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Mikołaj Sobczak

Heretics Forever

March 31st - May 5th 2023

Galerie Max Mayer is happy to present *Heretics Forever*, Mikołaj Sobczak's first solo show at the gallery. Mikołaj Sobczak's work is based on extensive research and reflection on history, contemporary politics, mythology and folklore. In bringing these points of interest together, he creates new forms of imagery, depicting stories that thus far haven't received their visual facet, with a focus lying on queer people. The term *heretics* (from Greek *hairesikos*, "able to choose") describes people that hold opinions at odds with what is generally accepted or, in a religious context, believe in heresies – ideas which strongly contradict established dogma and authority.

Sobczak's works take their positions on the lowest level of the gallery, spreading through the space while asking us to walk around them, come closer and take a good look at them. Blurring ideas of subjectivity and objecthood, the works deny classification, appearing as sculptural performers that claim their own stage and history. They consist of many layers, coinciding, and thereby forming material and medial entanglements that invite a multifaceted reading. Images based on medieval woodcuts – considered an early form of mass reproduction – constitute the backs of the works. Sobczak adapted their motives from the book *Malleus maleficarum* ("hammer of witches," or *Hexenhammer* in German, 1486), which played a central role in legitimizing the inquisition and witch-hunt. The milled wooden sides show scenes of witches burning snakes or embracing the devil. On the works' front sides, personal snapshots taken by the artist have been printed directly onto the wood to create a first layer, revealing a sort of "subjective evidence" inherent to the photographic image: a receipt of a gas station in Poland turns into a timestamp documenting a queer phobic attack against the artist, as does a bloody tissue that appears in several works, for instance as the dress of Zdenka Fantlová, a Czech actress, who was imprisoned in Auschwitz. Small sticker-imagery attached to the artist's selfie recalls childlike collecting practices, but on a closer look reveals medieval depictions of queer people and moments, such as Jeanne d'Arc or a witch transforming into an animal (taken from Arthur Evans' *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture*).

In a final step, painted scenes both visually and materially merge into Sobczak's personal archive of snapshots. Reimagining scenes of transgressive histories, the paintings also recall a style of socialist realism. Sobczak chose the technique of *grisaille* (French for "grayed") to depict stories from Joanna Ostrowska's book *Them. The World War Two History of Non-Heteronormative People* focusing on the history of people, who were imprisoned in 1933-45 under the so-called "Paragraph 175" against "homosexual relations." *Grisaille* has a special link to the works presented as part of *Heretics*: this technique, based on gray tones only, has often been used in the past to mimic sculptural elements or even sculptures, creating illusory effects of depth and motion that tend towards the theatrical. In the presented work, Sobczak has created new types of monuments, visual phrasings of memory. In another function, *grisaille* has been employed for sketching the primary layers of paintings and frescos, to be completed with layers in color with glazes. These initial studies in gray take on a specific meaning in this exhibition. Comparable to early cinema and its black-and-white shots that developed into color movies, Sobczak's works take a next step in offering visualizations for histories and stories that so far have only been passed on in oral or written forms.

