

PALMADOTZE

CANON. MATEO MATÉ

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Mateo Maté's exhibition presents at Palmadotze brings together a selection of drawings and sculptural pieces belonging to an extensive body of work that the artist has carried out in recent years, and which is articulated around the concept of canon. Canon is a term from the Greek word κανών, which could be translated as "rule", and which in the Spanish language has several meanings, all of them related in one way or another to the ideas of precept and norm. In Maté's artistic project, all the meanings of the word resonate, although it is the meaning that it acquires in the field of art that most interests the artist. The artistic canon, especially in academic sculpture and painting, establishes the ideal proportions according to which the human figure should be represented. It is therefore a rule that responds to an aesthetic ideal, although also a cultural, because there is no model of natural and incontestable beauty, but the canons change according to the context and the historical moment. The canon, therefore, operates in the field of ideas in twice: on the one hand, because it is an ideal, a model of perfection that rarely has a correspondence in real copies (that is, in people); and on the other, because it is ideological, insofar as it responds to a certain system of thought and values.

Many of Maté's artistic projects respond to an interest of the artist in analyzing from a critical and ironic perspective the relationship between iconography and power, and in questioning the use that political regimes and authoritarian forces make of images. "My role is to be suspicious," says Maté, "and I suspect how power uses iconography. It is, along with the work of other artists, writers and journalists, a small rebellion"¹. 'Canon' is part of this line of work and reviews, in a specific way, the survival of the canons of the classical tradition in the hegemonic culture, as well as its impact on the construction of the systems of power and productivity. With this project, Maté also claims the need to subvert these ideals so that they respond to a more diverse and plural reality.

To carry out this set of works, the artist worked for a long time at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando, and more specifically, in the workshop of casts and artistic reproductions of this institution, which treasures plaster casts and molds of the canonical sculptures of Classical Antiquity. These molds have been used in the academic training of countless generations of artists and have served in turn to make copies that are housed in the national collections of the Spanish State. Maté's introduction into one of the hegemonic institutions of the academic artistic tradition, as well as his interest in working with these molds, can be understood as an attempt to unravel who has the power and legitimacy to reproduce the canon, to keep it in force and make it continue to function as the rule from which a heteronormative reality, an orthodox and impossible beauty, continues to be constructed. Maté goes to the origin of these molds, although to verify that such origin does not exist or that, at most, it is extremely remote, since its riches us through copies of reproductions of other copies that in turn were copied. Even so, the canon continues to exercise power through that perpetual succession. It is in this gear of technical and ideological reproducibility, in this mechanism that makes copying a model of aesthetic and ethical transmission, where Maté introduces himself, as an infiltrator, or as a hacker -as Eloy Tizón has pointed out² -, to insert a stone in the system and destabilize it from within. An inside that, in this case, is that of the art system. I conceive of the artist," says Maté, "as a tennis player who, with one blow, deflects the trajectory of life with the same energy"³.

The deviation Maté practices in the journey of the canon through "Canon" is subtle, but effective enough to generate a momentary suspension of the game, the need to go find the deflected ball, and also some confusion that makes us wonder what rules (never better said) we have been playing so far, and how we should play from now on. Maté recovers and studies those canons to alter them and generate other molds, other more heterodox and inclusive references; new, less canonical canons, in short. From those modified molds, he gives rise to new sculptural works and drawings that have as reference emblematic sculptures of Greco-Latin culture, but that incorporate modifications that, while allowing us to recognize the original, transform them remarkably, for example, moving away from the Caucasian features, making them less athletic, changing some gender attributes or aging them.

¹ Piña, B. (19.5.2017). Otro canon de belleza griego. *Metropolitan*.

² Tizón, E. (21.7. 2017). Canon. *El Cultural*. <https://elcultural.com/Canon>

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In the main space of Palmadotze we find the Venus of Canova (black) (2016), sculpted from a copy of the Italic Venus of the Palatine Gallery in Florence, but partially racialized so that her face abandons the Caucasian features and acquires those of a Venus of African origin, thus reminding us that the common ancestor from which all humans descend is a black woman, the so-called "mitochondrial Eve". There is also a version of The Boy with the Thorn, who's original is in the Capitoline Museum in Rome, but of which there is also a copy in the Prado Museum. In Maté's version, the child is a girl (Niña de la Espina, 2016), although the only things the artist has modified are her genitals and breasts, keeping the face and the rest of the body intact. Something similar happens with Apolina (2016), a transsexualized version of the god Apollo. Other similar operations give rise to a set of charcoal portraits, among which we find, among others, an imposing Venus de Medici (hermaphrodite) (2018), made taking as a reference the homonymous Venus found in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, but represented in this case - as the title indicates - as a male and female figure at the same time; something similar to what happens with the Venus de Milo Doriphorus (2018), which combines body parts of the famous athlete of Polyclitus with others belonging to the famous Aphrodite of Alexander of Antioch.

Palmadotze also presents a selection of drawings and sculptural busts from the series Mitos Huecos (Hollow Myths), which gives its name to the exhibition, and in which the iconoclastic impulse that pervades Maté's project around the canon is made explicit in a much more aggressive, but at the same time highly poetic way. The series comprises portraits and sculptures that also take as a reference a series of classical figures, but in their representation, the artist amputates their faces, leaving their empty interior (or inner emptiness) in view. Both the gesture and the title present an interesting ambivalence: they warn us, on the one hand of the need to attack those imposed and rigid canon in order to empty them of content and invalidate them; on the other hand, they suggest that these aesthetic ideals may already be hollow, with nothing to sustain them beyond their external attractiveness.

Mateo Maté's project invites us to review the relevance of the classical canons in our contemporaneity. There will be those who consider that these aesthetic-normative references are already obsolete and have little impact on the contemporary imaginary. There will even be those who may think that the variations on the rule that Maté introduces are not so subversive in our times, in which there seems to be a greater acceptance, and even a celebration of everything that deviates from the hegemonic and canonical. These suspicious attitudes to the validity of this type of claims only make the relevance of a work like "Hollow Myths" more evident. The classical canon is still in force in our contemporaneity, and it is still linked to power; not only to political power, but above all, to the power of consumption, to capitalism, through advertising, the media and, with unusual vigour, in social networks, the advertising space for excellence in this era in which life itself, through the image, becomes a marketable and profitable product. The canonical image circulates and reproduces itself in the social sphere through digital molds and casts, under algorithmic logics, and it is a productive image, because it seduces and generates desire. The capitalist machinery then transforms and orients all this yearning for beauty and perfection towards multiple and varied forms of consumption. As for the supposed acceptance of the heterodox and of what goes against the norm, as Maté comments, "It is true that we are in it, and the laws already exist, but this supposed freedom to express oneself and behave as one feels or desires, sometimes only occurs in big cities and in certain countries"⁴. "Canon" can also be a warning that hatred and rejection of what is different and of dissident ways of being, living, and loving are still present, and at any moment they can burst forth with the utmost aggressiveness, from the purest, darkest, most canonical evil.

³ C. Fanjul, S. (2.6.2017). El canon subvertido. *El País*.

https://elpais.com/ccaa/2017/06/01/madrid/1496333750_867331.html

⁴ IDEM