

Jonathan Hammer

The Raft of the Medusa

January 26 – March 18

In 1819, Géricault's celebration of disaster, *The Raft of the Medusa*, caused an uproar, shocking the public by its realism, the strength of its composition, and the anatomical putrefaction of the corpses depicted. A masterpiece of Romanticism, the painter captures the moment of maximum contrast between the pure horror of those shipwrecked and the distant hope of a waning sail. We witness the carnal beauty of bodies, mixed with the repulsion of decaying flesh, best remembered by catastrophic anthropophagy, cannibalism...

The Medusa, the curly coifed monster, fits neatly within Jonathan Hammer's use of the Octopus as a surrogate of self portraiture. This Gorgon's effigy in Ancient Greece, an image that adorned temples, and the shields of heroes, embodies a symbolic reversal. It protects them against the evil eye she casts, or turns the spectator to stone. Hers is both an apotropaic figure, and a curse, as her own image reflected on Perseus' shield is used to destroy her. Isn't this the central engagement of art: to look, and to be seen? The shiver of danger that turns to victory.

The work of Jonathan Hammer at La Caja Negra, draws from these historical sources while overlaying contemporary concerns. His new graphics, and ceramic sculptures, are instruments of representation that shed light on an otherwise hidden world tinged by transformation, by the infinite richness of the minuscule, and by the ambivalence of forms. The presence of danger (the arm of a swimmer in the larger of the etchings, recalls a horrible diving accident the artist experienced 20 years ago) is mirrored as inner exploration. Aquatic enchantments coexist with monsters in shapes fantastical and disturbing.

The two prints display a world of complex layered microbial anger, while at the same time offering forth a kind of random and vivid sea-world beauty. Hammer's use of etching and collage over monotype, allows for individual variegations that match the swell and ebb of the sea. Wreckage is everywhere, but so is a kind of heroic yearning. The ceramic works included in the exhibition echo the same themes. How can the ugly, the monstrous, be portrayed in so exquisite a manner? The clay descends in fire to hell, and rises afterward in a volcanic reborn state as unimaginable creatures and landscapes. Are the two Gaias bristling with stingers or architectural towers, are the sculptures tectonic or viral forms? On the verge of abstraction, Hammer gives our fears and hopes the gleaming of a saturated and unstable world.

The monotype technique creates unique prints. Hammer further cultivates this individuality by generating a double, "ghost" image, pulled as a second impression off the press. He then overdraws, creating an original work on paper that produces an ambiguous second alternative of the first print.

These ghosts offer a more open lyricism to the exhibition, a more breathable, oxygenated world. They are fine examples of the central complexity of the artist's project, which waivers between evidence and palimpsest, simplicity and visual palindrome.

The Raft of the Medusa marks the 9th solo exhibition of Jonathan Hammer in Spain, and his first with Galeria la Caja Negra. In it, the artist insists on untying the typical bonds of printmaking and ceramics by allowing lustrous combinations urged by freedom and release from constraint.

JONATHAN HAMMER (Chicago, 1960). Jonathan Hammer has had 50+ solo exhibitions. For more than 35 years he has worked in several mediums including works on paper, photography, unique books, sculpture, ceramics, and prints, as well as his signature screens and panels made from marquetry of exotic skins. Hammer has exhibited widely in Germany, Switzerland, Norway, France, England, Japan, Mexico and the United States. In Spain he has had many solo shows. He has had 10 one person exhibitions in New York (including five at Matthew Marks Gallery). Along with numerous group exhibitions in museums worldwide, Hammer has had solo shows in Geneva at the Centre d'Art Contemporain, the Berkeley Art Museum and the Derfner Museum. His art is in many private and public collections including multiple works in each of the following: MOMA NY; San Francisco MOMA; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Hammer Museum (UCLA); Berkeley Art Museum; Whitney Museum of American Art; New York Public Library; Jumex Collection, Mexico City, among others. An authority on Zurich Dada, (especially Hugo Ball and Jean Arp/Sophie Taeuber Arp) Hammer published his critical writings on the subject in his book "Ball and Hammer", Yale University Press, 2002. He has received honors from among others: Art Matters, NY; Pro Helvetia (the Swiss Arts Council); The Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, NY; The Pollock Krasner Foundation, NY; PEW Foundation, Philadelphia; Arp Foundation, Berlin; Artis Foundation, Tel Aviv/NY. Hammer is the founder of the Villa Bergerie artists residency project. Hammer lives and works in Spain.