

NATALIA HUG

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Wu Du Wu

José Montealegre, Shaun Motsi, Alexander Sova
Curated by Laura Catania

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Natalia Hug presents Wu Du Wu, a group exhibition with works by José Montealegre, Shaun Motsi, and Alexander Sova. What sounds like a seemingly exotic curse emphasizes the three artists' examination of myths, symbols, codes, and customs. In their exploration of traditional values and norms, the artists break with one-sided narratives of a Western historiography and open up new perspectives in a time where reactionary forces are shifting or even determining political and cultural discourse. In his essay "What is this 'black' in black popular culture?" (2009)¹, Stuart Hall describes how the exercising of cultural power has not disappeared through the dissolution of high and low since postmodernism, but has instead taken on a new form: the exercising of cultural hegemony is no longer apparent through binary structures, but through a constant shifting of boundaries.

Elegance is associated with piano, especially the grand piano, which inevitably defines every room due to its dimensions, and everything else has to be oriented around it. It becomes the focal point wherever it stands, and is considered—perhaps precisely because of this—an indication of bourgeois culture, elitism, and white privilege. It is arguably the most popular, yet also the most cumbersome of the musical instruments and does not seem to fit in with today's demands for flexibility. The sculpture *Untitled* (2018) by Shaun Motsi also dominates the exhibition space in this way. Only the castors suggest mobility. Made—as if from one piece—out of plywood and MDF panels, waxed and polished to a high shine, the grand piano is reduced to its form and, detached from its function, becomes a fetish object. Shaun Motsi has been taking up this object since his exhibition *Sweet, Sweet Chariot* (2017). The artist explores pop culture references and motifs in his artistic practice and juxtaposes them non-hierarchically. In its stylized form, the grand piano—as the embodiment of high culture—becomes a symbol of the supposedly beautiful and good.

Alexander Sova takes up arguably the most popular landmark of Western Christian (high) culture in his works *ILYAUNEGRANDEFLAMME* (2019) and *DOWNTOTHEBONES* (2019): the textile objects were created in response to the Notre Dame fire. His materials and formal languages originate from the clothing industry, perhaps the most pop culture place of all. His fascination with fashion—with its direct way of portraying and mediating the present and its themes quickly and incisively—is repeatedly noticeable in his work, but is transferred into abstract canvases and soft objects that dissolve into their form. Text is also a much used medium of the artist. Found reference texts, logos of dominant fashion labels proclaiming an anti-aesthetic, self-written fragments, and lyrics appear, sometimes as dominant prints, and then, in faded traces of chlorine or acrylic, as linguistic pictures fragmented to the point of illegibility. For the works shown, Alexander Sova used passages from the preface to the first edition of Victor Hugo's novel *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831), in which the author prophesied the downfall of the cathedral: "The man who wrote that word upon the wall disappeared from the midst of the generations of man many centuries ago; the word, in its turn, has been effaced from the wall of the church; the church will, perhaps, itself soon disappear from the earth."²

This occult prediction on the transparent, flame-colored fabric confronts this reduction down to the only thing left: a disembodied framework deprived of any symbolism.

José Montealegre focuses on postcolonial theory in his artistic practice. His murals, texts, installations, and mostly small-scale clay sculptures—organic human and animal forms and figures, as well as cultural artifacts—spring from his interest in archeology, philosophy, and science fiction. His works oscillate between fiction and documentation, and establish an alternative, non-Western historiography.

1 Stuart Hall, "What is this 'black' in black popular culture?" in: *Black Popular Culture*, ed. David Morley; Kuan-Hsing Chen, London: 1993

2 Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris*. Volume 1, Chapter 2, translated by Friedrich Bremer, Leipzig 1884.

His work series shown here, *Contradicciones*, consists of four prints and collages in self-made frames and is the result of an ongoing exploration of image culture: the framed works look like found archive material and excerpts from books on cultural history, but they are mere facsimiles. José Montealegre prints material that is partly found, partly self-captured onto pages torn from discarded books, thus constructing fabricated historical documents. Following the collection and arrangement of Aby Warburg's atlas of images, the artist's material, selected from a vast fund, displays motivic similarities. As the viewers search for the underlying theme, they turn from silent observers into historians, inevitably putting themselves into a colonial position of power defined by discovery, appropriation, possession, narrative, and domination.

„ (...) it is always about changing the dispositions and the configurations of cultural power, not getting out of it.”³

Text: Miriam Bettin