the circuitous geographies of home and the spatial dimensions of memory.

Gonzales uses computer-aided design (CAD) programs commonly used for architectural drawings to render collages of the interior spaces of homes her family has lived in around the world. These graphic composites map her parents' journey as overseas

workers from the Philippines to Saudi Arabia, where Gonzales was born, and finally to Canada, where they moved a few times on the east side of the Greater Toronto Area. These renderings are created from reference photographs but also from memory, layering elements such as walls, windows, hallways, and stairs. In this digitally mediated reconstruction, Gonzales doesn't aim for architectural precision; in fact, she nearly disavows it. By using digital tools to recreate scenes of home, she acknowledges that these representations are fundamentally imagined negotiations of space, fraught with potential contradictions or inevitable blind spots. Any technical authority gives way to a best attempt, capturing spaces that exist as much in longing as in logic.

Gonzales paints these renderings onto a translucent fabric canvas, making work akin to architectural drawings on tracing paper. She uses the semi-sheer Filipino fabrics of piña (pineapple) and jusi (traditionally made from banana leaves but replaced with modern silk organza). Although her minimalist paintings do not depict figures or objects, her choice of these materials for canvas points to a deeper connection: the fabrics are used for clothing worn during significant milestones or celebrations in the Philippines. Despite their altered context, Gonzales and members of the Filipino diaspora are called back to a sensorial awareness, memories of wearing the garments, of feeling these materials against the body. It is an embodied cultural memory that transcends mere figuration and resonates beyond what is on the canvas—memory is felt, not shown.



Besides holding symbolic significance, these textiles allow Gonzales to extend the pictorial space through their translucency. The tones of the acrylic paint become more pronounced and converge into solid blocks of colour where the architectural planes collide in her reconstructions. Walls bleed through doorways, and stairs intersect with windows. The varying degrees of opacity create an illusion of depth that forms a sublime multiverse that is neither purely two-dimensional nor convincingly three-dimensional, but rather a palimpsest where multiple realities coexist, collapse, and reform. These seemingly infinite rooms are an externalization of Gonzales' interiority.

Installed with hinges, the paintings can swing from the wall, mimicking the doors and windows they represent. The transparent recto-verso arrangement enables both sides to be seen simultaneously. This transparency refuses painting's conventional promise of a singular, frontal truth, and looks to how memory operates multivalently: as fragments visible from multiple vantage

points, never fully graspable from any single perspective. While this offers an emancipatory promise, similar to how migration may allow opportunities for economic or social advancement, it also signals rupture and upheaval, requiring one to quickly reorient without one's established internal compass. The viewer, like the migrant, discovers that freedom from one fixed position necessitates the constant labour of self-location.

In recontextualizing her familial history, Gonzales foregrounds that the Filipino diaspora includes hundreds of thousands of domestic workers who leave the Philippines annually for employment abroad. In this reality, multiple homes exist simultaneously for an individual. While Gonzales' paintings contain these intimate domestic worlds, they ultimately strive to transcend their boundaries, seeking a dimension capable of holding all these places. Acknowledging the world-building potential here, Gonzales also grapples with the configuration of her identity and the inevitable dissonance of forming a coherent self-narrative.

Ella Gonzales, *Fill, pack, fold*, 2024. Acrylic and oil on linen, canvas, jusi silk and piña silk, wood support. Photo by Ella Gonzales. Image courtesy of the artist and Unit 17.



In the installation, *Fill, pack, fold* (2024), dozens of unstretched painted canvases are neatly folded and placed into a wooden box resembling both a dresser drawer and a small table. Only a small glimpse of the composition is visible on the edges of the canvases, a strategy of both concealment and compression. The work evokes "balikbayan boxes" that contain gifts sent or brought back to the Philippines by Filipinos working abroad. Gonzales introduces the dimension of modularity vis-à-vis a need for portability or compartmentalization. The constrained space within the box is representative of the limited possessions one can carry or acquire while in flux, highlighting the material and emotional economies of displacement. While one may also extoll the so-called resourcefulness of immigrants to do more with less, one must also face the cruel necessity of flattening oneself for mobility.

Gonzales cites postcolonial scholar Édouard Glissant's theory of the right to opacity—the right to preserve one's complex

personhood without it being diminished or forced to assimilate into dominant worldviews, especially those imposed by (neo) colonialism or globalization—as a strategy that undergirds her artistic practice.<sup>1</sup> This right to opacity serves as an intervention for genuine relation and understanding to take hold through the unknowable. Gonzales explores these ideas in *Sleeve* (2024–25), a spatially responsive installation commissioned by Mercer Union for a billboard on the exterior of their building, inspired by a poetics of becoming.<sup>2</sup>

In the first of three iterations, Gonzales layered her paintings that recreate old family textiles under a plastic sheet obscuring most of their detail, allowing only the contour of the silhouette to show through. This plastic acted as a "companion surface," serving to hold, protect, obscure, and perhaps disrupt the underlying composition.<sup>3</sup> The work was inspired by the same plastic sleeves her father used to preserve important documents and mementos. Through this technique, Gonzales employs opacity not only as a

Ella Gonzales, *A Room's Proportion* (Installation view), 2025. Installed at YYZ Artists' Outlet. Photo by LF Documentation.



