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Álvaro Perdices

CULTIVATING THE UNCANNY

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Ajuntament de
Barcelona

[LA VIRREINA]
CENTRE
DE L'IMATGE

Sin título (Abierta, Negada y Desnuda), 2012. Still. Castellon

This exhibition surveys the career of Álvaro Perdices (Madrid, 1971), presenting a selection of the artist's projects spanning the period from the first half of the 1990s to 2022, others created specifically for La Virreina Centre de la Imatge, and lastly, various installations shown in an updated version.

Cultivating the Uncanny alludes here to a melting pot of meanings. Cultivating as a reference to that which needs to be fed in order to grow, be it a crop, an ideology or oneself. Cultivating as a mention of landscapes, nature and botany on the outskirts, which signify so much in Perdices' work. Cultivating as a tribute to the book *Cultivos* (Crops, 2008) by the writer and editor Julián Rodríguez, a fundamental figure in the artist's development.

And the uncanny, understood here on the basis of that definition that associates it with the queer and even the strange, in keeping with the famous exhibition series by Mike Kelley—another of Perdices' referents—as there is a distortion, a search for those indecipherable zones that destabilise the normative and make it obsolete or alienating, zones to which Perdices dedicated no small effort to sowing and sustaining.

Perdices' own creative itinerary is an example of this. In 1993, he moved to Los Angeles, where he studied at postgraduate school at UCLA and was a teacher at Twentieth Street Elementary School. During these years, he came into contact with some of the leading artists on the LA scene in the 1990s, among them Kelley, Paul McCarthy and Lari Pittman. In 2011, he returned to Madrid and began to work as an exhibition curator and coordinator for the Prado.

This apparent dialectic between, let us say, the underground and erudition lies at the basis of his works, which often “address” certain forms of dissidence through micro-historical operations and gestures, or which “read” the history of art while freeing it from any academicism, as if it were a kind of long missive with multiple senders, a letter written by Velázquez and Kenneth Anger, Cornelis van Poelenburgh and Andy Warhol at the same time.

Perdices has been a pioneer in opposing human action and the response to it by a nature that warns us through ecological anarchy of the dangers of progress. In addition, thirty years

ago he explored free education, cooperative approaches with children in their formative years and the tools they themselves can make in the face of coercive pedagogical models.

The exhibition closes with *Forms for a Forthcoming Future* (2025), which revisits the rehearsals directed in 1936 by Pura Maortua and Federico García Lorca of Lorca's play *Así que pasen cinco años* (When Five Years Pass, 1931), together with ceramic designs by Maruja Mallo that disappeared during bombardments in the Spanish Civil War. These two projects cut short return today to the exhibition rooms of La Virreina as part of a restitution that is still awaiting completion.

ROOM 1

EXCERPTS: Querelle / Black and Light

Querelle de Lavapies' first venue was on Ave María Street in Madrid. It opened in the late 1980s and in the mid-nineties, it changed location and became a regular gay bar.

In the beginning, it was a place with two storage rooms, the second one at the back had concrete benches made with badly mounted bricks, plus the odd blue camping mat to make the seat or the floor more comfortable. A twenty-watt light bulb hanging from cables emerging from the ceiling, unpainted walls... The other light came from the TV sets showing films by Werner Schroeter, Fassbinder, Genet, early Warhols and, if I recall rightly, some by Kenneth Anger... All in all, a pleasant place where you could simply chat.

My art residency, so to speak, at the Prado Museum lasted from 2012 to 2018. In 2017, after many courier trips accompanying the artworks, and installing and hanging paintings, some at night, after hours, and in dim lighting, I thought about that shared intimacy I had with the works. Those moments enabled me to have a privileged proximity with the surface of those paintings. I often made conservation reports about the surface of the artworks... I had the feeling of getting to know the skin of a body from a close up, those places where the artists—all of them men—had deposited their intentions.

The films *Black and Light* and *Camacho's Nightwatch* (2017) bring together several hours of strolling in the dark all around the museum with some of the works I had the opportunity to travel with.

