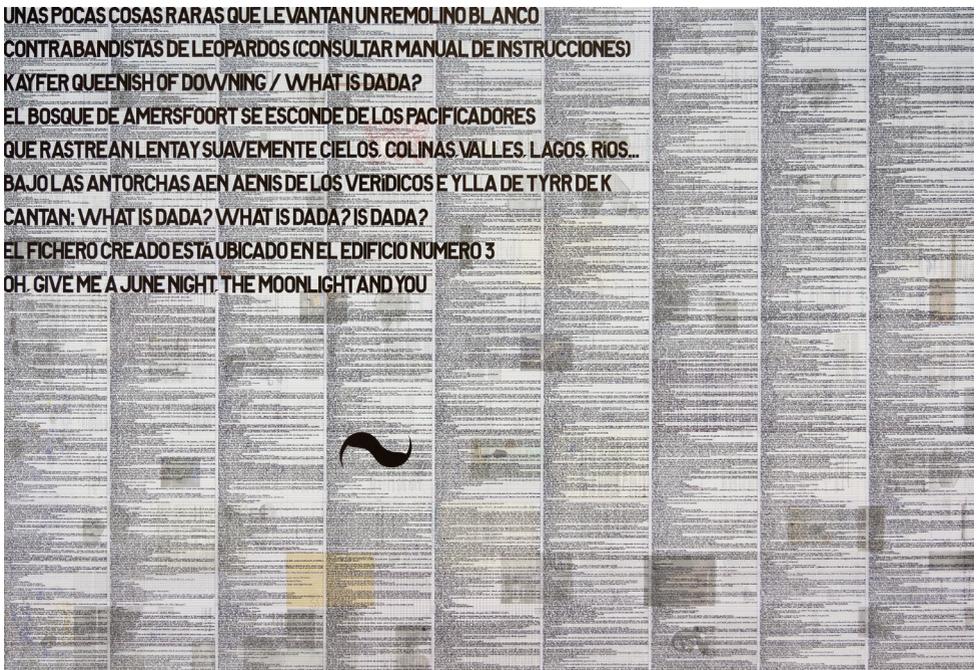


Exhibition June 3 – September 19, 2022

Parque del Retiro, Palacio de Velázquez

# Néstor Sanmiguel Diest

## The Vicissitudes of the Automaton



Néstor Sanmiguel Diest, *Dada en Marte*, 2015. Private collection, Maisterravalbuena, Madrid. © Néstor Sanmiguel Diest

Did the mechanical concept of the world project an automatic image or figuration of itself onto the human conscience? Does the universe, wonderfully mechanized by the thought of man, turn its automatic testimony against itself? Is man imprisoned inside that prodigious machine which verifies him mechanically by absorbing him completely?

José Bergamín, *El pensamiento perdido* (The Lost Thought), 1976.

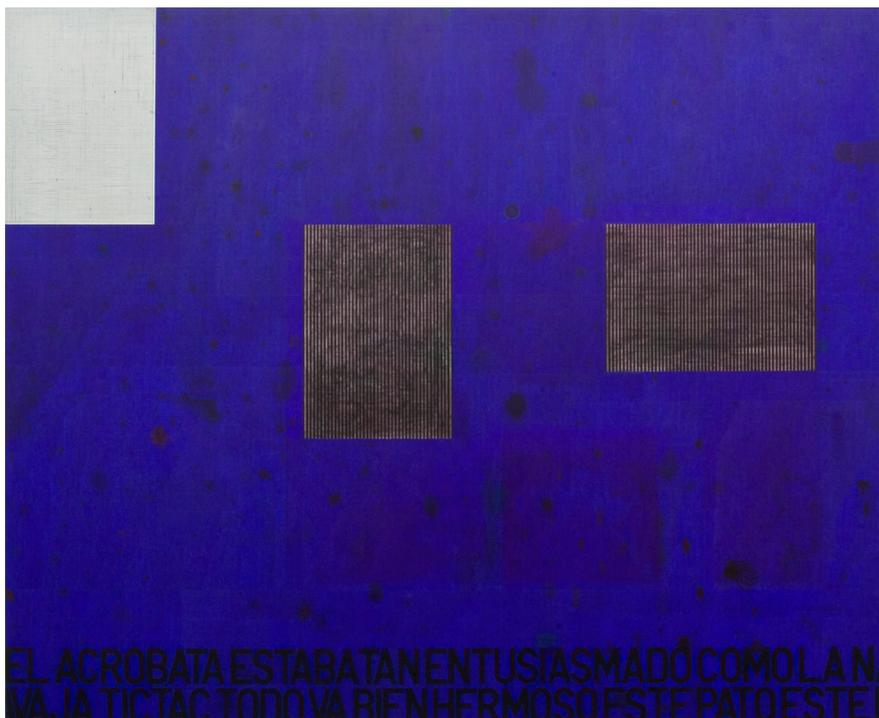
This exhibition dedicated to the work of Néstor Sanmiguel Diest (Zaragoza, 1949) covers his production from the late 1980s to the present day. Far from being organized along the lines of an ordinary retrospective, it shows series of works executed at different moments of his career, forming an itinerary that draws us into the practice of this self-described “studio artist”.

