

**SMART OBJECTS** is delighted to present *Unchained Melody*, a solo exhibition of new work by Los Angeles-based artist Zoe Koke.

Sifting the trajectory of Western history through a personal sieve, Zoe Koke's *Unchained Melody* samples cautionary premonitions forewarning the pitfalls of ubiquitous individualism and our ever-widening dissociation from history and nature. Through accumulated points of reference, space is created for the inescapable anxieties of looming catastrophe to be sublimated into new iterations of an enduring bid for hope that has echoed throughout human existence. As simultaneous forces of violence and peace, exploitation and care, chaos and silence lay bare the futility of the human project of progress, glimpses of optimism through accounts of brute survival are offered in turn.

Digging into the layered ruins of personal and world histories, allusions to such feats of survival sit alongside examples of empires buckling under the weight of their own aspiration. As meaning slips between various mediums and references, specifics dissolve into sensations and association is kept in motion. The Texas Willow, a delicate tree that can withstand high temperatures, is captured at night. A photo found amidst Koke's grandfather's archive shows a Canadian fishing, on the brink of rupturing ice with a violent blow, while another 'family photo' displays the target practice of Koke's sister.

In the face of the great equalizing force of time, *Unchained Melody* proposes a release from the grips of smooth consumability by rehearsing more antagonistic and probing relationships with histories and audiences—an industrial animal trap hanging in a doorframe predicates current entrapments of social forces, capital, media, and imagery, while a turn-of-the-century wooden toy peacock, ominously positioned, tacitly mocks an emblem of regalism.

Opening the show, a painting of a film still from Koke's love, Nick Flessa's, "If I Forget You, Jerusalem" conjures an endless Ohio forest. In another allusion to nature's resilience and mystery, a ghostly depiction of the 2800-year-old Mana Elia olive tree the artist visited in Crete is painted with rich roots that diffuse as branches multiply. Grafted on the resilient rootstock of a wild olive tree, Mana Elia has endured the adversities of drought, disease, and natural disasters. As such, the tree proposes a symbolic infrastructure for 'grafting' hope, broadening one's life purpose as a steward of care extended beyond one lifetime.

Other works on canvas continue to reconcile cycles of destruction and regeneration in blazing red LA wildfires, concurrent with color fields of expansive sea and landscapes that merge light, earth, sky, and water creating spaces to surrender and disappear into. An ink-black ocean flows through the triptych *Timbre*, likening the tone and cantor of drone music to Koke's atmospheric paintings. Continuing this comparison, improvised electro-acoustic music by Chris Mckelway and Nicki Chen will be performed at the opening.

Skulls and bones form a heart in a photo of the Catacombs of Paris. Employed as architecture after the city was restructured with underground tunnels due to sinking, generations of bones literally buttress the city's structure. The photo *Anzio Ruins* reveals the remains of the debaucherous Emperor Nero's home. An interpretation of caves in Anzio, Italy *Saturn devouring*

*his son* dredges up the layers of history in the area; the birthplace of Rome, the site where allied troops overtook Italy at the end of World War II, and its current existence as a deserted beach town.

The artist implicates part of herself in a reflective self-portrait obscured by a camera flash in a Vegas hotel window, made when she moved from Canada to the US. As a site of highly potent Americana, Vegas's simulacra of culture is a caricature of delight and disgust, endlessly devouring itself at the precipice of fulfillment. Elvis covers the song *Unchained Melody* in a slightly manipulated video of one of his final performances. Oscillating between wheezing breaths and guttural belting, Elvis serenades his fragile mortality as his celebrity persona continues on. (Elvis Lives!) While cautionary stories of fame eclipsing the fragility of personhood repeat, the myth of American individualism and celebrity ensnarement persists, though perhaps more diffused and en masse.

Overlaying archetypes, allegories, and symbols, *Unchained Melody* associatively traces the origins, reverberations, and impacts of Western overextension. As the dust around a collapsed power settles, bodies remember what history and memory forget. With the fragility of hubris and determinants of imperial overreach exposed, hopes for a new world can emerge. Acknowledging the hesitance to give up the fantasy of boundless resources and limitless growth, *Unchained Melody* surfaces, inspects, and consoles our collective reluctance to confront the looming specter of death on a grand scale for the sake of survival.

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**Zoe Koke** (b. 1989) lives and works in Los Angeles. Past exhibitions include *The Serpent's Tail* (with Rike Droscher), Alice Amati, London (2023), *Reflex*, Patel Brown Gallery, Toronto (2022); *Fever Dream*, One Trick Pony, Los Angeles (2021); *Doesn't whine by blue moon*, Ochi Projects, Los Angeles (2021) among others. Selected two person exhibits include *Agony / Serendipity* (with Nicholas Campbell), SMART OBJECTS, Los Angeles (2023); *Made to Look Natural* (with Ben Borden), SMART OBJECTS, Landers, CA (2018) and *Forced air: les ventilateurs* (with Carlyne Scenna) at Les Territoires, Montreal (2015). Koke recently had a solo show at Mai 36 Galerie's project space in Zurich and has an upcoming solo at Linseed Projects in Shanghai. She holds an MFA from University of California, Los Angeles (2019) and a BFA from Concordia University, Montréal (2013).

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