The visual violence of the alizarin crimson in Velázquez's *Innocent X* accompanies these clips.

ROOM 2

The Third Courtyard. Leonor

In 2008, while in Merida, Yucatán, I filmed a set of ten videos under the umbrella title of *Destination Progress*. One of the videos is entitled Leonor. It is made up of two channels in a single screening. During those tropical summer days, the shrubs grew by the day. *Leonor*, the protagonist, was working on her performance for her new show at the Dixbar in the city.

We decided to include part of a speech by the governor of Yucatán to one of her musical numbers. To that end, we did some rehearsals in which Leonor read part of the text. In addition, we hired three bartenders to remove the overgrown grass from a rear courtyard that was half-built and had turned into a wild garden. We carried out the rehearsals and filming there.

The place fulfilled the aspirations of the so-called “divine caste” —the descendants of Francisco de Montejo, conqueror of Yucatán—in the White City, Mérida, one of the few cities in Mexico where the Spaniards did not mix with the local population.

In the middle of the courtyard-corral-garden there was a small temple/ stage of eclectic architectural style in the European manner, decorated with lions and Corinthian columns and surrounded by an impenetrable mass of *xtes* or wild amaranth (*Amaranthus retroflexus*), along with other native weeds that were difficult to control.

Fig Trees and Storks

During a residency as part of Cordoba City of Ideas in 2022, I went back to searching for courtyards in the outskirts again and I came across the ruins of La Algodonera. This abandoned enclosure consisted of a series of warehouses and plots of land like courtyards that had been overrun by local species of plants. La Algodonera stands in the fertile plain of the Guadalquivir,

between the river and the ruins of the city of Medina Azahara. The people of Cordoba call this area “El jamón”, the Leg of Ham.

La Algodonera was one of the most important cotton separation and production centres in Spain. It was the flagship of the agrarian cooperative movement for more than forty years. It was set up in 1962 as the Cooperative Society of Cotton Growers and was part of the industrial fabric. It brought about major economic growth for the city of Cordoba. The industrial complex covered an area of 120,000 hectares. It was designed and built from 1951 by the architect Rafael de la Hoz in a style that recovered the language of modern architecture in post-war Spain.

According to the press of the time, the cooperative was run by a governing council made up of members of the so-called Caja Rural Clan, who stifled the company, motivating its closure. This fact and other interests of real estate companies led to its sale by public auction in 1998.

The land occupied by the cooperative was set aside for agricultural use, but to widespread surprise, the site was included in the Cordoba Urban Plan for the as possible land for expansion of the city to the west. As a consequence of the agreement reached between the Cordoba City Council and the developers Noriega and Arenal 2000, the land was reclassified as residential land for housing construction.

These empty spaces have no roof over the top of them and have become authentic orchards where wild fig trees, wild olive trees, date palm trees, hackberry and washingtonias grow freely, with no kind of constraints or pruning, while an abundant colony of storks occupies some of the ledges.

These gardens or courtyards on the outskirts have been taken over by new ecosystems with native or naturalised species which, with their ecological anarchy, enable us to visualise the possibility of unregulated and indomitable nature. A green and acultural violence that rebels against human action.

These photographs show the changing process of the landscape. Various species of trees and shrubs, with no human intervention but in constant motion and freedom, occupy and crack what could once have been understood as progress.

Currently, Banco Santander, together with Tremón, is fighting to get these lands purchased by Sandokán (Rafael Gómez), where it is planned to build a large shopping centre. That would involve eliminating the existing vegetation cover.

ROOM 3

The black photos series 1996 and 2010

During the debates we had in the Group Critique class in the Master of Fine Arts program at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), led by Lari Pittman, we talked about monochromy and how every decade of the twentieth century had understood this genre-space in a different way.

I decided to produce a number of images based on this idea. I took pictures with a black and white Yashica analog curtain camera in the dark rooms of gay bars in the cities of Los Angeles, New York and Madrid between December 1996 and January 1997. Most of the bars that made this kind of subcultural space possible have disappeared.

