

## Nadia Ismail – Falling into Paradise

Upon closer inspection the allusive poetical title 'Falling into Paradise' of Zhenia Couso Martell and Amit Goffe's dialogic exhibition at Kunstverein Duisburg contradicts a utopian promise by the use of the principle word 'falling' in a latently negative form. While the vision of paradise is always connected to an active process of the imagination, the verb 'falling' or 'sinking' becomes a passive activity in both the local and physical context, and one, which is owed to chance or negligence of attention.

This subtle, consciously set disparity of meaning in the title's content reveals the conceptual approach of the exhibition, playing as it does with the near universal interpretation of the religiously coined term 'paradise'. Both visually and in the imagination, the biblical reference connects to our perception of the meticulously designed artificial royal and temple gardens of the ancient orient enclosed and secluded from their environment. The 'Garden of Eden' quoted in the Old Testament becomes a synonym for a sanctuary offering the promise of healing. The area, originally allotted to all mankind, represents the demarcation of the ostensibly profane world as it is seen today through the concept of the 'fall of man'.

The almost universal supra-religious idea of a positive counter-world, however, splits into culturally influenced, society-specific visions. Departing from the Christian faith, they are subject to gradual changes decisively influenced

by socio-economic parameters, culminating in a positive subjective utopian vision of the future.

Through complex changes of perspective in the exhibition, the Cuban artist Zhenia Couso Martell and the Israeli Amit Goffe with their exhibits question a term commonly united through hope, connecting in the exhibited work of both artists the always present 'other side' of paradise and the fragility of an idealized 'parallel world'.

At the center of Amit Goffe's work stands the complex examination of the space. Each space is constituted by the interchange between spatial self-aura and subjective perception of man in which the architecture and intended function of the specific space plays as vital a role as the individual disposition of those who enter it. Depending on the internal rules, the aura of the space is enhanced or diminished, and may be for example threatening, serene, or eerie – an inseparable interaction between the concrete space and the subject who experiences it. In this field of tension, Goffe reacts to the immediate architectural situation at the Kunstverein Kunstverein (Duisburg art association) creating an object of pipe systems mounted together, running through the entire space close to the ceiling.

Presented this way, the matt gray commercially produced plastic pipes fit as an integral part seamlessly into the environment. *I breathe through my veins* (2016) flows into three wooden objects with the title *I feel you* (2016) distributed

in the exhibition space. Only the downward debouchures of the cylindrical wooden skeleton decipher the subtle spatial intervention as two merging works of art.

When the viewer places his or her head in a cylinder lined with foam material the pipe system transforms into some kind of periscope that enables a view onto the various exhibits in the space changing the perspective of the exhibited works according to the viewer's position.

Goffer, who lives in Düsseldorf, deftly weaves site-specific aspects of the space within the recipient's line of sight. The artist channels and raises the view through the linearity of the pipes to a higher power. At the same time, the work cannot unfold completely without the viewer's action. Nevertheless, his or her view remains an individual structure of cultural imprint, viewing habit, and immediate sentiment, which is confronted by and merges with the appeal of the new.

The question of the perspective taken couples the exhibit *Falling into Paradise* (2016) that gives the exhibition its title metaphorically, in conjunction with the aspect of voluntariness. Swaying, the viewer sits on the narrow rim of the wooden boat, which is anchored at the ceiling, suggesting the waves of the ocean through the passenger's movement. The up and down movement generated when the boat is boarded, simulates the difficulty of physical control of the craft in the invisible water. The ensuing instability of the perspective, which shifts with every movement of the boat, makes it impossible to fixate upon a visual goal.

Before the background of current events the association with refugee boats emerges immediately. In the face of a worldwide migration dynamic, which has been repeated throughout history at irregular intervals, the described involuntariness of the 'falling' in the title points to the relevant parameter for the reading of Amit Goffer's wooden boat. At which point in time does the promise of paradise transform into a prospect? At the beginning of and during the uncertain journey or only after the arrival, which will limit the autonomy of the people aboard for an uncertain time?

