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Contemporary Art Magazine

CHEWDAY'S, 139 Lambeth Walk, London SE11 6EE

Mathis Gasser: The Dark Forest



Title : Mathis Gasser, The Dark Forest, Installation view

Website : <http://www.chewdays.com>

Credit : Courtesy the artist and CHEWDAYS, London. Photographer: Damian Griffiths.



Mathis Gasser: The Dark Forest

CHEWDAY'S

13 May - 1 July 2017

Review by Carolina Mostert

'Ship': a vessel adapted to navigation.

'-ship': word-forming element meaning 'state, condition of being'.

The meaning of a word is often defined by the context. Upon hearing 'ship', hardly anyone doubts whether the speaker is referring to a boat or whether the term is being used as a suffix, as in 'relationship'. As a noun, 'ship' has a specific role which is completely different from the one played by the same set of five letters attached at the end of a word.

This clear role-play in language is blurred in the realm of art. In this context, 'ship' as in a vessel adapted to navigation and '-ship' as in the word-forming element meaning 'state, condition of being' are no longer worlds apart. In 'The Dark Forest' we see the light. The exhibition runs at CHEWDAY'S, London. Mathis Gasser transfers on to his canvas a digital diagram from the online forum deviantart.com charting all spacecraft featured throughout the history of science fiction, in novels, comics, video games. These ships are meant to travel through the sky from star to star, and do not actually exist. As such, they are adapted to a type of navigation that can only be theorised and never actually practised. They are the purest form of vessel, and so embody the concept of a ship.

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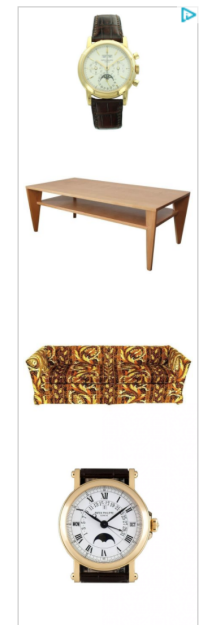


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In front of the oil on canvas, stands a sculpture by Gasser. Carved in low relief, the faces have a tactile, bodily quality that clashes with the flat one-dimensional surface of the painting. The sculpted figures call for an interpretation – migrants ready to depart or immigrants just arrived, perhaps – whose relevance to our times contrasts with the conceptuality of the spaceships. The immediacy of the work is emphasised by the fact that the white plaster is recycled: Gasser used a found, common material to evoke a somewhat familiar scene. The cubes on which the people stand could be houses but may also recall dice: unstable, being rolled, yet to land steadily on one face. As such, Gasser's plaster sculpture embodies a state, a condition of being: the momentary yet compelling circumstance expressed by the suffix '-ship', whose role is to pinpoint a situation.

For all their differences, Gasser might have envisaged a conversation between his works, entitling both 'Inhabitants' and placing the sculpture before the painting intentionally. A detail suggests this: the outline of a sailing ship is hidden inside the base of the sculpture, at the back of the work. It might be Gasser's way of linking the impossible, theoretical world of ships that travel in space to the down-to-earth reality enacted by the plaster cast travellers. The ship sails the distance between two artworks that seemingly share nothing, drawing them close. Meanwhile, it also travels the immense distance between the two distinct meanings of a word, telling us how unbridgeable gaps can be overcome only by a flight of the imagination.

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