

Press release
Zurich, 19 June 2014

Kunsthau Zürich presents 'The Torches of Prometheus. Henry Fuseli and Javier Téllez'

From 20 June to 12 October 2014 the Kunsthau Zürich presents two artistic positions that exemplify how the Prometheus myth has been adapted and reinterpreted between 1770 and the present day. The exhibition 'The Torches of Prometheus. Henry Fuseli and Javier Téllez' combines about 20 works of the early modern era with a contemporary film installation.

For Henry Fuseli (1741-1825) the bound figure of Prometheus, whose iconography dates back to Ancient Greece, was the quintessential embodiment of the modern artist. Fuseli's subjective and highly expressive handling of the figure began with an anatomical game: the 'five-point drawings' in which the positions of the head, hands and feet were dictated by five dots randomly placed on a sheet of paper. His sketches and paintings were an appeal to the limitless creativity of the modern human being, but did not shy away from the dangers inherent in the urge for emancipation. In myth, Prometheus is punished for stealing fire. He is bound to a rock in the Caucasus where each day an eagle is sent by Zeus to feed on his liver. Finally, after many generations, he is freed by Heracles. As a further punishment the gods send Pandora to dwell on Earth and bring misery to the human race.

PROMETHEUS'S FIRE UNLEASHED

Prometheus was venerated throughout the ancient world. He was admired for the vigour of his opposition to brute force and established authority. This message is as relevant today as it has ever been. Once lit, Prometheus's fire is almost impossible to control. It took Europe more than a century to harness the heady dynamism of the Industrial Revolution and turn it to beneficial use. In Ancient Greece, when the decision was taken to hold the Olympic Games every four years in honour of Zeus, the fire was lit with a torch commemorating that same Prometheus. To this day the Olympic flame, which is lit in Athens and then sent on a journey throughout the world, recalls the emancipatory act of this hero of Antiquity.

ARYAN IDEALS AND 'DEGENERATE' ART

In the 19th and 20th centuries, artists such as Gustave Moreau, Arnold Böcklin, Max Klinger, Constantin Brancusi, Jacques Lipchitz, Oskar Kokoschka, Barnett Newman and Tim Rollins were inspired by the light and dark sides of the Prometheus legend. One of the most striking works of contemporary art to deal

with the topic was created in 2011: the large-scale film installation 'Rotations (Prometheus and Zwitter)' by Javier Téllez (b. 1969), which serves as a 'window' on the exhibition that curator Mirjam Varadinis is creating for the Venezuelan shooting star at the Kunsthaus at the end of October.

Now on display, 'Rotations' shows two sculptures revolving in opposite directions: on one side is the massive 'Prometheus' created by National Socialist artist Arno Breker (1900-1991) for the Propaganda Ministry in Berlin in 1937; on the other is the fragile work of the 'outsider' artist Karl Genzel (real name Karl Brendel, 1871-1925) entitled 'Zwitter' ('Hermaphrodite') from 1920. Genzel was one of the artists discussed in detail by Prinzhorn in his celebrated 'Bildnerie der Geisteskranken' ('Artistry of the Mentally Ill', 1922). In his cell at an institution, Genzel veered between boundless productivity, outbursts of rage, hallucinatory experiences and a yearning for liberation on the one hand, and inaction and resignation on the other. Both 'Prometheus' and 'Zwitter' were exhibited in 1937 in Munich, as part of what were arguably the two most controversial exhibitions of the 20th century: Breker's larger-than-life nude proclaimed the Aryan ideals of Nazi ideology in the 'Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung' – the 'Great German Art Exhibition' – while Karl Genzel's small wood sculpture with its oversized genitals was held up as an example of the pathologization of the European avant-gardes in the 'Degenerate Art' exhibition.

This exhibition concentrates in a small space all the contradictions inherent in the historical reception of this ancient creation myth, its threatening dynamism and the hopes it awakens.

CONCERT AND GUIDED TOURS

Public guided tours in German take place on Saturday 5 July at 11 a.m. and Thursday 4 September at 6 p.m.

'Stamped with Originality', a concert to mark the 300th anniversary of the birth of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, will be performed at 3 p.m. on Sunday 22 June. The internationally renowned harpsichord player Preethi de Silva performs some of the best-known pieces from C.P.E. Bach's 'Piano Sonatas, Free Fantasias and Rondos' on the fortepiano. De Silva will also talk about the links between the music of C.P.E. Bach and Beethoven's Prometheus compositions. There will also be a reading of Goethe's poem 'Prometheus' by the actor Christian Dieterle (Berlin). Admission is included in the price of the exhibition ticket.

The exhibition is accompanied by a publication in German and English with contributions from Bernhard von Waldkirch and Mirjam Varadinis. With 64 pages and some 34 illustrations, it is published by Scheidegger & Spiess and is available in the Kunsthaus shop, price CHF 16.

FESTSPIELE ZÜRICH

The exhibition, which is curated by Bernhard von Waldkirch and Mirjam Varadinis, is the Kunsthaus's contribution to the Festspiele Zürich 2014, which are devoted to the mythological figure of Prometheus. The festival programme is available as a brochure in the Kunsthaus and can be obtained online at: www.festspiele-zuerich.ch

Supported by the Festspiele Zürich

GENERAL INFORMATION

Kunsthaus Zürich, Heimplatz 1, CH-8001 Zurich

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Fri–Sun, Tues 10 a.m.–6 p.m., Wed, Thurs 10 a.m.–8 p.m. For public holiday opening see www.kunsthhaus.ch.

Admission incl. collection: CHF 15 / CHF 10 (concessions). Children and young people up to the age of 16 free of charge. Admission free on Wednesdays.

CONTACT FOR THE MEDIA

Visual material is available for download at www.kunsthhaus.ch under Information > Press.

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