
Art and design

Artist of the week special: Asier Mendizabal, Alejandro Vidal, Adrià Julià

In the third part of our series assessing the top rising artists from the countries involved in the [Guardian's New Europe season](#), we look to Spain



Alejandro Vidal's *El tiempo del odio*. Photograph: Galeria Joan Prats

Skye Sherwin

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Spain is perhaps not the easiest place to be a young artist. Madrid's 30-year-old art fair [Arco](#) has grown into a major collector destination in recent years, and the city remains a fairly conservative art centre, focused on big names. In spite of mushrooming rent in Barcelona, it's where the more innovative art projects are found. Yet there's a long way to travel between small-scale independent spaces where fledgling talents can show their work and major museums such as [Macba](#), with little to fill the distance in between. Moving onwards and upwards is tricky, but not impossible, as these three have proved.

Asier Mendizabal is set to make a big international splash in 2011. This summer, his work is included in art historian [Bice Curiger](#)'s flagship [group show](#) at the Venice Biennale and he's rounding off the year with a solo outing at London's [Raven Row](#). Born and raised in the political hotbed of [Basque country](#), Mendizabal tackles how ideology is given form. Working in any number of mediums, from film to silkscreens, engravings and sculpture, his interests range from the ad hoc creations of grassroots movements to the intricate stories that lie behind public sculpture. He takes a people's monument to communist figureheads Marx and Lenin as the subject of the photographic work [Otxarkoaga \(M-L\)](#). The monument was erected in a working-class district of [Bilbao](#) using a statue salvaged from the Russian embassy at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall. A number of his key works also test political potency with flags, like [Not All That Moves \(Is Red\)](#), huge hanging standards in anarchist black and red.

With work centring on the often controlled nature of transgression, Barcelona-based [Alejandro Vidal](#) has earned a rep as the bad boy of Spanish art. His videos and photographs tend to tap into urban tribes and youth subcultures, with a cavalcade of topless rock chicks, black leather, grimy T-shirts and tattooed flesh. In one memorable photograph, [Invocation](#) from 2007, a PVC-clad groin gyrates against a provocatively angled police baton. What Vidal effectively gets at is limp, impotent stereotypes: these are ritualised acts and poses struck, aped over and over in music videos, band posters and magazines. For his [New York debut](#) last year he extended this theme to frontline news. Exploring

media representations of terror, the video *Firestorm* wed images of exploding fireworks with the sound of bombs. Meanwhile, his photo series, *A Song Before Sunset*, staged a Latin American form of political protest, the symbolic washing of a national flag before government HQs.

Barcelona-born and now Los Angeles-based, Adrià Julià's work explores fantasies of home and identity. Among his best-known film and photography series is the wonderful *La Villa Basque*, which turns a local Californian theme restaurant into a moving, provocative meditation on the ties of culture. Set up by Basque country émigrés, it's a rundown place, as Julià's shaky camerawork reveals, more a suppository of memory than an eatery, with dusty Spanish knick knacks and battered tabletops.

Julià presents its "stars", including a waiter who performs traditional dance with oddball hip-hop inflections and a bored blonde waitress in Basque costume, with the big movie glamour that Scorsese brings to small-time hoods. The conflation of documentary and big screen fiction is another theme, seen in an ongoing series of videos centring on a forgotten film, *Inchon*. Through cast and crew interviews, Julià has unearthed the bizarre story of this 1982 propaganda film that used real footage of the Gwangju massacre in Korea for battle scenes, with American soldiers stepping in as extras.

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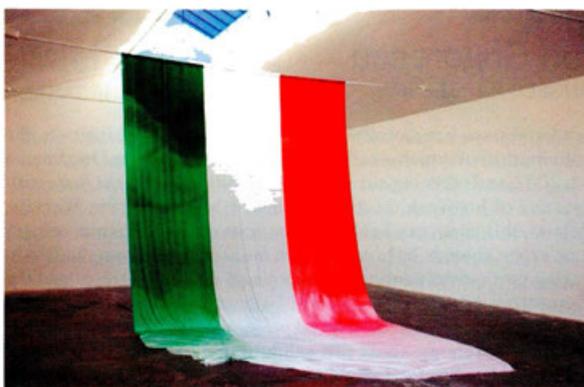
MILAN

Alejandro Vidal

GALLERIA ARTRA

In 2000, the Colectivo Sociedad Civil, a group of Peruvian artists and activists, organized a public action of protest and civil resistance in Plaza Mayor in Lima, Peru. Alluding to the reigning regime's corruption, their symbolic action *Lava la Bandera* consisted of the washing of the national flag. In *A Song Before Sunset*, 2009, Alejandro Vidal presents a restaging of this rite in ten photographs. Some people, faces unseen, intently soak flags of different nations. Yet the images are not a commentary on current or historic events, and, indeed, the event that precipitated the work fades behind the image. Vidal has always worked with the representation of urban rituals, including the violent practices of youth subcultures and metropolitan "tribes," but his art maintains a distance from any documentary form. Instead, he is interested in understanding codes, in the grammar of signs and stereotyped gestures, produced or reinforced by their representation in the media. As evinced in this recent exhibition, "Hell Is a Place Where Memory Is Dead," the artist isolates and abstracts these elements from their contexts, then restages them in detailed, artificial form.

