

Maria Loboda: Havoc in the Heavenly Kingdom

24.2.-14.5.2017, Kunsthalle Basel

EN

“I am aware that I am speaking about battles that were fought, lost, and won, and empires that collapsed a long time ago, but I still wonder if these historical examples provide an eternal warning in their recurrence.”
—Maria Loboda

Pay attention to her titles. There is subterfuge in Maria Loboda’s use of language and in her deployment of stories at once obscure, magical, or strange in the making of her art. Their historical exactitude is largely irrelevant; what matters is that they circulate and in so doing tell us something about our desires, fears, pasts, and potential futures. As a student, the artist’s first public presentation was an assembly of rather ordinary items, including white wood, verbena, fine steel, goatskin, and green ribbons. But its title, *The Evocation of Lucifuge Rofocale* (2004), meant that visitors who read it inadvertently found themselves calling forth the dark lord in a room full of all the items from the classic demonological recipe to summon him. The project revealed the artist’s persistent fascination with how mere things can be bestowed with a mysterious and auratic force.

What better way, after all, to describe that numinous thing we call “art” than to realize that besides kings and priests and bankers, artists are perhaps the only beings with the power to give value to things that ostensibly have none? Loboda does just that, rendering strange and unforgettable her combinations of willfully austere or simple-looking objects by layering them with encrypted backstories culled from the likes of obscure military treatises, alchemy, mythology, the occult, and museological research. Her tactics are neither nostalgic nor merely referential; rather, she transforms her findings into sculptural and photographic works whose force lies beyond any surface aesthetic appeal.

At Kunsthalle Basel, Loboda’s first institutional solo exhibition in Switzerland, the artist presents an ensemble of newly commissioned works that continue her particular brand of contemporary archaeology.

ROOM 3

9
Young Warrior in the Landscape Watching the Birds Go By (Pastoral), 2017
 Fabric, gorget, plaster
 310 × 30 × 30 cm

10
Trample Your Atavistic Ennui into This Sisal Rug, 2017
 Sisal runner, various elements
 Dimension variable

ROOM 1

3a
Hypothetical Reconstruction of a Gateway V, 2017
 color, drywall
 500 × 400 × 50 cm

3b
Hypothetical Reconstruction of a Gateway VI, 2017
 color, drywall
 500 × 400 × 50 cm

3c
Hypothetical Reconstruction of a Gateway VII, 2017
 color, drywall
 500 × 400 × 50 cm

4
Mrs. Van Hopper, 2017
 Cigarette, cream, glass
 Dimension variable

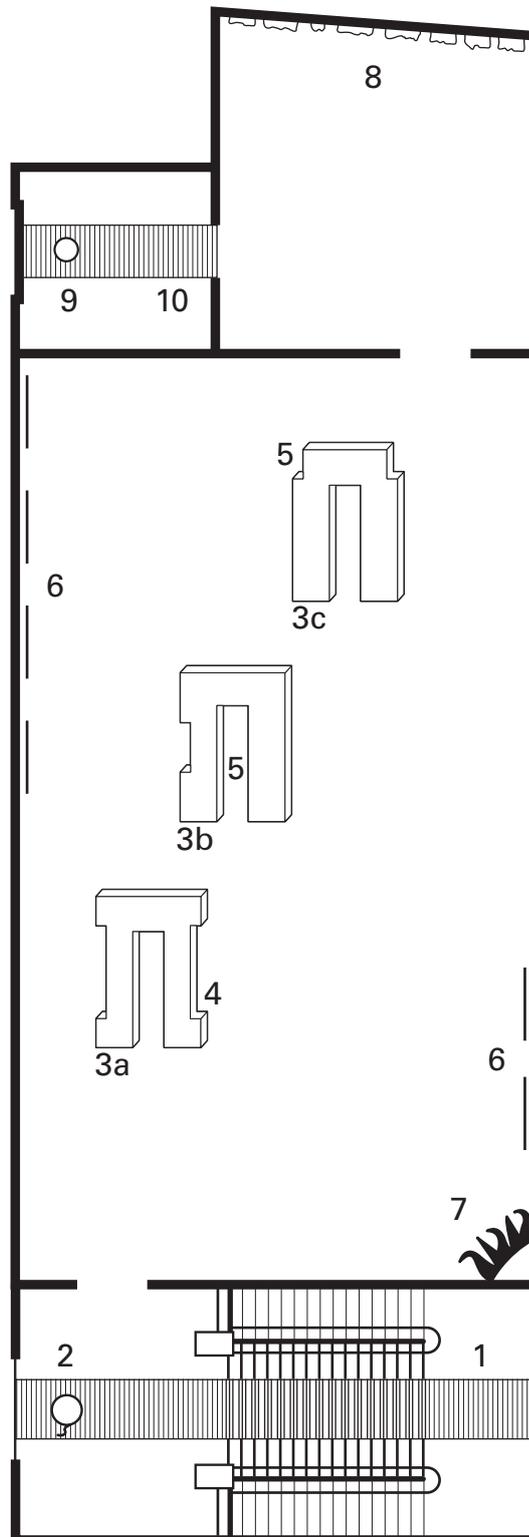
5
Note the Incendiary Weapon on the Left Ledge of the Third Gate, 2017
 Fabric, glass, liquids, vinyl letters
 Dimension variable

