

For his exhibition in the Austrian Pavilion at the 55th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, artist Mathias Poledna presents a new work titled *Imitation of Life*.

A 35mm color film roughly three minutes in length, *Imitation of Life* was produced using the historic, labor-intensive technique of handmade animation and is built around a cartoon character performing a musical number. Its buoyant spirit and visual texture evoke the Golden Era of the American animation industry during the late 1930s and early 1940s. In the preceding years, the time of the Great Depression, the medium had evolved from a crude form of mass spectacle into a visual language of enormous richness and complexity that shaped and continues to resonate in our collective imaginary.

*Imitation of Life* appropriates and reassembles this language as it revisits the contradictions and ambiguities that accompanied the medium's development. Advanced methods of production and visual ingenuity—indebted to the syntax of European modernism in its handling of surface, depth and color, and lauded by the avant-garde and critic intelligence of the time—coexisted with sentimental characterization and storytelling based on age-old fables and fairy tales.

Among the most pronounced features of the film is the extreme contrast between the conciseness of its scene, and the extraordinary amount of labor that went into its creation: more than 5,000 handmade sketches, layouts, animation drawings, watercolored backgrounds and ink-rendered animation cells, produced in close cooperation with acclaimed artists from the animation departments of film studios in Los Angeles, most notably Disney. Several small groups of these drawings are presented in the Austrian Pavilion.

The soundtrack, another key element of the production, was recorded with a full orchestra in the style of the period at the Warner Brothers scoring stage in Los Angeles. It combines new original music created specifically for this project with a rearrangement of a popular song from the 1930s written by Arthur Freed and Nacio Herb Brown.

Presented in Venice, Poledna's installation allows for a complex cross-reading with other episodes from this period: the relationship between European art and American mass culture; European emigration to the United States and American export to Europe; the presentation of animated films produced by the Disney Studios at the first film festivals in Venice; the late modernism of the Austrian Pavilion, and the period from 1938 to 1942 during which the building remained empty while Austrian artists exhibited in the German Pavilion.

On behalf of the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, the Arts and Culture.

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