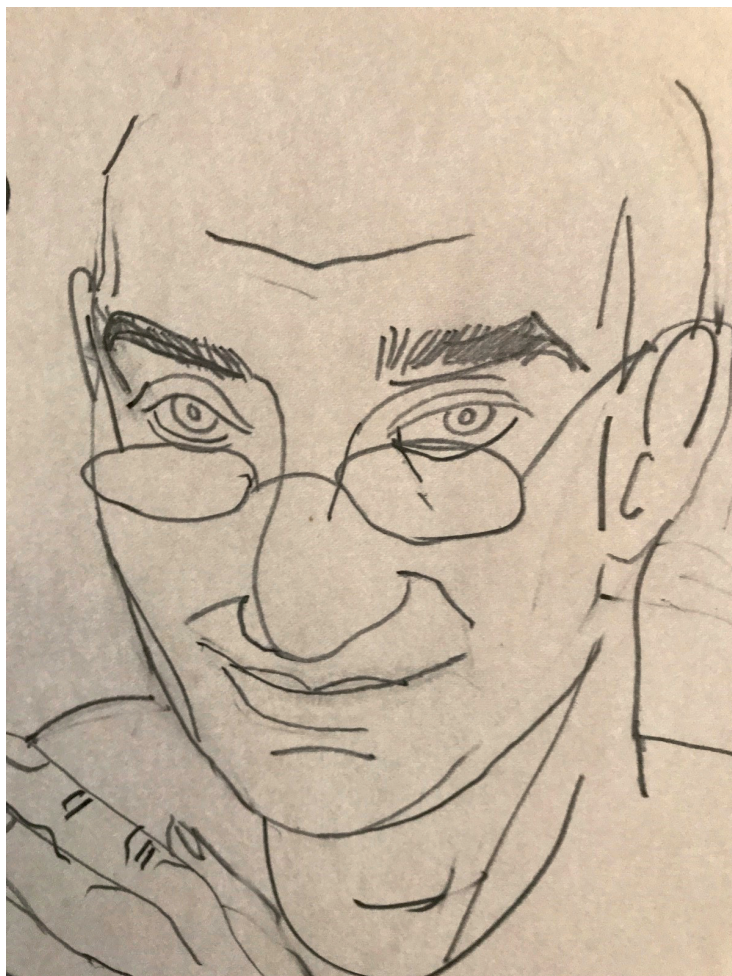


**Exhibition** April 22 – August 29, 2021

Parque del Retiro, Palacio de Cristal

# Pep Agut. Madrid Meridian: Dream and Lie



*Hèrcules (Autoretrat en devaluació econòmica i plusvàlua cultural)* (Hercules [Self-Portrait in Economic Devaluation and Cultural Capital Gain]), 2007 (detail). Artist's collection

The work of Pep Agut (b. 1961, Terrassa), at times classified within the post-conceptualism of the 1990s in Spain, largely reflects on the role of the artist, the problem of representation, and the place of art inside a system he regards as burdened by spectacularization and the reduction of the artwork to a mere commodity, but which at the same time, and particularly since the 1980s, has turned out to be one of the main protagonists in the foundational staging of neoliberalism.

The Meridian of the Royal Observatory of El Retiro in Madrid is referenced in maps of 1850, 1858 and 1864 drawn up by the Direction of the Geographical Mapping of Spain and the Spanish Mapping Commission. In October 1884, an international conference was held in Washington that led to the approval of a single universal reference Meridian tangent to the position of the Royal Observatory in Greenwich. The sovereignty and magnitude of the British Empire under the reign of Queen Victoria made this choice a logical and unanimous one. Although Spain had to vote in favor of the resolution (but not Santo Domingo, France or Brazil, which abstained), the *Universal Geographical Atlas* produced that same year by the cartographer, publisher and engraver José Reinoso was adjusted to the frequently demanded but always denied Meridian 0° of Madrid (3° 41' 16" west of Greenwich, and 14 minutes 41 seconds ahead of it), explicitly ignoring the international consensus. However, this was neither an official commission nor an isolated case, as it took a long time for the changes to come into effect, and use continued to be made of the Paris Meridian until well into the 20th century.

