

MAR OCULTO solo show of Jenny Feal

May 18th - June 22nd 2019

With the support for the galleries / exhibition from the  French National Center for Plastic Arts.

Jenny Feal's work often mysteriously refers to the *Mar Oculito*, the Occult Sea. She has already used this sombre, enigmatic expression to name precedent research projects, and this new occurrence refers to the shifting, uncertain context the young artist has chosen for this exhibition. Jenny Feal was born in Havana, where the sea represents an omnipresent, insulating environment. The term "occult" has a double meaning: the hidden and the unknown in an esoteric acceptance, as well as purposely hidden elements, confined to secrecy. This ambivalence is found in an exhibition that deals with matters at the same time deep voiced and mute, sad and joyful. The expression *Mar Oculito* is also the title of one of the works in this show, in which piled drops of dried clay suggest a hidden sea that exists as an idea alone, a dissimulated concept that discreetly creates an enclosed bond between all the fragments of a complex narrative hidden behind protective screens. Along with the sea, all types of water are summoned here. For example, the water in the visitor's body, an element that is as vital as it is destructive and clandestine. The entire exhibition is woven together in an underground, serpentine manner. Water connects all the pieces, and yet it seems to have evaporated completely, existing through its very absence. Upon its disappearance, everything seems to have been brought together. The exhibition is composed of works that are to be read both independently and through the intimate relationship created between them.

The exhibition starts with a text written by the artist: the story of the Cococitizens, a fictional narrative of sand dunes and the inhabitants of an island who paradoxically have never seen the sea. Their self-sufficiency may be functional, but they live in confinement. This tiny eco-system lives under the thumb of a far-off government, and their only chance of salvation could come from being swept away by a cyclone. Economic and political confinement weighs upon them, and although they do not all question their situation, the younger generations discuss their destiny and decide to search for a cyclone. The narrative transcribes Jenny Feal's personal experience in Cuba. The angst is real, and the exhibition is built on a series of narratives that illustrate the hopes and limits of her generation. Every element confronts the complex issue of political domination and the tension between renunciation and the desire for a geographic, temporal or contextual elsewhere. Every object contributes to the construction of a general feeling of confinement and anguish in the temporal territory of the art gallery. For example, the Cococitizens are like fencers, and their abundant sweat may be compared to the materialized form of spent water, a vital substance that evaporates in vain, because life in economic insulation destroys their dreams of achievements in the sport world due to a lack of means and restriction of their possibility to travel abroad.

Other objects, either reproduced, melted down in bronze or invented, such as a bed on broken dishes, seem to evoke a shipwreck or impossible repose, whereas a shaving brush that used to belong to a family member, a hopeful symbol of accomplishment and yet a painful example of the price one sometimes has to pay to gain one's freedom, has been melted down, immortalized by its own destruction, and ends up incarnating the political metaphor of longed-for change.

In Cuba, water is omnipresent, especially as a territorial frontier, however the island is more specifically incarnated in her work by land. Water and clay, so present in her pieces, represent the relationship all these elements maintain, generating the tension that impregnates her work. The combination of clay and water is more than just a material happening, it is a metaphor of life, with the intrinsic ambivalence that resides in the absence of life: death. The sensual texture of clay is her artistic demiurge, omnipresent in her work. She considers it as a noble material, thanks to which everything is possible. In the Bible, the first man is named *ha-adam*, a term designating the earth, from which Golem, in Jewish mythology, emerges. Jenny Feal compares this material to thought, the flexible, malleable materialization of thought. Work in clay can be interrupted, continued step by step, dried, or broken down... Philosophically, clay is a timeless material; it can be endlessly remodelled. Jenny Feal recalls her first piece at the Havana Art School: a vertical pipe in clay reaching from the ground to her mouth, like a "canalization piece" that could metaphorically transport water. This first ceramic piece, an evacuation, already suggested the asphyxiating, violent sensation of drowning. And the feeling remains in all her work. The exhibition *Mar oculito* does not withhold a form of traumatism.

Certain elements in the exhibition appear as biographical fragments, whereas others stem from the fictional narrative she created to translate feelings linked to her experience, such as insulation and enclosure. The artist admits that the minute she sets foot on an island, wherever it may be, she feels asphyxiated. A form of sadness hovers over the exhibition, on the surface of this obscure sea formed by drops of sweat, where sombre sentiments only exist thanks to the omnipresent poetry enhanced by irony and the absurd, initiated by the narrative of the Cococitizens. The story that opens the exhibition evolves throughout the different worlds created by the artist. Her process of creation is dominated by the desire to create a story. Perhaps the morality of her story also resides in the fact that the Cococitizens, in spite of their insulation and confinement, and maybe precisely because of them, are still able to dream. They do not need to have seen an *elsewhere* in order to imagine it. All the objects in this exhibition are brought to life according to the same rules, such as the materialization of thought and the fragments of a partly shared personal story that belongs to others along with the artist. These objects are the depositaries of an endless mental exploration. Jenny Feal appeals to all visitors coming to grips with a story whose codes are unfamiliar. At the crossroads of interpretations, in this strange atmosphere, how can one not be struck by such an intuitive, sensual realm.

Matthieu Lelièvre

Translated in English by Emmelene Landon



Participation of Jenny Feal in the 15th Biennial of Lyon 2019

*Là où les eaux se mêlent*

Musée d'Art Contemporain de Lyon, Lyon, France

18.09.2019 – 05.01.2020