



MAX SCHREIER

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Madrid Through the Eyes of Artist Secundino Hernández

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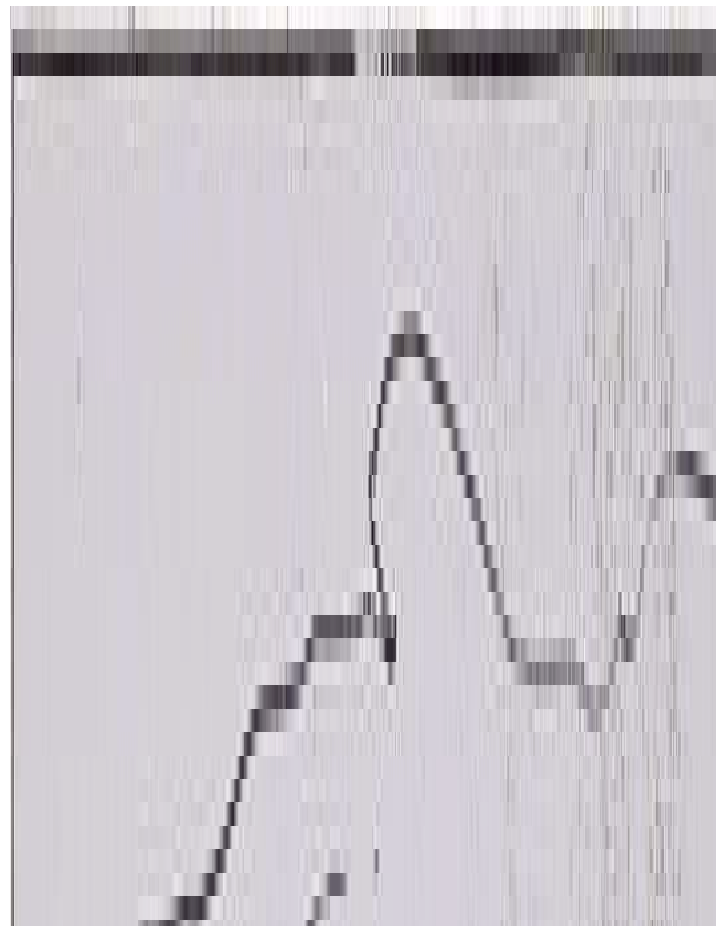
15 DAYS AGO

There is a manic energy in [Secundino Hernández's](#) work that is not immediately reflected in his personality. When I meet the artist in front of one of his large-scale paintings at the ARCOMadrid fair, before heading to an opening for [Imi Knoebel](#) at [Galería Heinrich Ehrhardt](#), he is poised and thoughtful. His phone rings several times as we speak and he shrugs and apologizes, happily taking calls from each of his five gallerists who are at the fair—all the while keeping a watchful eye on his daughter, a toddler who seems as comfortable around her father's canvas as many of the collectors who approached it earlier in the day. En route to the gallery, Hernández has kindly offered to talk about his hometown of Madrid, where he was born, studied, had his first solo exhibition in 2002, and continues to call home.

What is initially meant to be a physical tour of his home city becomes a conceptual journey through the meaning and value of place in making art. For Hernández, Madrid is not a place where he makes work, but rather an intrinsic part of his practice. Without Madrid, his paintings would not exist. His passion for the city extends beyond his own practice—he expects as much of the city as he receives from it. When asked about project spaces, he expresses his frustration with funding for opportunities for artists and the insular nature of the Spanish art world. Our excursion proves to be an exposition on what it means to truly love a place, for its uniqueness, idiosyncrasies, and as well as even its failings.

Max Schreier: How does Madrid influence your practice?

Secundino Hernández: I wouldn't say that the environment



occasionally influences my practice but rather my perception of what art is. For me, art and painting are activities that should be in touch with daily life, work, and have an impact on the average person.

My studio is in Coslada, an industrial area full of garages and warehouses. I love being surrounded by workers, mechanics, and operators, as I feel that an artist should be a worker. We work with shapes, colors, and ideas, and we should aim to transform the world in a tangible way as if we were construction workers. I love when these workers from the nearby garages drop by my studio and ask about my paintings and their meaning. Sometimes it is shocking and other times it is extremely rewarding, as you get contact and input from people that are not art experts or curators. In that moment, I feel that I have achieved something special; a human dimension to my paintings.

MS: What do you love about the art scene in Madrid?