In 2010, I resumed this series at the extinct Bar Cruising in Madrid, this time with an Olympus digital camera. Even though these images are also black, they contain elements in colour. Paradoxically, red and blue circles appear that are chromatic aberrations caused by the camera's inability to read blackness.

These images explore formal notions with extreme abstraction and little figuration. The Monochrome, the sublimation and the gender space, as well as the realm of the uncanny, overlap with a possibly queer perspective.

The dense blackness is interrupted solely by the light of the cigarette butts.

The photographs hang extremely close to the floor, thus becoming almost deep and impenetrable doors, where time and space have frozen. A large vinyl label with the title/location is placed on the wall.



El Tercer Patio. Higueras y Cigueñas. 2022. La Algodonera, Cordoba



Destino Progreso. Leonor. Still. 2008. Mérida, Mexico



Negro y Luz. Still. 2017. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid



47 NAMES. Still. 2024. Los Angeles



From The Hustler@CAKE. New York. Doc # 7. 1996



Paesaggio con rovine e scene pastorali. Cornelis van Poelenburgh. 1621-1623 ca.
Ariccia, Palazzo Chigi. Ferrari Collection. Copy by Antonio Monereo (2025)



Espejo y Reino / Ornamento y Estado. 2022. CA2M, Madrid.
Photography: Manolo Laguillo

ROOM 4

Free Education

In 1996, I started working as a primary school teacher at the public Twentieth Street Primary School in Los Angeles, where I taught until 2004. A couple of years earlier, and unaware that I would be going into teaching, I had been thinking about the rigidity of the educational system. The lack of movement, learning while sitting down all the time, the inflexibility of the forms and the lack of space for disobedience and agitation. I had always been attracted by the idea of free education.

At school, I ended up confronted with the apparatus of the institution, its rules, architecture and fences that surrounded the building, and even with its location in South Central LA. Moreover, every day I had to deal with, the utter exhaustion of school work that left me simply wanting to take naps in my studio. Thereafter, I viewed education and its context as a creative activity that generated numerous open projects that began with performance as a means to learn through movement, urging the body to action. In other words, I decided to turn the school into a study and education into work material.

We created drawings in the school playground without pencils or paper, cleaning the cracks in the asphalt as a group. The free food given to the students was precooked and wrapped in plastic. It was dire in quality. We designed and embroidered individual tablecloths and each student brought food from home. In a performance required for the Christmas program, we put three tables together on the auditorium stage and placed two artificial fir trees on top of them. The students climbed onto the tables and began to brush the trees using the microphone. We entitled this piece *The Christmas Sound / El Sonido de la Navidad*.

As a result of all this, projects emerged in other places. In 1999, the DAE (Donostiako Arte Ekinbideak) platform invited me to undertake a public art project in San Sebastián. I decided to work in the public arena and with students from the *Jakintza ikastola* (a Basque school where teaching is in the Basque language) in the city. These were difficult years in

the Basque Country: violence, terrorism, cohabitation and state actions influenced behaviour and words. I started a conversation with the children: we all sat in a group on the floor and talked about hiding places, holes, looking without being seen, the power that the closet sometimes gives us as a place of resistance.

2004 was my last year at Twentieth Street Elementary School. I filmed my students shouting their names to the Los Angeles sky in the schoolyard. 47 *NAMES* are the faces and voices of forty-seven boys and girls from Los Angeles. At times, it is possible to see Downtown LA in the background, and at others the clouds in the sky accompanied by the sound of their names.

Around 2011, by then I was living in Madrid, I undertook a specific project for the Espai d'Art Contemporani de Castelló (EACC) that involved all the elements of the exhibition space: indoors, outdoors, the staff and the content. Some of the works that emerged from this exhibition are a set of actions carried out in the center and documented on video. In one of them, a group of children from a public school who had previously visited the EACC were invited to create a hideaway inside the exhibition rooms. To do this, they ended up breaking one of the walls and making a huge hole that allowed access into a space inside the centre of the institution but not open to the public.