6
The Evolution of Kings, 2017
 6 prints on Hahnemühle Cotton Paper
 Each 100 × 150 cm;
 each 102 × 152 × 4 cm,
 framed

7
Raw Material Coming from Heaven, 2017
 Wall drawing
 Dimension variable

ROOM 2

8
Two Idiots Engaged in a Game of Chess, 2017
 Plaster fragments
 Dimension variable



STAIRS AND LANDING

1
Trample Your Atavistic Ennui into This Sisal Rug, 2017
 Metal rods, sisal runner, various elements
 Dimension variable

2
Young Satyr Turning to Look at His Tail, 2017
 Plaster
 300 × 100 × 70 cm

STAIRS AND LANDING

Loboda has lined the entrance stairs with a sisal runner that leads to *Young Satyr Turning to Look at His Tail*, a plaster pillar fitted with a satyr's tail. Its title references a Roman imperial copy of an ancient Greek sculpture, which in Loboda's hands becomes a cipher for vanity, decadence, and fallen civilizations. The runner that gives prominence to the piece is entitled (loosely borrowing from the 1909 Futurist Manifesto) *Trample Your Atavistic Ennui into This Sisal Rug*, and is held in place by metal stair rods that conceal any number of items slipped between them that were thought in ancient times to ward off evil. It is the first clue in Loboda's exhibition that one thing can hide another, and a sly announcement that each element in her installation hovers between mystery and evidence, occultation and evocation.

ROOM 1

In the central space of the exhibition, three monumental gates, *Hypothetical Reconstruction of a Gateway (V, VI, VII)*, in various geometric formations, are inspired by the ancient gates of the temple complex of Karnak. Here they signify hypothetical splendor, creating a space of sacred presence, hinting at the long-gone inhabitants who left behind clues to their eccentric existence. Each is painted with a different approximation of the color celadon, typically used as a ceramic glaze for the service of royalty and once thought to calm troubled souls when gazed at long enough. This color that ancient Chinese artisans regarded as "beyond description" is almost impossible to precisely replicate. Inscribed on one gate is a note that points our attention to the third gate's ledge, where a glass vessel contains a flammable substance and cloth wick, a common do-it-yourself weapon used by rioters, anarchists, and gangsters. This incendiary weapon perhaps reminds us that at the threshold of any great civilization is the power of revolt.

The walls around the gates feature a series of closely cropped, large-scale photographs showing the pants cuffs and shoes of a well-dressed man, perhaps an investment banker or politician, carelessly dirtying his finery in filth and mud. It may be a met-

aphor for the ways in which those in power reach it through any means. The series is entitled *The Evolution of Kings*, after an ethnological study of magic and religion that traces the evolution of not only kings and gods, but also sacred and taboo objects—a study that inspired the artist throughout the show.