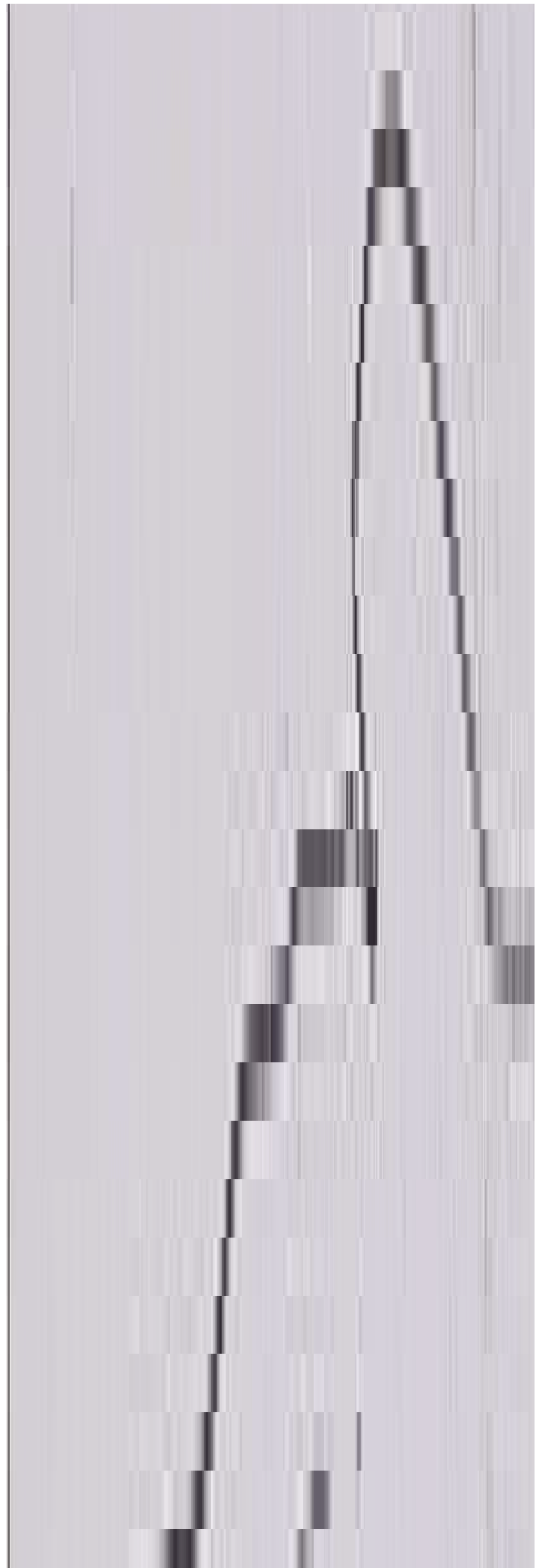
SH: What I love about Madrid, which is not easy to find in other parts of Europe, is the balance between chaos, friendship, nightlife, innovation, noise, and the stimulating need to overcome obstacles. Being an artist in Madrid is not that easy, so artists are working with a no-future perspective that can be extremely exciting. Here you can find artists working at music festivals, collaborating in alternative spaces, creating publications or fanzines, all without thinking about how the public will receive the work. Of course the risk of losing focus exists, but that is “very Madrid” as well.

MS: Where in the city do you go to discover new artwork?

SH: I always love to hang around the galleries in the center of the city with friends, looking for new places, such as the new galleries close to Museo Reina Sofia (an area which is now being called Madrid DF, after the street Doctor Fourquet where there is a high concentration of new small galleries). Sometimes I take a look at what’s happening at [The Goma](#) gallery or Galería Alegría. But probably the best way to discover is listening to friends, visiting studios, and speaking with colleagues and critics. Recently the writer and art critic Joaquín Jesus Sanchez Diaz—with whom I have collaborated on several exhibitions—has been a key source for me. He is young, extremely smart, and a perfect barometer of the subterranean trends in the city.

MS: What are your favorite rooms in the Museo del Prado and the Museo Reina Sofia?

SH: El Prado and Reina Sofia are part of my life. I’ve spent hours and hours in their rooms, figuring out how everything was painted, learning, and strolling around the rooms with no objective, just waiting to be surprised. The feeling of being there is very gratifying. Of course the rooms dedicated



to [Velázquez](#), [Goya](#), or [El Greco](#) [at El Prado] are places to enjoy, study, and connect with my ancestors. But on the other side, discovering lesser-known paintings is always very exciting. Both collections are constantly changing, full of new angles and areas of interest.

MS: Where do you take your friends from out of town when they want to have a true Madrilenian meal? And where do you take them after dinner?

SH: In Madrid you can always have a great meal and some “cañas,” small glasses of beer that allow you to drink in small quantities while you chat with friends. Often I will hang around the city center (Malasaña, Gran Vía, or Chueca) and have some “yayos,” a popular cocktail of vermouth and gin, at Casa Camacho. Then, when the sun sets, the best place to hide is the cocktail bar, Bar Cock, where you will always meet interesting people from almost every social and economic level.

