

JONATHAN JONES ON ART BLOG



Dictators in fridges: the artist putting Franco and co in cold storage

Spanish artist Eugenio Merino has stuffed mannequins of totalitarian leaders into chiller cabinets. It's just what we need in this age of burgeoning nationalism



Eugenio Merino – creator of Always Franco, above – is being taken to court, accused of damaging the honour of the late Spanish dictator. Photo: Guillermo Martinez/Corbis

It seems incredible that General Franco is still oppressing artists in Spain from beyond the grave. The dictator who rose to power by defeating Spain's Republic in the 1930s civil war and ruled until his death in 1975 might seem to be a forgotten nightmare in today's democratic Spain. But an artist has succeeded in provoking a foundation that preserves his memory into taking some distinctly intolerant legal steps.

Eugenio Merino is being taken to court – for the second time – for works he has made using the image of the late authoritarian ruler. His work Punching Franco is a lifelike head of Franco designed to be used as a punchbag; the Franco Foundation says it is "demeaning".

He has also been sued for his work Always Franco, a lifelike figure of Franco inside a fridge. He has now extended this out to create a whole series of dictators in fridges.



Stiff breeze ... Mao

Zedong, Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez as artworks in coolers by Eugenio Merino.

Photograph: Daniel Garcia Marco/Corbis

Merino's refrigerated dictators sound great. Hopefully we can look forward to Mussolini by the cold pasta, Stalin next to the vodka and Pinochet's fridge being left off so he goes rotten and has to be dumped in the rubbish. Can you recycle fascists?

Apparently you can, in 21st-century Europe. The amazing thing about Merino's dictator art is not that he does it but that people will come out of the woodwork to take offence at a satire on someone like Franco.

The atrocities that brought Franco to power are well-documented, not least in art. Picasso would not let his painting Guernica be shown in Spain while Franco lived. It is a howl of rage at the bombing of Guernica by the Luftwaffe, carried out on Franco's behalf in the Spanish civil war. The poet Federico García Lorca was murdered by fascists in the same war.

Franco won but his true face was seen by artists and still is, in these appropriately contemptuous portraits of him as punching bag or chilled corpse.

How can anyone speak out in defence of Franco's reputation? Yet in contemporary Europe this is no surprise. Neo-fascists have become part of the political scene in

Greece, while the current situation in Ukraine has eerie echoes of the 1930s. In Britain the "patriotic" rantings of Ukip are taken seriously, Scottish nationalists pursue autarchy and even the centenary of the terrible first world war is seen by some as an opportunity for nationalist nostalgia.

These are confused days. The lies and delusions of every variety of nationalism get an absurdly tolerant hearing as the global economic optimism of a decade ago seems a long, long time ago.

The opposite of global capitalism is not, it turns out, a new left but a new right which casually dabbles in odious nationalism of various tints. So we can't be sure the age of the dictators is gone. Maybe Franco and his brethren really are just waiting in their fridges.



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