

ARTFORUM

“Phoenix v. Babel”

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Likening Berlin to a modern-day Babel, exhibition curator Patrice Joly has selected ten artists who are based in Germany's capital for this show, while also channeling narratives of construction and destruction through the myth of the phoenix. Revisiting the legacy that the Pergamon Museum recently examined in the exhibition “Babylon: Myth and Truth,” Joly continues to unravel the mythical and lived complexities of the modern metropolis. The diverse range of formal language and content engaged by Saâdane Afif, Leonor Antunes, Robert Barta, Mladen Bizumic, Jean-Pascal Flavien, Mathew Hale, Timo Nasser, Vittorio Santoro, Sophie-Thérèse Trenka-Dalton, and Wolf van Kries allows the thematic juxtaposition to remain unresolved and acutely present. Positioning Trenka-Dalton's *Lammasu*, 2008, an installation incorporating a palm tree and a photograph of Assyrian stone carvings, in the first room of the gallery, Joly evokes an exotic site for the timeless struggle. However, the viewer quickly reenters familiar territory, as works like Santoro's *Untitled (Mask)*, 2007, incorporate within a seductively spare aesthetic a web of twentieth-century references. Three white walls, one featuring a quote from Graham Greene on a piece of paper, enclose a rustic wooden table and a World Radio that emits the voice of author James Lord reading excerpts from notable texts on African masks. Santoro hypnotizes visitors with the vision and sound of the exotic, then tempers it with the everyday.

In the second room, Bizumic's playful publication *Sister Cities of Babel*, 2008, is displayed atop a pedestal. Employing a game of translation, Bizumic quotes definitions and coping strategies for culture shock from materials distributed to students, business travelers, and immigrants. Translating each text twice, using a basic online service, the original texts encouraging patience and respect become nonsensical, devoid of any subtlety of tone or style. Bizumic also elaborates the immortal phoenix's pangs of culture shock in the doomed city of Babel in visual and architectural terms. His collages *Le Corbusier vs Mies van der Rohe*, 2007–2008, depict elegantly decomposing images of buildings by the master architects wherein slices of sky and foliage fall over structural walls and sculpture. Intriguingly, in each elegant image Bizumic suggests the legacy of the phoenix within the crumbling walls of Babel.

— Lillian Davies



Mladen Bizumic, *Two for One—Le Corbusier #8*, 2007–2008, collage on paper, 7 1/8 x 11 1/8". From the series "Le Corbusier vs Mies van der Rohe," 2007–2008.

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