Days later, we invited twenty-seven abandoned dogs, picked up by an animal shelter in Castellón, into the EACC space. The animals spent the day exploring the rooms and the hole the children had made.

ROOM 5

Excursus of the Kingdom in Red

Mirror and Kingdom / Ornament and State is a large installation made in 2022 for the Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo (CA2M) in Madrid, consisting of various series of photographs, videos, old furniture pieces and metal structures.

This work evokes the Hall of the Realms in the Palacio del Buen Retiro, for which Velázquez and other artists created

major paintings about military battles waged by the Spanish monarchy. At this time, the political power of Philip IV and his government was in evident decline, while the arts and letters were flourishing. The hall was nothing but a propagandist manifesto of a collapsing power.

In the nineteenth century, the palace was destroyed. The ballroom, today the Casón del Buen Retiro, and the Hall of the Realms survived. The hall was eventually converted into the Army Museum, until its relocation and transfer to Toledo in 2010. During the Franco dictatorship, the museum was an important cenacle of vindication of the regime, with private rooms for parties organised by the dictator, among them the hall honouring those decorated military or the room dedicated to the Civil War from the nationalist side, known as the Crusade Hall. The museum's private library, situated in the north tower was used by Lieutenant Colonel Antonio Tejero during the days preceding the coup d'état that he led on February 23, 1981.

When the museum and its holdings moved to Toledo, the building was stripped clean. What had been a symbol of a set Spanish nationalism became a museum in ruins bereft of its trophies.

La Virreina presents a reinterpretation of the installation held in Madrid with a smaller group of photographs from the two series taken in the Hall of the Realms / former Army Museum. The first are large-format images of details of the dilapidated state of the looted building following its abandonment. The smaller photos document the last event held in the hall, in honor of the artist Cai Guo-Qiang, which involved decorating the entire space in red. Today, the Hall of the Realms is currently undergoing work to restore it to its former glory and to reinstall the original works that were part of Philip IV reign. The remains of the Army Museum and of our recent history, the subject of this installation, were destroyed.

A group of trunks and a cigarette case are displayed with these images. They come from the Ocaña Penitentiary, where many Republican prisoners were held at the end of the Civil War. One of these prisoners was Daniel Frutos Morcillo, the

Republican mayor of Manzanares el Real, who crafted the small cigarette case and the matchbox, both in the form of books. The totem is formed by trunks probably made during the 1960s by the prisoners, who carved the faces of God and the conquistadors on their sides. These items were frequently commissioned to prisons to decorate Paradors and army residencies during the Franco regime.

SALA 6

On Cornelis

In the late seventies, Andy Warhol invited his secretary and some friends—Victor Hugo, Ronnie Cutrone or Walter Steding—to create the *Piss Paintings* and the *Oxidation Paintings*. They would spill onto the canvases and from their guts the urine they had accumulated throughout the day and night, as if they had a brush in hand.

Some canvases spread on the floor of the Factory—primed with metallic copper primer—received, like Danae, the golden rain.... *Voilà*, finished works!..., surfaces of greenish and orange oxidations, organic forms, gestures and fluids that undoubtedly had the work finished.

The Flemish painter Cornelis van Poelenburgh, settled in Rome at the beginning of the 17th century, in search of the *ideal beautiful* of the landscape—theorized by his contemporary Giovanni Battista Agucchi between 1607 and 1615—explores the natural world of the outskirts of the Eternal City, creating this work.

The painting, guided by the sculpture of a vestal, leads us diagonally from the top to the plain. In the middle, capitals and cornices, the ruins of a classical world. On the left margin, a man urinates on these stones.

Perhaps like Andy's friends, the painter was thinking about how uric acid changes and transforms the white purity of the canon. Cornelis, known as Satyr among his comrades the *bamboccianti*, and eventually defender of this art *della sregolatezza* (the art of debauchery), proposes us this urinating

sculptor, who is capable of liberating the forms of the classical ideal without a chisel.