From the first years of his activity in connection with the foundation of artistic collectives like A Ua Crag (1985-1996) and Segundo Partido de la Montaña (1987- 1988), Sanmiguel Diest has proved a methodical and prolific artist who uninterruptedly devises systems, rules, and protocols that he applies to the construction of his pieces. His enormous oeuvre, made up mainly of drawings and paintings, forms a singular catalogue that blurs the limits between image and text, like a palimpsest which simultaneously conceals and reveals a succession of narratives that engage with the viewer.

On various occasions, Sanmiguel Diest has referred to his practice as the “craft of dodging”, a premise that materializes in his way of situating himself on the geographical,

discursive, and material periphery. This flight or retreat from the most widespread narratives and debates has functioned as a tactic and a method, generating a thought and a corpus of work that question and defy contemporary modes of production and their organization of time.

Remote from any convention, his work falls into a field that includes frequent references to the history of art, literature, and music, as well as the ordinary and the everyday, through the incorporation in his pieces of documents, invoices, fragments of texts, notes, or pages from newspapers. It is an invitation to stroll through a jungle of symbols, a place riddled with expressive silences, in a constant negotiation with what builds up on the margins and often goes unnoticed. Evading a literal interpretation



*El pantano*, 2013. Museo Helga de Alvear, Cáceres. © Néstor Sanmiguel Diest

of the world, this production rests on a simultaneity of appropriations and citations like a potentially infinite and circular mechanism of surprising density.

*The Vicissitudes of the Automaton* begins with large-format paintings dating from the late 1980s, when the artist was doubly employed in his studio and as a pattern designer at a textile factory, a job he did not give up entirely until the year 2000. From that profession, he derived the application of a precise and meticulous logic in his working processes, persistent references to the factory environment, and a militant but not documentary iconography that uses humor to evoke his dual occupation. Sanmiguel Diest transfers his industrial working day – at least eight hours – to the execution of a systematized production in

his studio. In this assembly line setup in the artist's workshop, dies, patterns, and matrices are habitually used in his pieces, forming collages by means of *frottage* or copying.

Rather like a diary kept over time, his pages contain recurrent figures like the so-called “mother forms”, which grow larger or smaller in a manner resembling the manufacture of goods in different sizes, together with cogs, mechanisms, and stencils alongside emblems, acronyms, and manuscript or printed texts. This procedure is manifested most clearly in series of works executed over the course of several years, such as *Las emociones barrocas* (The Baroque Emotions, 1997-2005) and *Libro para Manuel (El segundo nombre de las cosas)* (Book for Manuel [The Second



*El descenso del buscador de perlas*, 1999, (detail). Private collection, Maisterravalbuena, Madrid. © Néstor Sanmiguel Diest

Name of Things], 2009-2010). Unveiling the artist's constructive strategies always requires extraordinarily close attention. Decoding the sum of referents deposited on the surfaces of his canvases demands a time and curiosity proportional to those invested in the construction of this catalogue of forms appearing so assiduously in his works.

