

Press release

We Shall Survive in the Memory of Others

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Opening Friday, November 29, 6 – 9pm
Gallery hours Tue – Sat, 11am – 6pm

We are bound to take the narratives that turn their gaze to the past – those stories we call history – into consideration when the title of a work indicates that it dates from the “early 1990s.” It is as if this time could only be vaguely remembered, as if it was separated from us by the fog of time. A letter board assembles some basic information: a place, a time, a title, participants. The place it references – 420 West Broadway – is often mentioned, evoked as a place “where history was written.” The board in the exhibition puts all the names and places in a relation with this ... maybe a futile attempt, maybe a different story. The works, however, that were made in the early 1990s bear this address on their back.

The title of the exhibition references a quote from Vilém Flusser: “We Shall Survive in the Memory of Others ...” This speaks of a crucial belief, namely that there is no spirit, no soul, nothing that survives death. It is only in the memory of others that we can live on. Living on, then, means being subject to change and exchange, to dispersal and dependency, beyond control and intention. My memory depends on others, and their memory depends on me. Our narratives are precarious.

In the early seventeenth century, a frequent motif in glass paintings were the Four Doctors of the Church – Pope Gregory, St Augustine, St Ambrose and St Jerome (Hieronymus). Their names appear at the bottom of the image, set in an architectural frame or cartouche. Much later, around the middle of the twentieth century, these glass paintings were taken out of their context, cut and set in lead to build this lantern. As far as we can tell, the picture of Jerome – usually depicted with his cardinal’s hat, sitting in his study translating the bible into Latin – is absent. He has been replaced by an archer on the left and a different figure on the right.

Sometime around 1800, a sailor – probably from a Dutch Colonial context, on the route to East India – made himself a chair. At least this is what we assume. The chair also contains a little chest. We don’t know the sailor, his name is lost. A stranded object. But the figures and patterns allow to place it in its context, however roughly. There are ivory Kris handles with fairly similar floral decorative patterns. And certain ivories from Sri Lanka that were taken to Denmark have lion’s heads akin to the chair. Sadly, all the reference books were sold.

Maybe the most persistent myth in our time is that whoever is depicted on your notes and coins guarantees its value, that symbolic representation can ground the economic. For some, that means security. For others, it means utmost dependency and decadent fraud, a scheme that is inevitably bound to shipwreck. On a canvas, we see a 10€ note disappearing, disintegrating into the materiality of paint.

Elsewhere, a different myth of the ground is evoked against the immateriality of the symbolic: that precious metals guarantee value independent of the authorities and context. Once narration overcame the limits of the image, it introduced a set of symbols that could be transmitted irrespective of their material basis. Today, the image is very agile, too, but to be so it had to be translated into a code – .jpgs can travel the internet, oil on canvas can’t.