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Valentina Pini

Snake Oil

In South Africa, if you are suffering from illness or facing problems that you feel powerless to overcome by yourself, people will likely orient you towards a Sangoma. In order to diagnose the causes of your ailment, this respected healer will usually perform a ritual consisting in throwing bones as a way to reach out to the spirit world and ask advice, before recommending you an appropriate muti—a traditional medicine based on plants, animal or mineral extracts—that will appease your ancestors and eventually cure you. In the world of the Sangomas, the empirical and the spiritual are no contradictory forces; the components of the treatments are selected for their chemical properties just as much as they are for their anagogic power. Similarly, the bones used by the healer to access the wisdom of the ancestors subsume their own ontological materiality into a transcendental energy that allows them to become carriers of inaudible voices and occult meaning. This sacred set of fetishes is proper to each Sangoma and may in fact not consist exclusively of actual bones, but also of tokens such as shells, stones, coins, dominos, dices and whatnot. Each of these objects is endowed with a distinct significance which, in configuration with the position of the other thrown “bones,” will allow the healer to interpret otherworldly messages. In other words, in traditional South African metaphysics—like in countless non-Western cultures—, the dialectic of the visible and the invisible is characterized, not by a fundamental schism between these two realms, but by a spiritual bridge that connects them and upon which the meaning of reality is built. Over the course of Western history, our essentialist tradition has misled us into frequently confusing form with matter, consequently wrongly interpreting the appearance of things as their fundamental nature. And so, the day you consult a Sangoma and look at the thrown objects laying on the ground, remember that these things you see are not merely what they appear to be. What you recognise as a few bones, perhaps a vertebra, a couple of shells and, say, a domino or a coin, bear a completely different meaning for the eye that looks at them from another perspective than your own. And these bones, which are not really bones, will all at once become not only a passageway to an invisible reality, but also the very eyes of these otherworldly spirits, looking at you look at them, thus simultaneously blurring the very boundary between the perceptible and imperceptible.

Valentina Pini’s artistic practice is articulated around the perception of matter. Through her multimedia work, she questions our positivist conception of material reality and the immutability of things. In this regard, she activates the transformative power of the elements and resorts to the illusionist properties of the mediums she works with. During a recent residency in Johannesburg, she focused her research

on the paraphernalia characteristic of divinatory practices in South Africa, and more particularly on the magical essence these everyday objects acquire as a result of their so-to-say non-standard use. Quite literally, the video *Snake Oil* on the large screen shows the gradual submersion in a thick liquid of a still life-like arrangement of a set of bones acquired by the artist over the course of her exploration of the stalls at the Faraday Muti Market in downtown Johannesburg. Most of the elements of this set, however, have been uniformly cast in lead and are in fact reproductions of the original objects that compose the set, thus pointing out at the functional ambiguity of these tokens beyond their explicit nature—an effect reinforced by the close up filming that somewhat hinders the identification of the individual pieces. The seashells out of which the liquid is slowly oozing are reminiscent of eyes, with their ridges and protrusions alluding to eyelashes. They hint at the divinatory virtue of these objects that allow the healer to see beyond the ordinary material realm and penetrate into the spirit world. Playing along with the filmed image, the sound piece that pervades the whole room is a special composition by Micha Seidenberg that is resorting to an algorithmic program in order to generate a sonic piece that responds to the narrative configuration of the video.

Sound is a central element in the second room, too. Voices are heard, those of two Sangomas, invisible yet audible, speaking about their healing and divinatory practice. One of them could be identified as a “traditional” Sangoma, while the other is a sort of “digital” Sangoma who focuses on doing business consulting for start-ups. The contrasting approaches and experience of these two very distinct contemporary shamans tell the tale of the enduring relevance of spiritual practices in Southern African culture in spite of the globalizing dynamics and standardization of economic, relational and medical protocols. Their testimonies demonstrate the possibility of a syncretic society where multiple beliefs and worldviews can cohabitate, and appropriate—even contaminate—each other.

The short 3D animation, back in the main exhibition room, creates a bridge between Pini’s newer works after her residency and her previous research. Initiated last year, this body of work departs from a visually familiar object which, through a process of material alteration, becomes alienated and begins to evoke other possible meanings and interpretations. This object, spinning and moving, seemingly floating in an abstract liquid, could be a sea creature, with its tentacle-like extensions, or maybe an organ—the slice of a brain. It surely looks organic, and yet, the texture applied in the animation makes it appear particularly solid and hard. Two lead casts of the same object are hung, somewhere else in the room. They are an edition specially produced for the show at DIENSTGEBÄUDE. Again, the material used frustrates the exact identification of this nevertheless not-so-foreign thing. Hung this way, one next to one another, they suddenly become like eyebrows, which, like the seashells in the video, refer to the sense of sight through an evocative mechanism that purposely keeps the actual eye invisible.

Throughout the exhibition, Valentina Pini constantly plays on the verge, not only between the visible and the invisible, but also between the recognizable and the indeterminate. What are those red, glossy objects on the two large pictures? Some kind of mineral? How big are they, actually? What seems at stake here, is the way in which we tend, on the one hand, to only believe what we see and, on the other, how sight is de facto a standard factor of empirical truth. The artworks in the show frustrate the attempts at identifying with certainty the nature of what is on display. And in this sense, they challenge the logical relationship between the eye and an absolute sense of truth, thus reminding us that reality

always exceeds the realm of the visible. By the way, the object on the 3D animation is a slice of grapefruit and the photographs show two peeled watermelons.

Text by Simon Würsten Marin

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