

JOHANN

JACOBS

MUSEUM

FOLL

LLOW

THE **“The negro.”**

LEADER

FOLLOW

An installation by Ines Doujak

“There’s a model of a ship, covered with lambskin. On the ship we see a hooligan, miming an African slave. He’s next to a sleeping woman who is masked and illuminated by lanterns. The ship itself carries five ostrich’s eggs, on which are painted pictures of Roma activists. So what, if you’d be so kind, does it all mean?”

Can we answer this question? – Well, we could give it a try, act as if we knew. After all, we are a museum. Our role is educational, and we should at least be able to explain what we are showing in our own exhibition space. Art, however, has the fatal tendency to transport, or even carry us off into realms in which meaning, the anchor of our symbolic universe, disappears. Spaces in which what is beyond meaning raises its head.

It has no doubt happened to many travellers, both on land and at sea: from a certain point onwards, certainties evaporate because nothing is familiar any more; there is nothing to hold on to. In this respect, it is worth reminding ourselves of the rituals of forgetfulness to which African slaves were subjected even before they embarked on the middle passage*.

Doujak had the outlines of ten battleships, each about a metre long, sawn out of Plexiglas, a transparent medium. The ships on which they are based sailed – and still sail – in the service of former and present-day colonial powers. There is *Viribus Unitis* [1914-30] of the Austro-Hungarian navy and *Spica* [1973-], a torpedo ship belonging to the Royal Swedish Navy. Behind the glass are coloured photographs that extend the entire length of the ship’s form. Figures or groups of figures that have been cut out of black-and-white photos are mounted on the glass. The visuals are sealed to the back of the glass with black sheepskin.

The ships thus have two clearly distinct sides: a furry one, which is purely material, and another, which has a metaphorical and representational character. Not that the material nature of the fur is without symbolic significance: until well into the 18th century, it was usual to bless ships with an animal sacrifice, after which the bloody hide would be nailed to the bow. Nor that the metaphorical and representational aspect would in itself help the narrative, the layering of meanings. To the observer, much of it remains shrouded in darkness, unfathomable. Much as it did to Amasa Delano, the American captain of Herman Melville’s novella *Benito Cereno* (1855). In a spontaneous gesture of helpfulness off the coast of Chile, he boards a Spanish vessel that has been carrying out puzzling manoeuvres and is confronted with a bizarre situation that he is unable to interpret.

THE LEADER ^B



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ENITO CERENO

Benito Cereno is one of the sources on which Doujak's work is based. It is the story of an initially successful uprising by a shipload of slaves on the high seas, which results in a reversal of the roles of master and servant. The lives of the Spanish sailors and their captain, Cereno, are spared on condition that they return the slaves to Senegal. The slave dealer himself – or, more precisely, his skeleton – ornaments the bow, where once Christopher Columbus was resplendent. Above the figurehead are the words: "Seguid vuestro jefe", or "Follow your leader", as an unequivocal warning to the Spanish. During his visit on board, Delano fails to see through the charade. In order to maintain appearances to the unexpected guest, the slaves treat Cereno as if he were a person of authority. Babo, in particular, the slaves' leader, pretends to be Cereno's faithful servant and never once leaves his side. But for obvious reasons, Cereno is unable to play his intended role convincingly.

In the course of the 20th century, the "state of exception" on board, which Melville's prose evokes perfectly, established itself as a topos of constitutional law and political philosophy. The term has come to describe the ease with which a sovereign state, whether totalitarian or democratically elected, is in certain circumstances able to suspend its legislation. One such instance would be the creation of the Guantanamo prison camp on Cuba by the USA in its "war on terror". In much the same spirit, the political theorist of German National Socialism, Carl Schmitt, used to sign his letters "Benito Cereno" after the demise of the Third Reich. It was his way of expressing that Germany's intellectual elite – above all himself – had to a certain extent been held to ransom under Hitler. The theorist of the "state of exception" was willing to take the chance that his equating the leader of the slaves with Hitler could be interpreted as a perverse distortion.

The implications, the admonitions and much more are all to be found in Doujak's installation. Key scenes from Benito Cereno are re-enacted in the black-and-white photographs: by Austrian skinheads and punks cast by Doujak for this purpose. The scenes, one per ship, depict among other things the insurrection on the slave ship, together with the daily procession of the Spanish crew to the figurehead and Cereno's close shave. One of them also shows Cereno saving himself by jumping into Delano's dinghy and effectively putting an end to the emergency.

human.”

The colour photographs that form the foil of the narrative action are more difficult to interpret. They are mostly night shots of intense theatrical power. Some of the images underscore the dramaturgical character of the entire event and provide the game of the outlaws with a kind of resonance chamber. Others frame a space inhabited by autonomous women who smoke cigars or give themselves their own breasts.

Finally, there are the ostrich's eggs, which the ships carry as cargo and are decorated with scenes and dates. Doujak gave a variety of professional artists and amateurs the job of depicting historic episodes – revolts and struggles, to be more precise – in which women had played a key role. Clarissa Metternich, for example, captures the actions of a suicide bomber in the Chechen struggle for freedom. Other groups of eggs are dedicated to organizations against trafficking in women, the Mujeres Libres of the Spanish Civil War, or the brigades of women bearing arms in the Kurdish resistance. But just as the positions on the slave ship are forever changing and multi-coded, and tend, therefore, to be impenetrable, it is difficult in these episodes too to distinguish between perpetrator and victim.

Doujak's installation, which is immune to any unifying type of observation has integrated the "state of emergency" into its form: the eggs are three-dimensional, the ships flat. If the Plexiglas has sharp edges, the lambskin is soft. If the surface of the paintings is tactile, the photographic surface has a mechanical smoothness. In themselves, these formal properties mean nothing. Nevertheless, they are a prerequisite for going beyond everything we know.

* The middle passage was the voyage that took African slaves across the Atlantic to the New World. It was preceded by the voyage from Europe to Africa with goods used to purchase slaves and followed by the voyage from the Americas back to Europe with goods and commodities to be sold there.