As others had done before him, Sanmiguel Diest operates like a robber of quotations who mechanically reproduces what is written and opposes it to the discipline of history. He reveals himself as the “pearl hunter” who gives one of his works its title, and is an erroneous appropriation of the name of “pearl fisherman” bestowed by Hannah Arendt on another impassioned collector of the last century, Walter Benjamin. Aware of the maxim that any object separated from its context is thereby preserved and destroyed in a single movement, Sanmiguel Diest also plunges into the depths of the past to retrieve (following Arendt) those crystallized “fragments of thought”. Evoked, divided or replicated with precision, the sources pointed to by the artist include the names of Joan Miró, Francis Picabia, Ellsworth Kelly, Rosemarie Trockel, Jackson Pollock, Tim Rollins & K.O.S. (Kids of Survival), Bridget Riley, together with those of Joy Division,



*El suicidio de Lucrecia. Aguas turbias*, 2007. Private collection, Maisterravalbuena, Madrid. © Néstor Sanmiguel Diest

Sonic Youth, Nurse with Wound, and Isidore Ducasse, William Burroughs, Virginia Woolf, André Malraux, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Julio Cortázar, some of whose books are transcribed in their entirety on his canvases (*Rayuela* [Hopscotch] or *Libro para Manuel* [Book for Manuel]). This is merely the tip of an iceberg with a production hidden beneath it that is based on constant negotiation between these authorized voices and those which apparently refer us to the ordinary and anecdotal.

Such a working method functions by accumulation and extends beyond the limits of the work in the form of word games and chains of aphorisms that give the pieces their titles. These writings construct parallel narratives and continue the texts contained in the canvases: *El poder del mago comunista* (The Power of the Communist Magician, 1988); *Sol del mediodía. La revolución* (Midday Sun. The Revolution, 1988); *Las olas* (The Waves,



*Libro para Manuel (El segundo nombre de las cosas)*, 2009-2010, (detail). Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid. © Néstor Sanmiguel Diest

1991); *Una buena máquina para la guerra de guerrillas* (A Good Machine for Guerrilla Warfare, 1993); *Nuestra madriguera secreta* (Our Secret Lair, 1993); *La máquina soltera* (The Spinster Machine, 1996); *Ningún sitio invulnerable* (No Invulnerable Place, 1997); *20.01.97* (1997); *En un bosque cercano a Ekaterinburgo* (In a Forest near Ekaterinburg, 1999); *El Gobierno retira su proyecto* (The Government Withdraws its Project, 1999); *Historias secretas* (Secret Histories, 1999); *Triángulo de amor bizarro* (Bizarre Love Triangle, 1999); *El descenso del buscador de perlas* (The Descent of the Pearl Hunter, 1999); *El suicidio de Lucrecia* (The Suicide of Lucrece, 2000); *El canal del molino* (The Millstream, 2003); *La calle del desconcierto* (The Street of Bewilderment, 2003); *Jardín Barroco* (Baroque Garden, 2004); *Las ciudades*

*secretas. Reconocimiento del discurso* (The Secret Cities. Recognition of Discourse, 2005); *Belleville y el melodrama del hallazgo y las verduras* (Belleville and the Melodrama of the Discovery and the Vegetables, 2007); *Franz en América o el desaparecido* (Franz in America or the Missing Person, 2008); *Rayuela* (Hopscotch, 2008); *Paisaje con tres túneles* (Landscape with Three Tunnels, 2011-2012); *Las bodas químicas* (The Chemical Weddings, 2014); *Dada en Marte* (Dada on Mars, 2015); *El diario de Edith* (Edith's Diary, 2017); *Aviuela se preparó para volar* (Aviuela Made Ready to Fly, 2019) ...

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*The Vicissitudes of the Automaton* is a curatorial project spread over two simultaneous exhibitions, one in Madrid at the Palacio de Velázquez, a venue of the Museo Reina Sofía, and the other in Vitoria-Gasteiz, at the Museum of Contemporary Art of the Basque Country Artium Museoa.



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