



LA GRENADE

*I picked this sprig of heather
Autumn has died you must remember
We shall not see each other ever
I'm waiting and you must remember
Time's perfume is a sprig of heather*

Guillaume Apollinaire, *Alcools*.
(‘The Farewell’, translation from Donald Revell)

“The memory does not film. The memory photographs”; these were the words written by Milan Kundera in *Immortality*. I take pictures, therefore I remember: the saying perfectly corresponds to Frédéric Nakache. With *La Grenade*, he rejects the aesthetic diktats of a certain vision of contemporary art, and offers an alternative version of mythological stories. Hence, more than ever, he chooses to blur all autofictional clues. By way of illustration, we could focus on his self-portrait made of 120 burnt-out matches, a reference to the Jewish tradition in which “May you live to be 120 years old” is a form of praise and good wish.

Half-fruit and half-weapon (in French the same word is used both for a pomegranate and a grenade), *La Grenade* shows a link to the character of Persephone. The daughter of the goddess Demeter, she was abducted by Hades, god of the underworld. Pressed by her mother’s grief, Zeus allowed her to return to Earth, yet under one condition: she would be freed as long as she had not eaten any food in Hell. But she was betrayed by a gardener who revealed he had seen her eat seven pomegranate seeds... Moved by her despair, Zeus eventually decided that Persephone should spend six months as Queen of the Underworld, and the rest of the year on Earth, according to the cycle of the seasons. Therefore Persephone’s immortal life is divided between bright awakening in the land of the living and hibernation in the land of the dead.

This very dichotomy is at the heart of Frédéric Nakache’s exhibition, for the question seems to be: how can one live and go on living when one knows we are doomed from the start? No clear answer will be provided, only echoes, clues, allusions. A Happy Family card game is represented as a tombstone. Vaguely white curtains hiding a vivid light materialize the passage to death. Still, this is not all about some form of gratuitous morbidity. The exhibition by no means dwells on the unbearable lightness of being. Quite the reverse, it is punctuated by significant variants of formats. Frédéric Nakache also scoffs at the traditional meanings of flowers, things, appearances, so as to grant them a new impact, as illustrated by his orchids, used here as a symbol of seduction and fecundity and characterized by a seemingly perfect beauty which turns out to be disturbed by the presence of dead bees within the hearts of the flowers. “Those images had been haunting me for a long time, the artist confides. For months, I would scribble my ideas on paper, without any involvement in their creation, for they filled me with some extremely strong emotions. Once I finally “digested” them, I became able to start working. The types of influences –such as German photography- which had guided me until then were superseded by new ones, including Victorian photography”.

At the end of the XIXth century, Oscar-Gustav Rejlander, Lewis Carroll or Julia Magaret Cameron experimented with long periods of exposure as it took a while to capture the image, elaborating live sets characterized by a genuine emotional power. One of the photographs from La Grenade echoes this tradition with its carefully thought-out and minutely-detailed staging of Persephone lying and holding the cursed fruit in her hand. The details of the character's skin and of the materials (the fabric of a smock, the plastic material of a toy, a velvet-like flower) are enhanced by the precision of the picture. Similarly, the characters' expressions are intensified in the photographs, as illustrated by the fixed cry of a young woman. And then, everyday life objects and things become peculiarly animated, as does this cuddly toy which has been all stitched up, as if freshly recovering from an open-heart surgery. By contrast, some human beings are desperately trying to liquefy, like this man simultaneously wearing three different masks – Freddy Krueger's, an old man's and a clown's: in this way he becomes gradually separated from his own humanity, layer after layer. Despite the phone he holds to his ear in order to start an undoubtedly imaginary dialogue, nothing will alter this estrangement from himself. "I have always been fascinated by zombies, the way they incarnate stupidity, this primary instinct, reveals Frédéric Nakache. For we live in a world where we are increasingly driven by our instinct. I personally see the zombie figure as a metaphor for the human being".

To Sigmund Freud, this was a certainty: "at bottom, no one really believes in his own death. In the unconscious, every one of us is convinced of his own immortality". The people and things meticulously chosen and photographed by Frédéric Nakache have also been marked by that conviction. And to keep boredom at bay, Persephone is the link between all of them. "I'm waiting and you must remember".

Sophie Rosemont

Translation: Elisa Ferrero

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