

EXHIBITION

FERNANDO SÁNCHEZ CASTILLO: THE WAYWARD PEARL



24 JUN. 2026
– 08 MAR. 2027

PARQUE DEL RETIRO

PALACIO DE VELÁZQUEZ

I

“Art is a force that shakes up the state’s official narratives,” says artist Fernando Sánchez Castillo (b. Madrid, 1970), whose practice embraces this premise and its implications. Through his work, Sánchez Castillo acts upon forms of representation of power, dismantling its symbols and revealing the fragility of the stories that sustain it. He analyzes monuments, images, gestures, and legends to show that history is not a stable narrative but a field of conflicting forces that directly concerns the present moment and our capacity to interpret and act upon it. As a critical device, his body of work modifies the imaginaries through which power structures its authority, turning reality in on itself and questioning its order and contradictions.

Directly interacting with the physical remains of history, Sánchez Castillo makes a series of changes—to materials, scales, and uses—that transform our relationship with the past and generate new layers of meaning. By subverting the original purpose of these objects, he activates new complicities that generate fresh perspectives on normalities that are taken for granted. For example, the statue of a tyrant is repurposed as a child’s swing, the vehicle

in which a prime minister was traveling when he was assassinated glitters like a disco ball, and a dictator's pleasure yacht is reduced to scrap metal. At the same time, these operations—which often involve a playful dimension—enter into dialogue with certain key passages from art history, from the baroque to the twentieth-century avant-garde, by way of minimalism and conceptual art.



Exhibition view: *Monumentos protegidos*
(Protected monuments), 2005–2015

The exhibition takes its title from *La Peregrina*, a pearl whose history encapsulates the close relationship between uniqueness, value, and authority. *La Peregrina* was captured in Panama around 1515, allegedly by a slave who secured his partner's freedom as a reward, although the exertion of the dive led to his death a short time later. Its large size and distinctive teardrop shape gave the pearl its name, which is Spanish for "exceptional" and "wayward."

La Peregrina soon traveled to the court of Philip II of Spain and thereafter remained at the center of power, linked to the crown. Diego Velázquez and his workshop painted it on Philip III's hat and as hanging from Isabella of Bourbon's waist, sometimes along with El Estanque, a diamond of exceptional beauty. La Peregrina had been jealously guarded at the court in Madrid for nearly three centuries when Joseph Bonaparte took it out of Spain. It was the start of a journey as turbulent as contemporary history itself. The pearl passed through several hands until Richard Burton acquired it at auction in 1969 as a gift for Elizabeth Taylor. Following her death and after a further auction in 2011, all trace of it was lost.

II

Pearls are born of an intrusion. A tiny, unwanted foreign body enters an oyster, which responds by secreting successive layers of nacre, eventually transforming the initial particle into something unique. Through this slow, cumulative dance, the wound becomes a singular object. Thus, pearls are the result of a negotiation between injury and form, between violence and beauty. We can draw a clear parallel between this transformation and the extraction of pearls, which for centuries inflicted a specific kind of violence on exploited bodies and lands—a violence

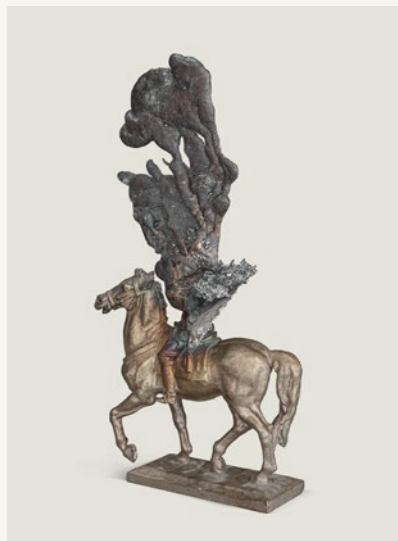
that is largely absent from the stories celebrating the value of these jewels.



Exhibition view: artists' studio,
2026 (detail)

History is shaped in a similar manner. An originating act of violence—a conquest, exploitation, or domination—is gradually overlaid with forms, images, and stories that stabilize it and render it legible. Over time, what had been imposed by force becomes tradition, and what was a wound becomes a style. Just as the oyster defends itself by creating something unique and unexpected, we human beings carry out a similar process, turning trauma into art. The baroque—which is etymologically linked to the idea of an irregular pearl, or *berrueco*—is one of the periods in which this transformation clearly emerges in the form of an exuberant language that, rather than hiding the damage, integrates it into a system of representation capable of generating adherence,

emotion, and order. Monuments also fall within this logic. They materially establish a particular reading of history, thereby disciplining the gaze and organizing collective memory. This is the case, for example, of equestrian statues, in which power literally rests on the false naturalness of the union of a body that commands—the rider—and a body that has learned to obey—the horse—without showing the sweat, the flared nostrils, and the marks of that subjugation.



Magno magma (de la serie *Estratos alterados*)
[*Great magma* (from the *Altered strata series*)], 2026

In this exhibition, the artist becomes the grain of sand that irritates the mollusk. For the nine months of the exhibition, Sánchez Castillo's studio will be located in the Palacio de Velázquez, and he

will work in the presence of visitors, open to dialogue with them. In doing this, he turns the conventional museum system inside out, so that instead of a place for presenting results it becomes one that defends processes. By downplaying the authority of the finished piece, the focus shifts to the body that is on display. At the same time, visitors are transformed from passive spectators to active interlocutors.