Appearing as if by divine intervention high above the exhibition's central gallery is *Raw Material Coming from Heaven*, a copy of a 1578 fresco whose origins are unknown, discovered in the 1980s in the Bernardine Church in Vilnius. Seemingly haphazardly drawn onto the arcs of the church's pillar, the awkwardly formed and almost pagan-looking symbol acts as the blackest eye looking down at churchgoers. Here it emanates from a corner of the exhibition, looking down upon Kunsthalle Basel visitors and brandishing magical, pagan properties.

ROOM 2

A back room contains a large-scale work entitled *Two Idiots Engaged in a Game of Chess*, representing an image found on an Egypt Papyrus dating from 1186 to 1069 BC. The image satirizes society and human activity, showing animals in reversals of the natural order: a lion and a strange hooved creature playing a board game. In Loboda's version, the image is spread across multiple broken plaster relief fragments that look like excavated archaeological artifacts from an ancient civilization—or perhaps our own.

ROOM 3

In the smallest gallery is a high pillar, titled *Young Warrior in the Landscape Watching the Birds Go By (Pastoral)*, anointed with an element of a metal armor and a delicate silk scarf—a reminder that a reflection on war and power underlies Loboda's cryptic unraveling of our present.

What does it all mean and how does it add up? Extending an exploration of the archaic, the mystical, and the transcendent that has preoccupied her throughout her career, Loboda instills each object in her exhibition with a witchy presence, but rarely leaves us with unequivocal answers about their meaning. And despite the magnitude of the subjects she might address, she maintains

a light touch, finding humor in how the arcane can speak to us today. For there is “havoc in the heavenly kingdom,” as her title announces from the start, taking its name from an ancient Chinese myth of Sun Wukong, known as the Monkey King, who is allowed into heaven to better be controlled, but in turn creates mayhem—a veritable metaphor for our present moment. But it also suggests that art and politics are never far apart. If the exhibition is heaven, artists are the divinities that we invite in and who channel chaos, all the better to reveal the power structures that actually order the universe.

Maria Loboda was born in 1979 in Kraków, PL; she lives and works in Berlin.

The exhibition is generously supported by the Ernst & Olga Gubler-Habluetzel Foundation and is made in partnership with the Adam Mickiewicz Institute.



Thanks to
Gilbert Bachour, Tomas Bekeris, Ewa Borysiewicz,
Mar Cubero, Gina Folly, Ronnie Fueglistner,
Julian Irlinger, Regina Lange, Jonas Leihener,
Sean Yongxiang Li, Pedro Maisterra, Clara Meister,
Ivan Murzin, Krzysztof Olendzki, Mindaugas Ružė,
Frederike Seifert, Ula Tornau, Constantin Thun,
and Belen Valbuena

GUIDED TOURS THROUGH THE EXHIBITION

Every Sunday at 3 pm guided tour, in German

12.3.2017, Sunday, 3 pm
curator's tour, in English and French

16.3.2017, Thursday, 6:30 pm
guided tour, in English

EDUCATION / PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Children's tour *I Spy with My Little Eye!*

12.3.2017, Sunday, 3 pm

30.4.2017, Sunday, 3 pm

A tour and workshop for children,
from 5—10 yrs., in German,
by reservation only:
kunstvermittlung@kunsthallebasel.ch

Guided tour by students in the context of
Perspektive Kunstvermittlung

30.3.2017, Thursday, 6:30 pm

Guided tour through the exhibition conducted
by students of the Institute for Art and Design
Education, Academy of Art and Design,
FHNW in Basel. Free entry for students,
in German.

Look Therapy - A cooperation with the
Institute of Fashion Design,
Academy of Art and Design, FHNW in Basel

13.5.2017, Saturday, 2—5 pm

Students of fashion are developing projects
related to the exhibition and use its
scenography as the backdrop to present
their work. The event is accompanied
by the launch of *Doing Fashion Paper*.
www.doingfashion.ch

In the Kunsthalle Basel library you will find
an associative selection of publications related
to Maria Loboda's artistic practice.

More information at kunsthallebasel.ch