In Vidal's photographs, then, he treats reality as an interloper that lurks in the background. This strategy was already clear in the artist's earlier works, also on view: the video *Tactical Disorder*, 2006, and the



Alejandro Vidal.
History Is Hoping for Tomorrow, 2009. Silk
flag, 14' 9" x 29' 6".

photographs *The Line Between the Devil's Teeth*, 2007, and *Sabbatique*, 2007. In the photographs of *A Song Before Sunset*, the flags are difficult to recognize, any references to a specific national context faded. But the scenes are reconstructed with maniacal attention to detail, which seems accurate, though one cannot be sure, and the reality effect is powerful. Just as in his earlier photographic or video works, the artist has created a perfect theatrical set where nothing is left to chance. Vidal analyzes the gesture of the washing of the flag with cold precision. He also investigates its aftermath: In the middle of the gallery there hung an Italian flag that had been washed repeatedly until it was partially faded (*History Is Hoping for Tomorrow*, 2009). The flag was large and perspicaciously occupied the space, but in its discolored and weakened state it could not help but bring to mind that country's current condition, and perhaps the broader erosion of the nation-state generally.

A different kind of artifice appears in the video *Firestorm*, 2009. This work is a montage of shots of fireworks, splendid explosions of flowery forms set as decorations against the nighttime sky. Here Vidal does not reconstruct a set but uses found footage. He abolishes people and action. He does not use multiple framings but favors a single, frontal view, albeit edited with a syncopated rhythm. The emotional aspect of sound becomes responsible for the construction of meaning; the violent noise of a bombardment overtakes the sound track, suggesting a scene of aggression. This state of tension, like that of Vidal's photographs, demands alertness to both ciphers and meanings.

—Alessandra Pioselli

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.

STUDIO

Society of the

In Alejandro Vidal's multimedia works, chaos and violence are the unseen subjects

BY BARBARA POLLACK

Spanish artist Alejandro Vidal is a master of impending violence, creating scenarios brimming with aggressive energy and outright criminal acts without ever spilling over into blood and gore. His large-scale photographs, videos, and installations have been shown in venues ranging from the Museum of Contemporary Art Taipei to the Center for Art and Media (ZKM) in Karlsruhe, Germany—but barely at all in the United States. This past spring, Vidal's visceral yet thoughtful and nuanced works were featured in his first American solo show, at Participant Inc, a not-for-profit gallery on New York's Lower East Side.

Born in Palma de Mallorca in 1972, Vidal has resided since 2000 in Barcelona, living with his girlfriend and daughter in a large apartment where he also maintains his studio. In the late '90s, he resided briefly in London while attending Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design. He never received a degree and dropped out of a series of universities and art schools, each time after only a few months. "I always thought that a university would kill my ideas, my energy, my way of working," says the artist. He began his career painting in the style of Jean-Michel Basquiat, and was early on exploring themes of violence in his artworks. He had images of terrorists in ski masks in his first solo show, at Andreas Grimm in Munich in 1998. Soon after, he was a finalist for the Son Carrió Prize, the Ciutat de Manacor Prize, and the Marratxi Prize, all in Spain.

By 2000, Vidal realized he had reached his limits with painting, after introducing photographs in a series of collaged canvases. Although he continued to make sketches and drawings, he also began to experiment with photography and video. In 2003 he created "Exercises in Self-Protection," a series of videos for which he staged muggings and street fights. "I am interested in the moment prior to violence," says Vidal. "You don't know what is going to happen, but you know something is about to happen." An installation of three photographs the next year, *An anatomy of violent crime*, featured a group of protagonists playing with guns. Vidal selected models who were exceptionally glamorous so as to contradict the media's portrayals of terrorists.

Vidal is wary of being labeled, however. He points out that he has also



explored the energy of punk bands and raves. "I think to be an artist is a political decision in a way, but I don't want to be identified as a political artist," he explains. Vidal is currently represented by Galería Joan Prats in Barcelona and Artra Gallery in Milan, where his photos are priced between \$4,000 and \$7,500 and his videos between \$6,000 and \$8,000.

For one of his most ambitious videos, *Material Dust* (2006), Vidal gained permission to follow a film crew in Hong Kong during the making of an action movie, tracking the filmmakers' movements with the urgency of a stalker. In another video, a hand holding a cell phone shoots up from a crowd at a rock concert, the tiny bright screen shimmering in the darkness and capturing the scene from a different perspective. In each of these works, Vidal explores how the media represents chaos and violence, but he offers this highly cerebral analysis while seducing viewers with the color-saturated hyperactivity of the moment.

Despite his protestations, he continues to focus on political themes. In the photograph *There's no room left for the strong* (2009), he shows a band of young people washing flags, a form of political protest in parts of Latin America, where the act takes place in public squares. But in Vidal's images, the protestors are isolated in the rain along the side of a highway at night, with many of the pictures having been shot through the windshield of a car. "It's about the lack of political emancipation of our youth," he says.

To make the video *Firestorm* (2009), Vidal gathered images from the Internet of fireworks going off during various Independence Day celebrations around the world and then mixed them with a soundtrack of war explosions, including soldiers shouting over the noise of bombings. It is a spectacular work, thrilling to watch and disturbing to hear. "It looks like buildings are being blown up or that car bombs are going off," says Lia Gangitano, curator of the Participant Inc show, "but they really are completely benign images of detonations and fireworks. It shows that most of us anticipate violence, even when it's not there." ■

OPPOSITE Alejandro Vidal says his latest work is "not about war. I am talking about the globalization of images of terror." **ABOVE** (clockwise from top left) A photo from the "Exercises in Self-Protection" series, 2003; a still from *Firestorm*, 2009, in which he set fireworks to a soundtrack of war; a still from *Pushing Up the Power*, 2007, which was filmed at raves; and *Falling from Trees*, 2009, from Vidal's series of photographs of young people washing flags.

Barbara Pollack, a contributing editor of ARTnews, is the author of *The Wild, Wild East: An American Art Critic's Adventures in China*.