

MOTHER MAY I

Deanna Havas on Marc Kokopeli at Lomex, New York

Gently tucked away amid the sprawling landscape of the Pacific Northwest, set within scenery once emblazoned with the ecotopian promise of liberal democracy's full bounty, remain the reproductive faculties of suburban Americana. I had grown up with impressions of the kind of American nuclear family that populated these parts – initially through sitcoms but later on, following the death of my father, through the more sensational true crime genre. Thousands of miles away in my hometown New York, I couldn't have felt more estranged from this seemingly wholesome, optimally nurturing familial configuration. After all, I had already resigned myself – in the face of my own inherited preoccupations with material and ideological reproduction – to a life of perpetual homelessness; this the consequence of a transitory, albeit modular, metropolitan sophistication certainly imparted, to some extent, by the conventions of the gallery opening, among other like rituals. These ceremonial activities offer a sense of respite, although never enough to offset the constant state of trepidation and precarity that is ancillary to this industry.

Musing on these sorts of half-baked associations and representations, I stumbled up the stairs to Lomex, a relatively new Lower East Side gallery (which, I learn, occupies the former studio of Eva Hesse) on the occasion of Marc Kokopeli's first solo show, "Song of Hammy's." Kokopeli, originally a native of the Seattle area, is now a familiar face in New York's younger downtown scene; an intimate, familial collective of artists persisting in the shadow of the city's caustic housing market. As though with a mind for the present's matri-

lineal canon – Hesse's post-minimalism, but also the photographic/mass-media appropriation and sociological exploration of Pictures generation figures such as Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine, and Laurie Simmons – Kokopeli presented a selection of photographs produced by his mother in their Seattle home during the early '90s. This source material was initially intended for use in classrooms as illustrative educational models and featured children – including the artist himself as a boy – staged in hypothetical scenarios depicting variously ethical protocol. For Kokopeli's installation of this work at Lomex, he underscored the role of pedagogy as an agent of enculturation, hanging his appropriated photos on freestanding, toddler's-eye-height, custom-built padded walls. In addition to this element, what with its gestures of childproofing, the show also included two small anthropomorphic animal sculptures (each barely 30 centimeters and positioned on tiny plinths resting on the floor). The figures, though appearing hand-formed in clay, had in fact been carved out of stone; as such, they seem to grimace, gazes fixed, at the memory of that which was once pliable.

The use of didactic educational imagery, particularly those figures that exist as mementos of hypothetical enactments (e. g., the scenes that Kokopeli's appropriated photographs depict), might square with other forms of reenactment – like, say, the historical reenactments authoritarian regimes employ to bolster political legitimacy. Could similar mechanics of indoctrination exist at the root of the daily mimema of the contemporary bourgeois family (albeit in atomized form), the antecedent of a fleeting nuclear morality? One might think here, contra the efforts of '90s parenting theory, of the growing number



"Marc Kokopeli: Songs of Hammys," Lomex, New York, 2016, installation view

of radicalized, young white heterosexual males from otherwise seemingly benign upbringings, the demographic profile of most "lone wolf"-style violent actors. Maternal effects from attachment parenting to artificial food dye to anti-psychotic medication, among others, are popularly deemed culprits.

The common occidental tendency has been to conceive of contemporary society in contrast to authoritarian regimes of the past. If the converse of a paternalistic historicist order finds the maternal figure accountable for a speculative future, it's not surprising, then, that the future, the unknown, has often been feminized (whether via Fritz Lang's cyborgian Maria or antiquity's Cassandra). And indeed we can come to understand mythology through the material detritus that animates it – not least, the stone sculptures that sustain the folklore of individual actors against the flux of time: like the neoclassical motifs that adorned Napoleon's regime, historical pageantry functioned to ceremoniously justify the current

political order by presenting it as the "natural" outcome of a linear, teleological history.

The neoclassical aesthetic was so sweeping, in fact, that it dominated the decorative arts in Europe and America centuries after Napoleon's death. Among the ideas that finally led to its expiration was, not least, Manifest Destiny, a movement that, rendering space reciprocal to time, led the United States' expansion westward into what is now the country's Pacific Northwest. Perhaps it is precisely such a view of Kokopeli's 1990s Seattle – and his meditation on its horizon of ceiling-less economic optimism and final vestiges of virtualized promise as seen through a child's bright-eyed gaze – that allows us to better assess a viable present-day ethics despite all of our genealogical ties to a socially atomized past.

"Marc Kokopeli: Songs of Hammys," Lomex, New York, May 28–July 10, 2016.