A few years later, the Madrid Meridian is cited in the catalogue of the General Exhibition of the Philippine Islands: "The two archipelagoes extend between latitude 4° 48' N. and 21° 7' N. and longitude 120° 35' E. and 130° 19' E. of the Madrid Meridian (135° 3' 29" and 150° 47' 29" of the Island of El Hierro), with the highest latitude corresponding to the last of the Batalnes Islands and the lowest to Mamu Manca in the Archipelago of Joló, while the closest longitude lies at the westernmost extreme of the island of Balábac, and the furthest on the opposite coast of Mindanao." The exhibition, inaugurated in the Palacio de Cristal in 1887 under the auspices of the Overseas Minister, Víctor Balaguer, had clear colonial propaganda purposes, as did several other similar international shows, especially popular at the end of the 19th century, whose model was the Amsterdam International Colonial and Export Exhibition of 1883. The General Exhibition of the Philippine Islands demonstrated a deliberate blindness, fed by the most futile delusions of grandeur, to what was by then the evidently ruinous state of the Spanish Empire. The disaster of 1898 made the Madrid Meridian completely



*Rescue attempt. Nonsense*, 1994. Museo Reina Sofía

unsustainable. Nevertheless, the dictator Francisco Franco determined in 1942 that Spain would finally adopt the time zone on the Meridian of National Socialist Berlin, a decision whose effects remain in force to this day.

In *Madrid Meridian: Dream and Lie*, Pep Agut reflects on these circumstances from the contemporary standpoint of a present that has not yet managed to detach itself from foundations laid with all the perversity of absolutist monarchic regimes. The artist's argument starts from the form and history of the building itself, designed by Ricardo Velázquez Bosco for the General Exposition of the Philippine Islands and inspired by Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace (London, 1851). The artist invites us to reread and experience those times and their broad similarities with the present day.

The work is articulated on the basis of seventeen plaster columns that replicate one of the columns inside the building. The mold for making them, a process carried out in six parts, is understood as an intermediary element that records every detail, like a photographic negative, of this specific object designed and built at a particular moment, which will be conditioned as it reappears in the exhibition by the variables of the material used for its reproduction. The resulting objects never cease to bear traces of the construction process, but their horizontal arrangement removes every sign of their original functionality. Agut had already experimented on many previous occasions with procedures that were similar from both a conceptual and a formal point of view. Pieces like *Maquetes de Llum* (Light Maquettes, 1991–95) show it to be a recurrent structural strategy in his practice to replicate generic

models that later enter processes of variation, combination, or permutation. *On arribo a veure-hi* (As Far as I Can See, 1988–90), *Habitacions exactes* (Exact Rooms, 1987–89), or *Rescue Attempt. Nonsense* (1994) are works that moreover hide self-references even in their most recondite details, such as the replication in one piece of the oval form of his astigmatic cornea.

While Agut has sought to articulate spaces on the basis of past forms, and has often worked with the concept of the ruin as one of his generic models, he removes himself on this occasion from the romantic melancholy associated with this type of presence. This work invites us on the contrary to reposition our gaze, demand another perception of spatiality, and perform a different reading of the context that will allow Spain's imperialist past to be threaded together with the reality of the colonial power exercised at present over the different nations of which it is formed. A critical landscape is built up through an architecture of perfectly useless monumentality that can do no more than fluctuate under the lights and shadows cast during the day by the full solar cycle through the architecture of the Palacio de Cristal itself, a ruin of imperialism that remains standing.

The individuality of each column or of each of the parts and sections that came out of the molds is completed with a series of inscriptions by the artist, made using the same tool, the burin, as the engravings of Goya and Picasso, especially Goya's etching *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos* (The Dream of Reason Produces Monsters, 1799)

and Picasso's *Sueño y mentira de Franco* (Dream and Lie of Franco, 1937), one of the preliminary studies for *Guernica*. In this way, Pep Agut rests upon and continues the line of critical thought in art that reacts to political circumstances adversely affecting the whole of society. The governmental delusions of grandeur denounced by Picasso and Goya are thus posited as permanent aftereffects that are also embedded in our own time.

The large set of plaster tubers arranged next to the columns, also taken from molds extracted from seven natural rhizomes, reiterate the ideas articulated through the columns. While some tubers refer to their remote colonial origin, Agut associates them sarcastically—he calls them “little Francos”—with those appearing in Picasso's depiction of the dictator in the eighteen small vignettes that make up the set of engravings mentioned above.

Pep Agut studied at the Facultat de Belles Arts de Sant Jordi in Barcelona, where he obtained his bachelor's degree (1979–84) and doctorate (2018). He was an elite hockey player, and took part in the Olympic Games in Los Angeles (1984). He has lived and worked in various European cities. Throughout his career, he has coordinated and participated in numerous seminars, conferences, and debates on art. His work has been seen at the 45th Venice Biennale (1993), Prospekt (1996), and the 11th Biennale of Sydney (1998), and he has exhibited his work both individually and collectively at institutions such as the Tel Aviv Museum of Art (1993) and MACBA in Barcelona, which devoted a retrospective to him in 2000.