

The twisted circus of Kathryn Andrews at the König Galerie.

BY ELDA ORETO

The circus is the ultimate entertainment for children: the colors and the magic of a suspended world where everything is possible, beyond imagination. But the circus is also 'fiction par excellence', the ambiguous place of illusions where clowns, acrobats, actors appear almost doomed to entertain people. Circus Empire is the solo-show of Kathryn Andrews at the König Galerie in Berlin that opened on Friday June 7th and will be on display until August 4th, 2019.



Kathryn Andrews, Circus Empire, 2019, installation view. Courtesy the artist, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles and KÖNIG GALERIE, Berlin / London.

A gigantic circus tent, made specifically for the exhibition, is encapsulated in the nave of the former Church of St. Agnes, now the home of the gallery.

Outside the tent, we meet the first work: Picasso trace Buzzer, a sculpture that resembles one of those games that can be seen at an amusement park. The work consists of three elements. The silhouette of a bull, as drawn by Picasso, a high voltage cable with a hook at the end, and behind the bull a large yellow cage in the shape of a light bulb.

The device works like the well-known game for children Operation, where the high-tension hook must draw the shape of the bull without touching the metal tube. If it does, it starts an annoying buzz, the bulb and a neon sign lights up that says: Picasso not Picasso.

The exhibition seems to bring out the rascal child in us, staging an aspect of our society that incites fun at all costs. However the spectator can witness this fun without being an active part of it.

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London.

Through her artistic practice, Kathryn Andrews (Mobile, Alabama 1973 – lives and works in Los Angeles) investigates the dynamics of power and freedom. Using elements that refer to Pop culture, the entertainment industry and the movie world, mixed with the classical European tradition, from visual arts to archeology, Andrews underlines how culture is a practice of colonization and normalization of forms of control.

Kathryn Andrews, MFA of the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, and BFA of Duke University in Durham, exhibited in various institutions including the Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI (2017) , the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, (2015), The High Line, New York, (2016), and the Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany (2013).



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Inside the tent, the American Claw Game welcomes the visitors, a plexiglass box that simulates the fishing claw machine. But there is no handlebar to drive it or no coin acceptor. There is no way to play, one can only look at it from the outside.

Inside the plexiglas box there are various toys that recall props from Hollywood movies. Among them, entangled in the mechanical claw, there is a mask of Richard Nixon, the 37th President of the United States. The mask is an imitation of the one used in the movie "Point Break" (1991), in which a group of reckless surfers robbed banks disguised as Presidents.

Walking inside the amusement park, there are five panels with Wheels of Foot in Mouth, another recreational device.

Five rounds panels reproduce diptychs with futuristic masks and of ancient sculptures.

Each mask has a 'window' on the mouth and one on the head. As in the wheel of fortune, a mechanism on the back of the panels randomly shows figures on the heads: games, weapons, symbols, flowers; while from the mouth are coming out sentences like: Did you get an invitation? You remind me of my ex, for example, or Oh, was that the end of your story? Your laugh is so boisterous, and again, We've already met, Do you dress yourself?

Expressions that belong to formal circumstances but that unveil sarcasm and hostility.

The masks are sphinxes that reproduce an enigma without solution.



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Looking for John Conner, is the reproduction of Terminator arms attached to a metal tube and supporting another thinner tube. At the ends there are uncanny clown miniatures.

At the exit of the arena, the last work is composed of two sculptures, two giant faces, which look into each other's eyes. Two steel tubes cross the forehead and at the end there are two words: Are you Happy with it? And You sound so nervous.

Like the phrases on the wheels, these statements always hide their true message.

In the background a 4-channel audio installation, Carnival, created by Kathryn Andrews with Scott Benzel, reproduces the atmosphere of the amusement park.



London.

Circus Empire shows elements of contemporary society, but has something very ancient in it. Indeed, it seems almost to go beyond time to connect the past and the present. In particular, it reminds me that the circus was one of the favorite entertainments of the ancient Romans. In the Satire X, the poet Giovenale writes “at this point, since votes aren’t sold anymore, [the people] have lost all interest; they once cared about everything themselves, powers, legions; now lets everything get away, caring only for two things: bread and circuses (panem et circenses)”.



Kathryn Andrews, *Circus Empire*, 2019, installation view. Courtesy the artist, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles and KÖNIG GALERIE, Berlin /

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For the excessive and enigmatic tones, for the contrasting and strident elements, for all the clamor and the cumbersome installation, which occupies the space, the exhibition made me think about that and also about a comment by Cicero, the Latin writer and politician, about this satire. According to him the problem was not the fun, the circus, but the desire of people to sell their freedom and their rights in exchange for a full belly and excitement, which distracted them from noticing other appetites, the ones that belong to men who never get satisfied.