III

Sánchez Castillo's practice falls within the specific context of recent history that is not yet fully resolved. In his work, Spain is a structural condition rather than a subject matter, a territory where layers of story, memory, and forgetting overlap. In the field shaped by the dictatorship and the transition to democracy—and the ways in which both have been recounted—the visible and hidden coexist in a state of constant tension. Sánchez Castillo does not show us a past that is over and done with but a series of mechanisms that are still operating in the form of symbols and strategies of authority. This is the space of latency in which he operates: not to reconstruct an alternative history but to act upon its underlying infrastructure, drawing attention to its discontinuities, its silences, and the violence that still runs through it.

This is no easy undertaking. Even today, intractable refusals to delve into the past are commonplace. Just when we might expect that a degree of democratic maturity could allow a more rigorous reexamination of history, mistrust and fear appear. Moreover, as the second quarter of the twenty-first century begins and we enter a crucial time for safeguarding hard-won democratic systems, it is essential that we defend the role of art and culture as a collective unconscious open to questions of all kinds.



La cueca sola (The cueca sola), 2023

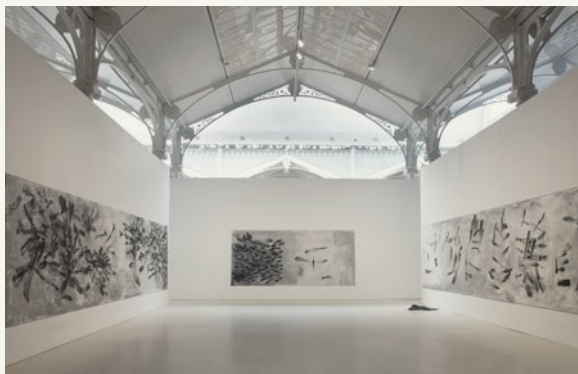
In Sánchez Castillo's historical explorations, we come across heroes whose small actions have unexpected consequences: people who neither bow down before unjust power nor aspire to be remembered in the annals of history. Their resistance

silently but resolutely alters the underpinnings of narratives of the past. Sánchez Castillo's work also reveals the importance of absences. The decades of the twentieth century lost to a fratricidal civil war emerge in material and spiritual voids that are difficult to fill. The artist delves into the past, salvaging stories and physical remains of what was doomed to oblivion or left out of the picture. He also finds, amid the grand narratives of history, a multitude of moments full of humanity, affection, and empathy.

IV

Rather than making a direct critique, Sánchez Castillo creates small shifts that introduce irony into representations of power. He does not destroy symbols but reactivates them by changing their use, scale, or context, rendering them unstable. This simple disruption prevents their automatic functioning and shows them to be constructed and thus subject to change. As a result of this gesture, what used to appear grand becomes familiar, what seemed un-touchable becomes manipulable, and what sought to assert its authority becomes commonplace or may even provoke uneasy laughter. This playful aspect strengthens the political dimension of his work because, although humor does not provide relief,

it does serve as a critical tool that can erode authority without having to confront it directly.



Exhibition view: *Salón de los espejos*
(Hall of mirrors), 2023

From baroque choreographies to contemporary ways of occupying public space, authority is underpinned by a series of repeated gestures that organize collective experience. Monuments (and museums, such as the one hosting this exhibition) are part of the same logic: They not only establish an image but also determine the spectator's position, path, perception, and quality of attention. However, as Sánchez Castillo shows, these choreographies can be disrupted. The modification of objects and their underlying forms can introduce disruptions that force us to relearn how to interact with them. The body then ceases to automatically obey and becomes aware of its position, its movements, and its involvement in what it is looking at.



Exhibition view: *Global Museum Protest*,
2015–2026

As in the formation of a pearl, none of these actions remove the original injury. Instead, they cover it. Layer upon layer, time deposits new forms that allow for coexistence with a past that remains unresolved and becomes, in our case, art. Sánchez Castillo's work seeks not to bring this process to a close but to make it visible while keeping it open. Every gesture, shift, and modification adds a new layer to history, which is never definitive. Thus, instead of establishing a fixed meaning, it disrupts the conditions in which meaning is produced. In this gesture, art does not offer answers; it reorganizes the gaze, offering us a different way of inhabiting the tensions that shape us.

Ferran Barenblit
Curator of the exhibition

EXHIBITION

Exhibition Project

Fernando Sánchez Castillo

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Toni Rueda

Urbia Services

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All the works:

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OPENING TIMES

Main venue

Monday to Saturday: 10 a.m. – 9 p.m.
Free: 7 – 9 p.m.

Sunday: 10 a.m. – 2:30 p.m.
Free: 12:30 – 2:30 p.m.

Tuesday: closed

Last admission:
30 minutes before closing time

Clearance:
15 minutes before closing time

Parque del Retiro

Monday to Saturday: 10 a.m. – 9 p.m.
Free

Clearance:
15 minutes before closing time

EDUCATION/MEDIATION

Guided tours



ACCESSIBILITY

Main venue

At the Assistance/Information Desks
(Floor 1):

- Wheelchairs
- Folding cane seats (also on Floor 4)

At the Audio Guide Desks
(Floor 1):

- Audio guides (audio descriptions / Spanish Sign Language)
- Magnetic induction loops
- Radio guides

Parque del Retiro

- Vertical Platform Lift
- Portable magnetic induction loop



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