

Totem

Sacred Beings and Spirit Objects

MEHTA BELL
PROJECTS

Curated by
Mehta Bell Projects

Artists featured
Anida Yoeu Ali, Dana Hargrove, David Batchelor, Dean Fox, James Hopkins, James Roper, Kamolpan Chotvichai, Lorenzo Vitturi, Mit Jai Inn, Saad Qureshi, Tawan Wattuya, Uudam Tran Nguyen, Ye Hongxing, Yarisal & Kublitz

Curators Mehta Bell Projects investigate the spiritual connotations of the totem as an object invested in ritualistic dimensions, in their diverse exhibition 'Totem: Sacred Beings and Spirit Objects'. The totem is traditionally an object or being that has spiritual significance to a particular society; based upon this ideology the exhibition explores the idea of the art object as a totemic emblem. The eclectic selection of artists each take a disparate approach to the notion of the sacred in their practices. For some it is the ritualistic process that imbues the work with sacramental qualities, whilst others allude more explicitly to physically totemic forms.

The mass use of prosaic or ubiquitous articles such as plastic children's stickers, used pill packets or origami paper flowers, is prevalent in many of the artworks, suggesting that the repetitious accumulation of the mundane can somehow result in a profound conclusion. Ye Hongxing's monumental collage 'Jungle No.11' directly addresses this concept. Comprised of thousands of children's stickers, each zealously applied as part of a meditative process, the intricate composition presents images of a dystopian society dominating over distant religious imagery such as a biblical exodus of animals alongside traditional temples. The innocent cartoon imagery of the stickers poignantly juxtaposes against angry protestors, riot police and whirring military helicopters in an extraordinary statement on contemporary society. David Batchelor's 'Blisterstick 1' is an assembly of empty pill-packets, which suggests a ceremonial obsession with medication in fear of our own mortality. Also discussing ritualistic themes, James Roper's 'Devotion' consists of approximately 10,000 origami flowers. On average the artist made 10 flowers per day over a period of three years ultimately resulting in this striking mandala. He invokes the spirit of daily repetitious religious activities associated with many faiths such as chanting and the devotional adornment of temples and altars.

The exhibition is interspersed with the presence of totemic 'Sacred Beings'. Certain artists choose to represent themselves as a spiritual entity, utilizing their physical bodies to discuss their own individual metaphysical explorations. Anida Yoeu Ali expresses her personal turmoil between Buddhism and Islam as she takes on the persona of 'The Buddhist Bug' in her photographs. As the saffron-coloured creature, she seeks to map a new spiritual and social landscape through its surreal existence amongst ordinary people and everyday environments. Alluding to Buddhist teachings Kamolpan Chotvichai cuts away at her photographic self-portraits, in an attempt to dissolve her form. She obliterates her identity, eliminating her face and literally stripping away her physical anatomy, in the process relinquishing attachment to her body.

Saad Qureshi's arresting installation dominates the centre of the exhibition and is comprised of a multitude of these sacred beings. 'Congregation' is rooted in an event briefly mentioned in the Quran, where a divinely-inspired flock of ababil birds dropped burning pebbles on an army and so saved the sacred Ka'bah. 99 architecturally totemic concrete and wooden stands accommodate 313 of these conceptually totemic birds, imagined by the artist. The flock of birds evoke further religious references such as in the Bible (St. Francis who preached to the birds) or the epic 12th-century Persian poem The Conference of the Birds.

Totems are often affiliated to particular 'clans' or groups, this theme is highlighted in many of the artworks in the exhibition. It is not only Qureshi's group of birds that insinuate this idea, Uudam Tran Nguyen's single channel video 'Waltz of the Machine Equestrians' also relates to this concept. His motorbike riders, connected to each other by thin strings clipped to their brightly coloured ponchos, resemble a contemporary band of knights adorned in flimsy armour and pollutant-detering face masks as they ride in choreographed unison along a Ho Chi Minh City street. Dana Hargrove's towering cardboard artwork 'Wall' cites the transient totems belonging to a homeless community that exists on the fringes of society.

Many of the artworks embody the perception of the sacred object. Mit Jai Inn totemises the painting by presenting it as a free-standing object. He builds up thick layer upon layer of paint, to the point where each painting can stand independently as scrolls. The column-like forms blur the boundaries of painting and object and transcend the limitations of the two-dimensional. Yarisal & Kublitz create beautifully rendered objects that explore material, sexual and spiritual desire. 'The 3rd Ei' looks at the significance of the object in religions and rituals. James Hopkins' intriguing sculpture 'The Magician' suggests an alternative dimension as he creates an optical illusion with his magic wand rendered in marble, which he reflects in a mirror to appear as if it extends into the ground and looks much bigger than it is. His is a slightly more cynical reading of the totem and its relation to the spiritual, with connotations of trickery rather than the divine.

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Lorenzo Vitturi
Yellow Chalk #1 & 2
 Photograph printed on
 Hahnemuhle bamboo paper,
 mounted on painted aluminium box
 150 x 100 cm



Yarisa & Kublitz
The 3rd Ei, 2013
 Brass, string
 18 x 27 x 56 cm



Kamolpan Chotvichai
Years of Pain, 2016
 C-type print and
 hand-cut canvas
 105 x 79 cm
 Image courtesy of the
 artist and Loredana
 Pazzini-Paracciani



James Roper
Devotion, 2002-2005
 Paper
 Dimensions variable

Saad Qureshi
Congregation, 2014
 Clay, plaster, straw,
 pinewood and concrete
 Dimensions variable
 Image as courtesy of the
 artist and Gazelli Art House



Anida Yoeu Ali
*Spiral Alley, The Buddhist
 Bug Project*, 2013
 Digital c-print
 75 x 112.5 cm, Edition 2/5
 Image courtesy of the
 artist and Loredana
 Pazzini-Paracciani