Top: Ella Gonzales, *Sleeve: A YEAR IN REVIEW*, 2025. Acrylic on organza, piña and jusi silk, vinyl, and clear poly sheeting. Photo by Ella Gonzales. Image courtesy of the artist and Unit 17.

Bottom: Ella Gonzales, *Sleeve: as that surface fluctuates*, 2025. Acrylic on organza, piña and jusi silk, vinyl, and mesh. Photo by Ella Gonzales. Image courtesy of the artist and Unit 17.



Ella Gonzales, *Sleeve: which cannot be reduced*, 2024. Acrylic on organza, piña and jusi silk, vinyl, and clear poly sheeting. Photo by Ella Gonzales. Image courtesy of the artist and Unit 17.

thematic element but also as a material one, creating a layer that interrupts the viewer's access to the narrative cemented by her father's archival impulses.

As the series progressed, the covering changed with each iteration, and additional paintings were added under its surface. The second sleeve is slightly more translucent, revealing more of the accumulating mass of textile-paintings and their striped patterns. The third and final sleeve is the most transparent and mesh-like, and we see the final intricate tableau of paintings most clearly. Gonzales' gestures of opacity aren't simply about withholding nor an idealization of a fixed past, but a method in which she can unpack intangible expressions of diaspora over time, where permeability evolves. Gonzales' origins become integrated within the new geographies and contexts of Toronto. The plastic material resembles the same construction material covering the many developments in the neighbourhood where Mercer Union is located, ubiquitous in many cities in a process of revitalization at best and gentrification at worst. This material connects the artist's personal excavations to the broader urban transformations happening around her work's exhibition. The surface is a threshold to critically engage with place and present conditions.

Her inquiry into compression and concealment continues with her use of appropriated domestic items from her cherished archive of references. For an exhibition titled "A Room's Proportion" (2025) at YYZ Artists' Outlet, her painted work on silk was a recreated wall-length curtain from a photo of a party in her parents' apartment in Saudi Arabia. The rippling folds of the canvas-curtain become a continuum of amalgamated histories that brush up against one another, embodying the discreet but poignant virtue of compression over expansion.

Curtains reappear in Gonzales's show at Unit 17 in Vancouver, "Twofold," on a smaller scale but in a more sculptural form. Pleated canvases are hung across the bottom of a wooden trapezoid board, placed on the wall like a sconce. They denote utility in their shelf-like construction and convincing volume, yet they contain a deficiency. The boards slope downwards, unable to form a flush ninety-degree angle with the wall or support anything on their surface; as if to say, *all this expansion, this claiming of space, for what?*

As suggested by its title, "Twofold," the exhibition unfolds across two rooms and is installed so that if you were to fold the exhibition along the shared wall separating the two rooms, the works in each room would have a mirrored double. This spatial intervention physically brings the viewer into the fold and replicates the act of mental recall, much like the one the artist engages in herself: comparing, measuring, and noting what shifts between each room. Through the slight asymmetries, Gonzales stages a multilayered architecture shaped by both the slippages and reifications of memory, not mapped linearly but topographically within space.

Gonzales's practice interrogates the architecture of memory itself. Her work asks whether we seek symmetry and structure in our recollections or learn to navigate the amorphous, fallible, yet deeply human process of remembering the spaces held in our mind and the spaces that continue on without us. Gonzales constructs what might be called an affective envelope—a dwelling for psychic inhabitation that embraces relational approaches, where our identities are not found in our origins but rather our intersections, and our histories are not single points of departure but overlapping possibilities, ready to be packed and unpacked. ■

**Trey Le** was born in coastal Southeast Vietnam and immigrated and settled in Canada as a child. He is a cultural worker, writer, and curator and has held roles with Western Front; the Department of Art History, Visual Art and Theory at the University of British Columbia; PuSh International Performing Arts Festival; Out on Screen; and Toronto International Film Festival.

**Ella Gonzales** is a Filipina Canadian artist working between painting and computer-aided design programs. She has recently exhibited at Unit 17, Vancouver (2024); grunt gallery, Vancouver (2024); The Power Plant, Toronto (2023); Galerie Nicolas Robert, Toronto (2023); Xspace Cultural Centre, Toronto (2023); and the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge (2022). She holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Western University and a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Guelph. Gonzales is represented by Unit 17, Vancouver.

### Notes

1. Danica Pinteric, "Twofold," Unit 17, <https://www.unit17.org/ellagonzales-twofold>.
2. Mercer Union, *Sleeve: as that surface fluctuates*, exhibition of work by Ella Gonzales, Toronto, June 16–September 25, 2025, <https://www.mercerunion.org/exhibitions/as-that-surface-fluctuates>.
3. Mercer Union, *Sleeve: A YEAR IN REVIEW*, exhibition of work by Ella Gonzales, Toronto, January 24–June 12, 2025, <https://www.mercerunion.org/exhibitions/gonzales-a-year-in-review>.