ROOM 7, DINING HALL AND CORRIDOR

Forms for a Forthcoming Future

In the spring, the poet and playwright Federico García Lorca and the intellectual and theatre producer Pura Maortua were rehearsing the play *Así que pasen cinco años* (When Five Years Pass) on the thirteenth floor of the recently built Carrión tower building, today the Hotel Vincci Capitol. The poet had finished writing the play on 18 August 1931. Pura Maortua was one of the founders of the Lyceum Club Femenino and La Cívica cultural association and, together with Lorca, was the founder of the Club Teatral Anfístora.

At the same time and in the same city, the painter Maruja Mallo had created a set of designs for ceramic pieces in innovative, avant-garde shapes whose astonishing modernity shed light on a closer and more sustainable relationship with the world of nature and harvesting.

Lorca's assassination on 18 August 1936 (just five years after writing his play) and the destruction of Mallo's studio by bombings during the Civil War put an end to two proposals that had boded well for a new future for Spanish society and culture. Lorca's play was not performed in public in Spain until 1978. The ceramic designs that Jacinto Alcántara¹, director of the Madrid Ceramics School², had commissioned Mallo with the intention of creating a new tableware disappeared, and the plates were never made.

This project gathers and reinstitutes in the present some works that were aborted in our recent history and remained on stand-by.

1 On March 21, 1928, Jacinto Alcántara took office as Director of the Ceramics School. On Sunday, March 9, 1930, Francisco Alcántara died of a long-standing illness.

2 In 1984, the Madrid Ceramics School was divided into two schools, one state-run and the other municipal: the Official Ceramics School, now the Francisco Alcántara School of Art, Ceramics and the Moncloa Ceramics School.

The installation presents a number of videos, developed in collaboration with LAJUAN Gallery, of what those rehearsals for *Así que pasen cinco años* could have been. They are directed by an actress playing Pura Maortua and a group of young actors. The videos sketch out different moments from the play in an imprecise place in Madrid that has an inner garden. “You just have to think you’re in the garden of wonders”, was the laconic advice given to Félix Navarro—an actor in those rehearsals—by Federico in 1936.

Alongside these videos there is a group of ceramic plates—hanging vertically as if they were other characters—made by students at the Escuela de Cerámica de la Moncloa in Madrid.

They have been made using a chromatic reconstruction based on existing photographic material of Mallo’s destroyed studio and her ceramic notebook (Museo Reina Sofía. Lafuente Archive Collection).

The reconstruction process, in collaboration with the collective *Aulas Inteligentes* (Juan Luis López Espada & Guillermo Francisco Rivero), was developed using meticulous historical and technical analysis aimed at reviving Mallo’s original palette of colours by means of AI-assisted colorization techniques. This approach made it possible to reconstruct the vivacity of her ceramic designs, that blend tradition and innovation, in a proposal that reimagines what disappeared in 1936, and endows the installation with a new visual dimension that establishes a dialogue across time between memory and technology.

After receiving the collaboration proposal, the Escuela de Cerámica de la Moncloa took as a starting point the *Ceramics Notebook* filled by Mallo between October 1935 and May 1936. Teachers and students were involved in an immersive process of research on these ceramic designs that have rarely been seen thus far. To this end, various procedures have been designed—using a potter’s wheel, slabs and moulds—to make the possible tableware.

Various modes of decoration—in the raw clay, using sgraffiti, reserves, stencils and transfers—have resulted in a wide variety of possibilities materialised in the tangible colours and

forms of those designs “suspended” in time. Maruja’s presence and spirit inhabit the spaces in the school once again.



Forms for a Forthcoming Future. Rehearsals for Así que pasen cinco años, 2025. Still

Curator: Valentín Roma

B 8222-2025

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Opening hours:
from Tuesday to Sunday
and holidays, 11 am to 8 pm
Free admission



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