

D'UN MUSÉE L'AUTRE

RAPHAËL DENIS

Raphaël Denis

Born in 1979

Works and lives between Brussels and Paris

exhibition

from 10th April
to 28th May 2022

opening

Sunday 10th April
2pm - 6pm
Komunuma openings

galerie Sator Komunuma

43 rue de la Commune de Paris
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opening hours

Wednesday-Saturday
10am to 6pm

and by appointment

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Raphaël Denis' exhibition "D'un musée l'autre" [From One Museum to Another] focuses on the fate of artworks in museum collections within contexts of profound historical upheaval. The idea of displacement, both geographical and political, is at the centre of this new project. Through migration, concealment and appropriation, the institutional work of art – the expression of a national community – becomes a stake in power.

Whether it be masterpieces from the Louvre – such as the Victory of Samothrace which was moved at the beginning of the Second World War to escape the threat of the Nazis –, the sale of "degenerate art" – works looted by the German state from its own museums – in Lucerne in 1939, or recent casts of antiques deformed and appropriated by the artist, the question of conservation and transmission of the work arises.

Even before the war was officially declared on September 3rd, 1939, the Louvre's masterpieces were evacuated to Chambord before being placed in various other French chateaux. The Victory of Samothrace was amongst these works and was hidden in Valençay. Photographs by Marx Vaux show the precious marble sculpture placed on an assembly of fragile planks and suspended in the Grand Escalier of the Louvre. Raphaël Denis was inspired by these historical facts and images to create yet another work in the series La Dynamique des restes [the dynamic of remains] entitled Les



Ailes du désir [the wings of desire]. Discovered on the island of Samothrace in 1863, recovered and "repatriated" to France by representatives of the Second Empire, the Hellenistic masterpiece has since become one of the emblematic pieces of all French museum collections. The Victory of Samothrace embodies the imperialist appropriation of foreign assets that become national symbols. The two wings suspended as if on a gallows or a hunting trophy remind us of the fragility of these political and symbolic constructions by the dominant powers (the victory of one being the defeat of the other).

After having been interested in the private Jewish art collections that were looted during the war by the nazis, Raphaël Denis has now dedicated his research to German museums and conservators, victims of the regime. Close to sixteen thousand artworks deemed "degenerate" – according to the criteria defined by Berlin – were seized from German museums by authorities beginning in the 1930s. One hundred twenty-five sculptures and paintings were sent by the nazis to the Theodor Fischer Gallery in Lucerne, Switzerland to be auctioned off on June 30, 1939. The Kunstmuseum in Basel and the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Liege were amongst the most active buyers. Modern works from German collections thus became the property of Belgian and Swiss institutions. For these museums, this was both a means of protect endangered works and an enrichment of their own collections. As a prelude to the realisation of a life-size installation, Raphaël Denis' model represents the moment when all of these works were put into crates and offered at auction. The crate as an object of

protection and transport evokes the stakes of conserving and transporting artworks, as well as their shuffling between great powers.

Since the seventeenth century, tools to create reproductions of images and art objects – such as chalcography as well as moulding and casting techniques – have been used to increase outreach of national collections with the aim of transmitting knowledge and creative genius. It was also a matter of carrying out an offensive cultural policy, as a demonstration of the state's power, be it royal or republican. Using casts of ancient busts acquired from the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire de Bruxelles and the gypsothèque (a place where plaster casts are stored) of the RMN (Réunion des Musées Nationaux-Grand Palais), Raphaël Denis engaged in deforming representation. Soaking the works in plaster basins and covering them with acacia gum and encaustic, layer after layer, he attacks their integrity, symbolically transmitted for generations thanks to the reproducibility of the moulds. In an almost iconoclastic gesture, the artist challenges the concept of conservation. Here, the displacement is thus creative.

The artwork can only exist through the how it is perceived. The closing of museums during the pandemic reminded us of this. Raphaël Denis seeks to reactivate our gaze on the fate of an artwork, reflections of the violence and troubles of human history.



(p1) LA LOI NORMALE DES ERREURS : D'UN MUSÉE L'AUTRE - wood, painting, graphite and documentation, 200 x 320 x 70 cm - 2022

(p2) LA DYNAMIQUE DES RESTES : LES AILES DU DÉSIR - painting, steel, plaster, 280 x 175 x 150 cm - 2022