



Jonathan Hammer, *Operation Octopus*, 2020, Mixed media on wood
H117 × W143 × D6 cm / H46 × W56.2 × D2.3 inches

Jonathan Hammer

Preview: Thursday, July 29, 2021

Public View: Friday, July 30 to Saturday, September 11, 2021

Solo Exhibition

OPERATION OCTOPUS

Sokyo Gallery
381-2 Motomachi, Higashiyama-ku
Kyoto 605-0089 Japan
Tuesday – Saturday 10:00 am – 6:00 pm
+81 (0)75 746 4456

Marukawa Collection

SCROLL AND TENTACLE

Sokyo Annex
3F, SSS Building, 357 Ichinofunairi-cho, Nakagyo-ku
Kyoto 604-0924 JAPAN
Tuesday – Saturday 1:00 pm – 6:30 pm
+ 81 (0)80 9745 8452



press release

From July 30 to September 11, 2021, Sokyo Gallery and Sokyo Annex are pleased to present Jonathan Hammer's solo exhibition: *OPERATION OCTOPUS* and Marukawa Collection: *SCROLL AND TENTACLE* at the same time. The solo exhibition features his signature marquetry of diverse exotic animal skins tooled in gold leaf, along with drawings on handmade washi paper from Shikoku, and three new ceramic works. This is Hammer's second exhibition in Japan and his first with Sokyo in Kyoto. The collection of Hammer's works in the Marukawa Collection started from a friendship and sympathy between different cultures, Jewish and Japanese. At Sokyo Annex, we will be exhibiting his valuable historical works, and show how his past activity connects to his latest works. It would be a great pleasure if you could take this opportunity to experience the charm of Hammer's works.

Affected by the worldwide migrant crisis, as well as his personal family history, Hammer presents the latest chapter of his ongoing project "Kovno/ Kobe", which examines the historical events of World War II, that led the Jews of Kovno (Kaunas) Lithuania to travel en masse - thanks to the intervention of the Japanese diplomat Chiune Sugihara - across Russia, to Kobe, Japan.

Using a vocabulary of semiotics (the study of signs and symbols and their use and interpretation) Hammer questions and investigates how one people sees "the other" in the context of an explosive and sudden cultural contact. This is especially relevant as Japanese history is woven with misunderstandings and misrepresentations of outsiders. How does the host see the refugee and vice versa? Conceptually inspired by 16th century Namban screens (byobu) that depicted the cultural clashes of the first westerners to arrive in Japan, Hammer's work searches for echoes of the experience in the Eastern European Jews' sojourn in Kobe. "Operation Octopus" delves into these themes of semiotic representation. Hammer borrows the octopus as a surrogate image of the Jew. He likens the curly hair of the Jewish refugees to the tentacles of the sea creature.

Kyoto is home to Takoyakushi-Do Temple. The familiar story of the monk who defies his Buddhist precepts, and carries a live octopus through the streets of Kyoto to honor his dying mother's wish for a last meal, is central to Hammer's Kyoto exhibition. When the monk meets the Abbott and his fellow monks in the street, and they enquire what is in the box, the ashamed monk opens the lid, and a miracle occurs. The octopus has transformed into holy scriptures! Thanks to Sugihara, the only complete Jewish religious academy (out of hundreds exterminated) was saved and sent safely to Japan. These young Jewish scholars with their curly hair (octopus tentacles) were to a large extent the keepers of the sacred Torah scroll of the Jews. Hammer uses the story of Takoyakushi-Do temple and overlays it with his semiotic interpretations of the Jews of Kovno/ Kobe.



Transformation and disintegration of the self occur among displaced populations. Hammer's labor intensive marquetry of diverse animal skins, scrupulously reassembles the puzzle of these fragmented identities using a semi abstract figurative style. In these works the Octopus literally transforms into the "Torah", a scroll written on skin.

The exhibition's eponymous work "Operation Octopus, 2020", is made of inlaid salmon, lizards shark, frog, beaver tail, seal, snake, ray, among other skins. Set in a period frame from the 30s, referencing the Japanese fascination with Art Deco European design, the work suggests the magic moment of transformation as the animal turns into scripture, mirroring just how different cultures "read" each other. In this large work, the Torah crown atop the scroll/shell becomes a crab, as the octopus in a hat transforms into the pious jew with curly hair.

In addition to this large work, the exhibition also includes three smaller leather panels exploring the same moment of transformation in their depiction of the Jew as octopus changing into the scroll as sacred text. There are seven works on paper likewise further exploring the Kyoto myth, as well as three ceramic sculptures where the octopus literally becomes the wooden book block.

Jonathan Hammer (b. 1960 Chicago) lives and works in Spain. He has had over 45 solo exhibitions in many countries. For 30 years he has worked in several mediums including works on paper, photography, unique books, sculpture, ceramics, and prints, as well as his signature screens and panels made from marquetry of exotic skins. Hammer has exhibited widely in Germany, Switzerland, Norway, France, England, the United States, Mexico and Japan. He has had 10 solo shows in New York (including five at Matthew Marks Gallery). Along with numerous group exhibitions in museums, Hammer has had solo shows in Geneva at Centre D'art Contemporain, the Berkeley Art Museum, and the Derfner Museum. His works are in many public and private collections including: the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA); San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA); Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art (LAMOCA); Hammer Museum (UCLA); Berkeley Art Museum; Whitney Museum, NY; Jumex Collection, Mexico, among others. An authority of Zurich Dada, Hammer has published his critical writings on the subject in his book "Ball and Hammer", Yale University Press, 2002. He has received numerous honors from among others: Art Matters, NY; Pro Helvetia (the Swiss Arts Council); the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, NY; the Pollock Krasner Foundation, NY; and PEW Foundation, Philadelphia. Hammer is the founder of the Villa Bergerie artists residency in Spain.



Press

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In order to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus, Sokyo Gallery and Sokyo Annex regret to inform you that we are open by appointment only. Please contact us for appointments by email at least one day in advance. Thank you very much for your kind cooperation.