# BORDERCROSSINGS

## Ella Gonzales

April 2024

Crossovers

Danny O'Quinn

What does it mean to see through painting? The question has been posed many times but rarely with the multivalent possibilities afforded by Ella Gonzales's current exhibition at Galerie Nicolas Robert, Toronto. The paintings and objects that make up "Temporary



lacework" thoroughly interrogate the potentiality of pictorial space and our common assumptions about the relationships between surfaces, spaces and borders in the world itself. They are *capricci* or architectural fantasies for our present migratory world. The gallery's statement indicates that this is "a solo exhibition of paintings and supports," and this duality is necessary for capturing the works' extraordinary attention to both the painting surfaces and the gorgeous wooden structures that sustain them.

The paintings can be divided into four types

Ella Gonzales, *Persistently soft*, 2023, acrylic on piña silk, 61 × 50.8 centimetres. Photo: Alison Postma. Courtesy Galerie Nicolas Robert, Montreal.

by shape/installation. On opposite sides of the gallery there are two large paintings on Jusi silk, *A kind of proposition* and *Cadence of habit*, which are roughly door-like in dimension and are affixed to the wall with three standard door hinges. The paint application here is opaque, but the hinges allow the viewer to look behind the surface and address it from different angles. On the same wall as *Cadence of habit*, you find a string of five small, jewel-like works (roughly 16 x 12 inches) each bearing the title *Portrait*, in which piña silk is stretched within carefully bevelled wooden boxes. Because these box/stretchers are pushed out from the wall by little wooden legs, light passes through the back of all the *Portraits*, thus you literally look through the surface of the painting. The effect is mesmerizing. On the same wall as *A kind of*



*proposition* are two mid-sized paintings, *Persistently soft* and *Elaborate elsewhere*, which operate as a diptych of sorts: the former is a transparent blue monochrome and the latter is an opaque polychrome rendering of the architectural fantasies that are the subject of all of the paintings in the show. These two works encapsulate the show's primary conceptual and material concerns. *Persistently soft*

Ella Gonzales, *Elaborate elsewhere*, 2023, oil on linen, 61 × 50.8 centimetres.  
Photo: Alison Postma. Courtesy Galerie Nicolas Robert, Montreal.

takes the viewer into an interior space of hallways, doors and windows, but the subtle layering of different shades of blue paint on the transparent silk surface dematerializes the walls that would otherwise make such structures necessary. Where the walls are veil-like, what purpose is an aperture or a passageway? At stake is the traditional understanding of the picture plane as a window no less than the assumption that a painting lies on a two-dimensional surface. As with the other transparent paintings in the show, the stretcher can be seen, but at times it feels as though there is a second or even a third layer of silk behind the painting's surface. That is an illusion but one that strangely persists even as you become accustomed to this soft architecture, forcing you to imagine a world where abstraction's power allows for freely passing through the material limits that separate inside and outside. It's a metaphor for both recognizing and dematerializing political power's reliance on the formal organizing elements of time and space. The same sets of architectural concerns are explored in a polychromatic, opaque register in *Elaborate elsewhere*. Fittingly, that opacity places us outside the structure, but we are able seemingly to access the interior through two window-like panels and a peculiar door set tantalizingly ajar. These apertures in a diagonally set, pale yellow plane reveal an iteration of one of the show's most generative figures: a mauve staircase. What is so fascinating about *Elaborate elsewhere* is how it seems to read as a depiction of architectural space while remaining an exploration of hard-edge abstraction's power to upend spatial expectations. Gonzales achieves this extraordinary tension through a virtuoso management of colour and shadow. Muted washes of her generally cool palette are activated by small geometric swatches of reddish orange. However, cast shadows seem to confound the space. With extended viewing, the tiny central orange rectangle emerges as the ultimate enigma; it organizes the painting, but it appears to have no clear "architectural" referent.

The remaining works extrapolate on the propositions tabled in these two companion paintings. Like *Persistently soft*, *Between gestures* is a transparent brown monochrome with a visible stretcher, but the depicted space echoes that of *Elaborate elsewhere*. Resting on the floor, *Furnishing* expands the box frames of the "Portrait" series to produce a rectangular wooden prism whose top surface is another monochrome painting on silk. Roughly two feet high, it can be approached from any angle, but the picture's composition generates a visual conundrum where the spatial claims of sculpture and painting are mutually frustrated.

The "Portrait" series condenses all the formal experiments of the larger works and combines their effects to create spatially impossible interiors and temporally dreamlike worlds. Transparent polychromatic layers and irregular lines gesture at ghostly walls, doors, windows, passageways and marvellous staircases, all of which make us yearn for places and paintings that might have been or are yet to come, but those boxes that keep the silk surface taut introduce a sense of containment. I left the show puzzling over whether these versions of Piranesi's *Carceri d'invenzione*, the most famous of which are also in portrait format, capture the condition of soft incarceration that defines late

capitalism, or whether these imaginary prisons offer sanctuary or asylum in a world where crossing borders is increasingly fraught and dangerous.

*“Temporary lacework” was exhibited at Galerie Nicolas Robert, Toronto, from November 23, 2023, to December 23, 2023.*

*Danny O’Quinn is a professor in the School of English and Theatre Studies at the University of Guelph.*