

this is tomorrow

Contemporary Art Magazine

Peles Empire, Karl-Marx-Straße 58, 12043 Berlin, Germany

Shannon Bool: Cathedral/Castle



Artist: Shannon Bool

Title: Installation view

Date(s): 21 October, 2017 - January 2018

Credit: Peles Empire

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Review by Joan Lee

Peles Empire continues its tradition of reconsidering and reimagining spaces in the unveiling of Cathedral/Castle, a presentation of works by Shannon Bool. Each exhibition curated by the duo, artists Barbara Wolff and Katharina Stoeber, acts as an instalment of a series of rooms belonging to the eponymous Peles Castle in Romania.

Set against a printed backdrop of one of the royal rooms, the works function to create a domain where the past is confronted with itself. The exhibition is almost a pastiche of a cathedral, with objects that one might expect to find in such a place; a prayer bench, a large decorative mirror that could masquerade as stained glass, and an impressive tapestry.

'All Saints Bench' (2017) is made entirely of grey marble, with drawings that are at once childlike and complex. Viewers are allowed to sit on and touch the etchings, which include Latin phrases, cartoonish crucifixes, sailing ships and even miniature labyrinths for catching demons. Recalling the rogue inscriptions found on church interiors dating back to medieval times, the etchings in this work suggest the markings of a humble hand. This type of 13th century graffiti can be found on church walls to ward off evil or to say prayers, but also contain indecipherable meanings. What is assumed today is that making a mark in the holiest of places was at the time considered acceptable. While this alternative means of communication has since been shunned by society, some still employ this tactic as a way to subvert both visual and institutional hierarchies.

In 'Five Wives of Lajos Biró' (2017), faceless figures are woven in a wool tapestry that recalls Picasso's women, Malagan ritual objects and the 20th century fetishization of African culture. The surface is densely layered and worked upon by Bool, whose labor is evident in the intricate patterns and decorations superimposed on the looming silhouettes. Taking the western appropriation of African sculpture, Bool weaves these stylistic references into iconographic forms as evidence of the colonization of culture and people by white European art history.

Facing the other two works is a mirror, stretched over with transparent silk. Comparatively, the greyscale work seems orderly and modest, with a grid pattern which gives it its name: 'Scribed Grid' (2017). It could be a window on first glance, perhaps like the stained glass found in worship halls. However, it only provides a blurred reflection of the viewer who is fragmented by the gridded lines that are made with messy brushstrokes. Looking at the use of the grid throughout history and the inevitable reference to the modernist obsession with order and abstraction, this work embodies the failure of these ideals and subsequently a shattering of the illusion they created.

Cathedral/Castle can be seen as a fictive space for contemplation and meditation, where iconography is perverse and multiple narratives take place. In works that address the power of visual representation, Bool manages to challenge authority by means of re-appropriation and exposure to forms once more unfamiliar.