

KENDELL GEERS

OrnAmenTum'EtKriMen

curated by Danilo Eccher

21.09.2020 – 30.01.2021
OPENING 21 September at 7pm

M77 presents *OrnAmenTum'EtKrimMen*, a solo show by South African artist and activist **Kendell Geers** (Johannesburg, 1968) curated by Danilo Eccher, open to the public from Monday 21 September 2020 to Saturday 30 January 2021.

European by descent, African by birth, Kendell Geers defines himself as both animist and mystic, shaman and alchemist, punk and poet. Committed to the fight against apartheid from a very young age, Geers used his experience as a revolutionary to develop a psycho-socio-political approach in which ethics and aesthetics are viewed as two sides of the same coin spinning on the giant table of history. In his hands, the vast narrative of art is brought into question, the languages of power and ideological codes are disrupted, expectations dashed, and systems of belief are transformed into aesthetic canons. The contradictions that are intrinsic to the artist's identity are embodied in his work. His pieces combine personal with political, poetry with misery, violence with erotic tension. Geers works in various media and techniques, ranging from everyday objects to large-scale installations, and comprising the use of neon, performance and video.

The exhibition's title *OrnAmenTum'EtKrimMen* is based on the 1908 essay *Ornament and Crime* by Austrian architect Adolf Loos, pioneer of modern architecture who condemned the decorations on the façades of buildings as a useless, even dangerous excess, steering the course of architecture towards the concept of functionality. For M77, Geers embraces Loos' cultural heritage by interrogating the languages of Minimalism and the model of gallery white cube, throwing aesthetics against the brick wall of experienced and shards of broken ethics.

Through a selection of historic pieces, his newest production and site-specific installations designed to interact with the gallery's interiors, the artist creates an itinerary in which the juxtaposition of different materials and the powerful impact created by his use of colour and pattern give rise to a series of cross-references and contrasts intended to threaten the cherished beliefs of the observer, consciously or unconsciously immersed in a setting that is indeed attractive but that is in fact inhospitable and potentially dangerous.

The exhibition opens with an impactful site-specific installation *Hanging Piece*, 1993, in which heavy clay bricks hang from the ceiling suspended on nooses made from red rope. The brick and icon of the Minimalist movement is transformed into a gallows humour of the archetypal trickster. The visitor is invited to make their way through the rain of bricks punctuated by three prophetic neon signs from 2003, that flicker the words DANGER TERROR BORDER. The first letter sparks and then turns off and the words transform into ANGER ERROR ORDER. The already extremely estranging effect of the overall installation is amplified by a mirroring floor which doubles the experience while suspending it in a surreal almost dream-like state and "as Above" shifts to become "as Below".

The South African artist's solo show transitions then to his new production – lenticular prints with double meanings, photographs of flowers and plants that are like the scars and wounds of our nature in protest and the still life paintings that heighten the experience of a world spinning in every direction. Here the sensation of alienation is renewed by means of a site-specific wallpaper and wall painting, and the feeling of danger is reinforced by his use of menacing yet aesthetically charged shards of broken glass. The broken glass is reminiscent of his iconic 1995 *Self Portrait*, a broken bottle of Heineken beer.

«*OrnAmenTum'EtKrimMen* is a resurrection of spirit through an invocation of nature, a powerful invocation on the subject of love through the agency of still life painting. The cut flowers of the classic still life painting tradition might be the most precise symbol of our times. The flowers have been severed from their roots and are sustained, only for brief moment, by the water in their vase. Their beauty lies in their fragility, still alive and yet dying simultaneously.» says the artist.

Geers flips the Dutch art historical language upon its head with a conceptual-expressionist twist and the cut flowers are framed against the backdrop of climate change and the proliferation of borders and social

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boundaries. Describing himself as an AniMystikAktivist, he weaves together animistic and shamanic tradition with alchemical mysticism in an unbridled activism. In protest against the materialism of our age ruled by economic prejudice and political expedience, the artist proposes an art of spiritual transformation. He believes that Art holds the key to the difficult questions of healing. He believes art is an esoteric practice and the work of art is nothing less than a talisman. His studio is his heterotopia, a space set aside from reality in which he is able to channel spirit into form, a word is made flesh, a dream manifest and formless uncanny silence given a voice to sing. To him creating a great work of art is more than a physical process because when you look at a great work of art, that work of art looks right back at you for it is alive – with a spirit.

OrnAmenTum'EtKrimMen is a call to arms, but instead of bullets, love, like art, is a weapon of transformation because “« Art Changes the World – One Perception at a Time ».

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue where the curator Danilo Eccher is in dialogue with the artist.

KENDELL GEERS

Born in Johannesburg into a working-class Afrikaans family during the height of apartheid, Kendall Geers grew up realizing that his moral, spiritual and cultural education was based on racist lies. He ran away from home at the age of fifteen, and performed an artistic operation on himself by deciding to change his date of birth to May 1968.

Fighting a Crime Against Humanity on the front lines of activism and protest, he fled from the military regime which had sentenced him to six years imprisonment, reaching London in 1988 as a political refugee. In 1989 he moved on to New York where he found employ as Richard Prince's full-time assistant. Following the release of Nelson Mandela, Geers returned to South Africa in 1990 to help build the new democracy.

As an artist, curator, musician, designer and writer, Geers works without compromising. In the belief that art is both political and spiritual, his multi-faceted practice cannot be categorized in terms of trends, clichés or fashion. The raw energy of a punk attitude blends with the visceral visionary philosophy of poets like Rimbaud, Blake and Burroughs in a mysterious cocktail of unexpected contrasts.

From the early 1990's, Geers has taken part in many exhibitions world-wide, including *The Street. Where the world is made* and *Road to Justice* at MAXXI (Rome, 2018 and 2017); Documenta (2017 and 2002); the Venice Biennial (2017 and 2007); Shanghai Biennial (2016); *Punk. Its Traces in Contemporary Art* at MACBA (Barcelona, 2016); *Contemporary Art from the Centre Pompidou* at Haus der Kunst (Munich, 2016); *INSERT 2014* at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (Delhi, 2014); *The Luminous Interval at the Guggenheim Museum* (Bilbao, 2011); and the Bienal de São Paulo (2010).

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