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Christian Kosmas Mayer
En deux mille cent quatre-vingt-un
Le monde entier verra sa fin

Opening: 24.03.2022, 18:00-21:00
Exhibition: 25.03.-07.05.2022

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Christian Kosmas Mayer's new exhibition at Galerie Mezzanine is titled "En deux mille cent quatre-vingt-un le monde entier verra sa fin." The title in French hinges on an almost untranslatable idiom: "voir sa fin," to see one's end, as if one could somehow perceive the moment of one's own demise. It is precisely such paradoxical forms of seeing and foreseeing that inform the works on view in this exhibition.

The title is postdating a prophecy attributed to a 16th-century English woman named Ursula Southeil, more famously known as "Mother Shipton." She was allegedly born in a cave outside of Knaresborough, Yorkshire, still named after her to this day. Renowned as an herbalist and healer, she acquired a reputation for soothsaying. Her fame was such that it reached King Henry VII, who called her "the witch of York" in response to her prophecies concerning the monarchy and the end of the world. Her auguries were only published long after her death, while her legend grew to include malefic powers, such as that of turning men into stone like the classical Medusa, but also like the calcareous waters of the famed Petrifying Well, also located in Knaresborough. This is one of the many contingent connections that Mayer mobilizes in this exhibition. A series of stuffed animals, petrified in its supersaturated waters over a period of several months, are also on view in this exhibition alongside a video of the petrification process in Knaresborough's Petrifying Well. The endearingly familiar shapes of the plush toys are rendered uncanny and sepulchral by the calcination, a disjunction made all the more poignant by the quasi-universal affective resonance of plush toys. A wallpaper-sized reproduction of an 18th-century copperplate etching of the Petrifying Well – which lies alongside Mother Shipton's birthplace – grounds the eerie connection between these two forms of petrification, one supernatural, the other geological.

Mayer's precise excavations and citations of historical material brings to light the complex imbrication between the different modes of knowledge characteristic of the modern era. A series of optically vibrant paintings address the "Mother Shipton moth," named by the Swedish entomologist Carl Alexander Clerk who saw a resemblance between the central element in its pattern and the caricatural depiction of Mother Shipton. The silkscreen paintings bear witness to the physiognomic impulse in visual perception, namely the propensity to read and detect familiar forms within the abstract and contingent visual artefacts of the natural world, such as clouds or rocks, or in this case, the wings of a moth. It also resonates against the 18th century pseudo-science of physiognomy. Narratives relating to Mother Shipton consistently describe her physical deformities as if they were indicative of a malevolent and demonic bent. A long-nosed, hunchbacked woman, especially one aligned with herbalist medicinal practices and soothsaying, still operates as the stereotypical description of a witch in popular culture. As a result, the face that emerges from the moth's wing pattern, highlighted by the artist's hand, is one that we have seen in countless cartoons, children's books, and costume shops.

Clerk's taxonomic decision is based on a form of projective vision, in the sense of projecting an imagined form onto a contingent image. As such, it recalls the equally anticipatory dimension of the various prophecies that course through this exhibition, from the readymade prophecies of the historical "Mother Shipton" fortune-telling automaton on view, to the series of prophecies generated by GPT-3, the most advanced text algorithm available today. The artist fed the same phrase into the algorithm as a starting point for all of the texts: "This is my prophecy for the future of mankind." The algorithm then chose words and phrases based on the colossal collection of internet texts that it had been given as its training data. Mayer describes these letters as stemming from the collective conscious of the internet. Though the "authors" of these texts are unquantifiable, the same human hand has transcribed all of them onto paper for the exhibition. This hand transcription imbues them with an uncanny subjectivity, thus evoking that other offspring of physiognomy in the 19th century, i.e., graphology.

As one moves through the works on view in this exhibition, as well as the narratives linked to them, connections emerge that are neither linear nor, for that matter, narrative. Instead, one is pulled into an active constellation of ideas and facts, illuminating by the questions that emerge between them, like the imaginary lines in an astrologer's chart. Each of these works bears witness to different forms of projection, of wanting to read into the things and events of the world, so as to predict, ascertain, or prepare for our increasingly uncertain futures. The supernatural prophecies of Mother Shipton are echoed by those retrieved and assembled by the GPT-3 text algorithm. The taxonomies of herbal medicine are reflected and amplified in those of Linnaeus's contemporaries in the modern sciences, namely Carl Alexander Clerck. The question that haunts each of these elements is that of how to read the world, how to interpret and negotiate its complexities by means of language, observation, and thought. In his highlighting of the enduring demonization of Ursula Southeil, the artist also brings to light the ethical dimensions of these intertwined histories. To cite the American poet Jack Spicer, Mayer operates like a "time mechanic, not an embalmer." The historical fragments, events, and narratives that he weaves together bring to light the tensions and complexities of our present world, and of our enduring impulse to project the fears, dreams, nightmares, and fantasies that haunt our present lives onto the unascertainable horizons of the future, or the irretrievable realm of the past.

Julien Bismuth