

folie á deux

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folie á deux is defined as a medical term, basically meaning “a madness shared by two” or shared psychosis. It is a psychiatric syndrome in which symptoms of a delusional belief are transmitted from one individual to another. The Berlin based artist Martin Werthmann’s use of this term as the title of his exhibition connotes cultural or ontological commentaries: a possible common disorder, and suggests shared commonalities that may be found in different contexts. It refers to widespread disorders that might exist in any society and generally in contemporary life. The artist then shares his ontological questions about human being with his Iranian audience.

When one encounters the actual exhibition, she would see a set of eccentric materials in different sections. The Diamond-Breathing-Machine is placed next to large woodcuts which shape an installation representing functional process accompanied by aesthetic reflection. For example, the way the plinth, the bucket, boxes and tubes are connected and arranged could create a three dimensional collage. However, the facts given in the construction of the machine reveal that it is not only an installation that symbolically indicates a certain process, but a machine with an actual function: it produces diamonds from the artist’s exhaled air. The encounter with this complicated installation would face the viewer with different puzzling questions. First of all she may be confused to see such a “laboratory” in the context of an art exhibition. But then she will come to understand that the arrangement is by no means accidental: starting from the chair to the highlighted equipment on the white plinths to the large-scale woodcuts in the background. Everything seems to be carefully staged.

Here the equation is simple: carbon + heat + pressure = Diamond! The product of this “alchemistic” process of oxidations and reductions the pure carbon out of exhaled air, is put into a final stage for the purpose of another conversion by a hydraulic heat press. The whole process refers to an alchemical narration – a long standing desire of human being to achieve the ability to transform base metals into the high value metals like gold or silver or an elixir of life conferring youth and immortality. Was the “philosophers stone” found, what the alchemists searched for centuries? Or does the artist question the idea of value by using a “magic” trick that transforms air into diamonds?

The whole process relates to the life and associated consciousness processes. The process in the Diamond-Breathing-Machine is associated with the fundamental processes of life and makes the need for a constant exchange of materials. The reduction and oxidation processes of human body make in fact one’s life possible. In this machine something organic is transformed into something crystalline, something formless is taking shape, something dynamic solidifies and finally the softest possible material – the air we breathe – becomes the substance with highest hardness on earth: the diamond. It also implies an ironic existential meaning. The artist is creating something of the highest value by using his used exhaled air. In other words, he creates the diamond with the “divine breath” like the Creator.

In addition to the technical and theoretical perspectives, the work can also be seen as an aesthetic point of view. Apart from aforementioned implications, it is aesthetically attractive installation when one sees equipments from a laboratory are transformed into art objects. So at the same time when it is seen as an entirely technical and purely chemical process, the focus may lead from the shapeless black carbon to the beauty and purity of the diamond, associated with glamour and fashion.

The other part of this installation consists of series of woodblock prints. Werthmann is particularly interested in the cartoon-like figures. This can for example be seen in the image ensemble with the intrusive-unfriendly-looking clown who could have sprung from a horror novel by American novelist Stephen King or the portrait of Alex de Large from the film “Clockwork Orange” and the background figure, the German artist Martin Kippenberger, who stands in a corner.

Cultural and historical references can be found in this series of works, although the artist believes that he is merely referring to a single figure or phenomenon rather than intending to include extensive references. A three-legged creature, for example, is drawn from Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* where the animal keeps coming up, but is not involved in the action. In this figure Werthmann is thematically interested in the imperfect appearance i.e. the missing leg. Werthmann explains his woodblock prints as a poetic counterpart to his conceptual works. For three years he worked on the two-dimensional picturesque “Scenery” series. The areas of colour and organic forms of fragmentary and often centrally positioned figures are reminiscent of plants, newly hatched birds, skulls, science-fiction creatures, and more recently landscapes.

Martin Werthmann: Folie à deux at Gallery Etemad, Tehran, Iran, 2015