

Soshiro Matsubara

Study for a Labyrinth

January 29 - March 12, 2022

Opening reception Saturday, January 29 6-9pm

The story of Viennese Expressionist painter Oskar Kokoschka (b.1886 - d.1980), heartbrokenly commissioning a life-size doll in the likeness of composer and socialite Alma Mahler (b.1879 - d.1964), is a recurrent reference in Soshiro Matsubara's work. After Mahler and Kokoschka ended a turbulent love affair in 1914, Kokoschka wrote several letters to a doll-maker, Hermine Moos, with specifications for an Alma Mahler replacement; the resulting plush figure was a disturbing model of both fantasy and frustration.

Somewhere online, there is a photograph of a replica of the doll, displayed sitting on a chair at the Belvedere museum in Vienna. A visitor, seen from the back, stands in front of it and looks at it. This viewer in the photograph is Soshiro Matsubara's doppelgänger: same hairstyle, chic clothes that could be his. The visitor seems to be carrying a portfolio of some kind, perhaps to sketch the doll. Matsubara insists it isn't him, though the likeness is eerie.

Matsubara imagines that the concept of the doll came to Kokoschka in a moment of crisis when he found himself in rebellion against the world. The golden age of turn-of-the-century Vienna, in which Kokoschka made his best work, was coming to an end following the ravages of war: this decline of early 20th century European radiance in his mind seemed to coincide with the demise of his love affair. The doll, then, is the device that Kokoschka designed to maintain a nostalgic connection with the past, in his mind a stand-in for the lost splendor of Vienna's bygone days. The doll is an obsessional object, conceived in a passion, but carried out with compulsive attention to detail over nine months of correspondence with Moos. The end product was a disappointment: the doll looked nothing like the envisioned object of desire. In the years to follow, Kokoschka's cultural context changed rapidly; however, sweetly and sadly, the doll remained the same. Finally, while hosting a champagne party he dressed up the fetish and destroyed it; this marked the completion of his project. Kokoschka claimed to have cured his obsession, but did he?

Three quarters of a century later, Kokoschka's doll becomes a muse for Matsubara to craft his own fantasy world. Matsubara felt the first stirrings eight years ago when he enrolled in art school in Vienna, where he immersed himself in European art from the early 1900s. He instantly recognized that much of the popular culture that attracted him most was influenced by the Symbolists: in comics (Jojo's Bizarre Adventure), in video games (Final Fantasy), etc, forming the culture of the Westernized non-place in postwar Japan. This modernist dreamscape created by Japanese artists was then in turn exported to the West. Matsubara, from the island of Hokkaido, also feels an affinity with the films of Wes Anderson, a Houstonian living in Paris: Anderson's films evoke a nerdy fantasy world, an imagined old and new Europe. Matsubara seems to find all forms of Romanticism both irresistible and outlandish, which may be why his paintings and sculptures of fallen heroes and naked bodies seem so elegant at first, though if you look at them again they suddenly reveal their sly humor.

In his adolescence, Matsubara was surrounded by music that sang of love from a feminine point of view, although he noted that the lyrics were usually written by men. More recently, Matsubara has been making covers of these songs, which he sometimes performs. In the 1980s and 90s, the theme of unrequited desire in pop music created a collective fantasy, a pervasive shared language carried through radio waves. Today the Top 40 heartaches have been replaced by songs with varied, atomized topics. Cleverly, Matsubara's artistic creations infused with cultural commentary evade the grime of Realism, while preserving the Romantic gloss. Somehow, when he depicts extreme acts of obsessive longing, the work retains a cool beauty.

At Bel Ami, Soshiro Matsubara will construct an installation—a theatrical maze—which opens up the possibility of a personal fantasy world, one of spatial and temporal dislocation, a domain that is aware of—but apart from—the challenges of reality. Like Kokoschka's obsession with the past, the maze here is an installation-as-time machine, a device that allows the viewer to travel into an anachronistic realm of remembered romance.

Soshiro Matsubara (b. 1980, Hokkaido, Japan) lives and works in Vienna. He has held solo exhibitions at Museum of Contemporary Art, Rome; Croy Nielsen, Vienna; Schiefe Zähne, Berlin; Bel Ami, Los Angeles; Brennan & Griffin, New York; and XYZ collective, Tokyo. Recent group exhibitions include *Winterfest*, Aspen Art Museum and *The Sentimental Organization of the World*, Crèvecoeur, Paris. His work is in the collection of the Lewben Art Foundation, Vilnius.