

What Is Less or More Than a Touch?

Sebastián Espejo

curated by Philippa zu Knyphausen

26 September - 18 October, 2025

Private View: 25 September, 18:00 - 21:00

The lichen or the desire to be seen

There is a particular quality of lichen (λεϊχήν, leichēn) —a hybrid organism especially visible during winter months— that stands out above all others: it is relentless. Thriving in dark and humid environments, lichen needs a surface to survive, and when it finds the right conditions to thrive, it does not yield or adapt to the natural properties of its surroundings; instead, it slowly overtakes them.

Originally found on rocks, lichen has moved with the landscape, as Anna Tsing notes in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*. In some regions, the purposeful relocation of these rocks has brought lichen to appear in unexpected places, such as cemeteries. Walking through the silent stillness of an old graveyard, one witnesses the many lichens growing over tombstones; an image Tsing connects to death, perhaps suggesting that their permanence mirrors our own transience.

Lichen grows in the forest's forgotten corners. Similarly, *natura morta* —the classical still-life subject in painting history and a recurring theme in Sebastian Espejo's work— takes on a darker, more distant quality when removed from its natural context and placed within a domestic sphere. For Espejo, painting lichens began in the dim and quiet of winter, when nature retreats. Drawn to their unique characteristics, he began to notice parallels between the organism and his own process: like lichen, a painter needs a surface to colonise; like lichen, a painter grows through contact, dependent on environment, medium, and context. And like the lichen, the painter seeks to be seen, to be acknowledged, to exist.

In *What Is Less or More Than a Touch?*, Espejo presents paintings of various lichen species gathered from forests in North London, close to his home and studio. Removed from their natural setting and transformed into subjects, the lichens became, for him, a study in geographic dependence. In London, unlike in his hometown of Viña del Mar on the Chilean coast, lichen tends to grow facing north. This observation became a metaphor: the lichen, like the artist, orients itself with purpose, drawn toward a direction, animated by invisible energy.

Observation and attention to the environment have become Espejo's enduring method; a way of expanding a constant, evolving practice. The title of this exhibition references a phrase from a Walt Whitman poem about the bodily ecstatic experience — something that can refer to a form of connection, whether with nature or with someone else. By bringing this exhibition to life, the lichen is not only present (even in its original shape and form), but also expands the ongoing connection that nature has with the practice of observation and painting.

Text by Philippa zu Knyphausen

Sebastián Espejo

(b.1990, Viña del Mar, Chile) lives in and works in London.

Sebastián Espejo's artistic practice centres on painting as a form of attention, with a focus on exploring the language of painting, the natural world, living organisms, visual experience, and the perception of light. After graduating in Visual Arts from the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, his work has been exhibited in numerous institutions and galleries across Chile, UK, USA, Taiwan and South Korea.

Thursday - Saturday
11am — 6pm

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