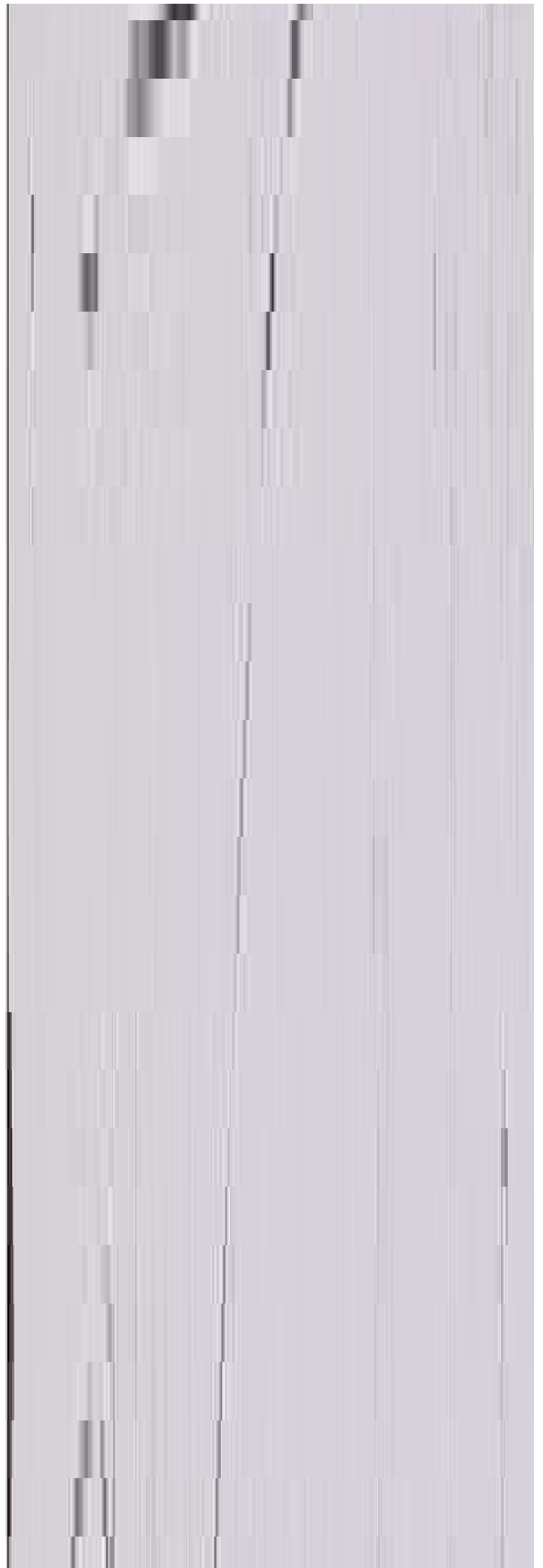
MS: The city is renowned for its established institutions, but it also has a growing number of project spaces and nonprofits. Which of these stand out to you?

SH: We are living in exciting times as people have realized that no one is supporting the art scene and government funding for institutions is shrinking, so there is a new generation of artists and galleries that are taking risks without expecting support. This is great because it introduces more freedom for artists to focus on their work rather than on “projects” or “grants.” What we need now is a balance between that freedom and new ways of supporting the arts to ensure that these small projects do not disappear due to lack of resources. More specifically, I would highlight ephemeral projects like [Hambre](#) or [Presente \(Presente\)](#), which both take place in different locations other than Madrid once per year.

MS: Is it more important for the Madrid art scene to bring work and talent from other art capitals in or to highlight its local artistic scene and try to present it outward?

SH: In Spain we have serious problems highlighting our local scene and presenting it outside of Spain. In Madrid we have had amazing artists from different generations such as [Luis Gordillo](#) or Luis Claramunt who could have been extremely relevant throughout Europe, but are unfortunately completely unknown outside of Spain. Our young artists need to make themselves present outside the current system that we have. When you think about artists like [José Díaz](#) or Luis Felipe Talo, it is clear that they could have a presence in international galleries and exhibitions if they were known outside of Madrid.

MS: What makes an artist a “Madrid Artist” rather than



just an artist who works in Madrid?

SH: Being a “Madrid Artist” is more than just working in Madrid. It means that you have to accept chaos and the absurd as something inherent to life. One needs to have a taste for the grotesque and bizarre. It is being open to meeting people from everywhere and being able to behave both in the palaces of Barrio de Salamanca and in the barrios in the industrial area of the city. Of course having a sharp sense of humor is necessary, as well as a weird attraction to cruelty and what Valle-Inclán called “esperpento”: a distorted way of looking at reality without taking it too seriously. You’ll never find that in other cities such as Berlin or London. For me, Madrid has an exciting lack of civilization that is not commonly found in Europe.

MS: When you get home after traveling, what is something you must do on your first night back home?

SH: Go to see my little girl Gala. That’s the most important thing now and the most valuable time I spend.

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