Goffer refers also from a purely aesthetic perspective to the fragile borders of two contrary conditions by opening an art-historical reference to Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (1819) through the boat's angle of inclination. In his large-format painting, Géricault portrayed the aftermath of the circumstances of the passengers and crew of the French frigate *Méduse* after it ran aground on a sandbank on its way to West Africa three years earlier. Owing to an insufficient number of lifeboats to contain the total number of people on board, a raft was hastily constructed from the mast to carry 149 people, which was to be towed by the lifeboats. At some point the ropes that tied it were cut and only 15 people survived by practicing cannibalism on the bodies of the deceased. Through its pictorial composition *The Raft of the Medusa* combines the aspects of hope and failure. The foreground perspective of the raft's lower edge suggests to the viewer the sensation of being on the boat.

While Amit Goffer creates transitory spaces in terms of perspective and imagination the bulky materials from which his

works are constructed possess an austere aesthetic, Zhenia Couso Martell's exhibits seem to celebrate life. Colorful and noisy flashes of light explode in the space which again and again is broken acoustically through laughter and voices from the video *Piñatas (experimental)* (2011).

In the exhibition, the Cuban-born artist processes presumably cultural-specific ceremonial rites of her country of birth, with her deliberate thematic condensation subtly referring to the stereotypes and almost cliché-like views of behavior patterns for each country.

Cuoso Martell removes the surface of Cuban joy of life and exposes by means of compression and reduction the underlying facets of a social structure imprinted by Socialism. In the process the artist, who now lives in Germany, intertwines biographic experience with diffuse collective aspirations for a 'better life', which in turn are closely connected to political structures and economic necessity. She uses the fragile frame of the so-called piñatas, which permeate her exhibited works like a diverse artistic guideline. As part of her Cuban cultural identity the collective opening of the figures, which are filled with sweets, constitutes the ceremonial part of the festivities. This ritual, which actually originated in China where it introduced the New Year, has long since established itself firmly on the Latin-American continent. From there this custom became a popular part of birthdays and festivities all over the world. The global distribution has changed and blurred the view onto the nuanced conditions specific to each country in which piñatas are broken open using a striking movement.

Whereas in the Western context it is often compared to the children's game 'hit the pot' where an individual blindfolded child has to find the pot by casting around with a cooking spoon and on locating it is rewarded with a sweet, the piñatas in Cuba function in the collective. Here the suspended shell is not blindly smashed by just one person, but opened through many random strikes from below touching lightly upon the ideology of socialism and is reflected once again in the joint collection of the content. The bounty that falls to the floor seems to overlook the current situation of strained supply as a relic of colonial aspect.

Zhenia Couso Martell creates shells of yearning in the form of a luminous private home (*Untitled*, 2016) the color of which changes constantly through a built-in LED-panel. The static shell counteracts the striving toward individuality, visualized through the differing colors, holding the object symbolically in unfulfilled longing. Meanwhile on the opposing side of the room, the artist self-referentially lets the reflecting shell of the comic figure of the Little Pumpkin circle around its own axis (*Calabacita*, 2016). The visual association of the comic figure Calabacita with the GDR-Sandman can be explained through the screening of the East-German TV-production in Cuba. The implicit reference to the former German ideology and the current form of government in Cuba is represented in the dazzling garment of former and current propaganda and combines backward-looking aesthetic with pop culture.

The works on paper on the wall, which represent facets of the piñatas in discreet wooden frames, appear quiet. At times

they show dispersed bits of confetti, at other times they seem to represent sketches for a yet to be realized piñata.

The exhibition's light dramaturgy enhances the impression of a wish-afflicted vision, at the same time reflecting its limitations. In the darkened exhibition space the exhibits appear almost expressive and staged. The iridescent LED-light of the *Piñatas* refracts colorfully and glitteringly on the walls, while the video work emits a pale light from the monitor. Next to it the boat rises monumentally in a pool of light and develops a staged light course, on which the ideas of the respective artist seem to wrestle for the viewer's favor. The view jumps from exhibit to exhibit evoking the intended multi-perspective within the

exhibition, which continues in the individual artwork. If the viewer could see the space in the sober ceiling light, the figuratively dazzling, illusionary-heavenly symbols would seem less glamorous. Immersing the space afterwards in total darkness, the fine neon lines of Amit Goffer's objects entitled *I feel you* the borders of which are affixed with light-storing materials unfold the impact of a lucid spatial drawing.

In the exhibition, Zhenia Couso Martell and Amit Goffer reflect cryptically and diversely on the complexity of view structures negating the significance of perspective.

Translated by Uta Hoffmann