



Photo by Marie Haefner

Soshiro Matsubara: »Well, Where’s the Romance«

INTERVIEW

ENGLISH

ART

CROY NIELSEN

SOSHIRO MATSUBARA

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Vienna-based artist SOSHIRO MATSUBARA ㊦s work centers around a famous art couple’s obsessive romance with paintings, sculptures and ceramics. An interview by Juliana Lindenhofer about his current exhibition at CROY NIELSEN ㊦ Gallery Vienna, severed heads and his aversion to collecting things, with photos by MARIE HAEFNER ㊦.

The starting point for your exhibition was the scene of a hangover morning for Oskar Kokoschka.

As a press release for my show »True Romance«, I wrote a fictional diary as Oskar Kokoschka. It’s a hangover scene playing out at noon the day after a champagne party, where he got drunk and cut off the head of his Alma Mahler doll. He recalls his time with the doll up until then. The works in my show are moments within his recollection. So, the works are about lost things.

The time that Oskar Kokoschka spent with his doll was a gift for him. In order for a person to recognize that it is a gift, they need to recognize that »it was given, and I received it«. In his case, when he lost it, he recognized that he had received it. Just in case, this is a fictional account I wrote based on a story of Kokoschka and a doll he made.

In your installation »A Tale of Romance«, we see children’s feet and a female figure with a body made of soft textile. In its crotch, a severed male head seems to perform oral sex. Who are they, and where is the romance?

They are lovers: a doll-shaped Alma Mahler and the head of Oskar Kokoschka. Well,...where’s the romance? The romance might take place in the small gap between the crotch of the doll and the tip of his tongue.

The lovers, as sculptures and paintings, somehow seem to behave like living entities within the gallery space.

The works in my show are all related to Oskar Kokoschka and Alma Mahler and the Alma Mahler doll, except for »Twilight« (yellow painting), »LAST NIGHT« (wall lamps) and Sphinx« (coat hanger). Even though they might not look the same, because they have slightly different faces.

I wanted to give the entire gallery, including the beautiful corridor, an atmosphere of intimacy. I can’t find the words to describe what mood this is. Intimate and creepy, even beautiful. I do not know how much of it I was able to get across. But for me, this mood itself is an integral part of this show.

What excites you about this heterosexual romance between these two artists?

First of all, I am not even sure if this romance can really be understood as purely heterosexual. I was very interested in the story of Oskar Kokoschka and the Alma Mahler doll and Alma Mahler. Because I am drawn to the strangeness, attachment, obsession, energy, humor, beauty and imbalance of the story. This unique cure for being lovesick cheers me up.

Needless to say, every romance is unique. No matter what kind of sexuality, even if the partner is a doll. The story of Oskar Kokoschka, the Alma Mahler doll and Alma Mahler is only a more eccentric case. This is also one of many. I think everyone has the potential to cling to something in a similar way. In their case, it is both a heterosexual romance and an objectophile romance. Of course, they are intrinsically intertwined. In fact, today, such cases are not rare anymore. I have read articles about people living with love dolls in Japan. With further technological evolution, such romances might become even more common.

The sculpture »Portrait of Alma Mahler« has a body made out of bedsheets. Enthroned, it is observing the whole room, with its mouth slightly opened.

I think that the impression this work leaves on the spectator changes dramatically, depending on the exhibition situation. I like the layout at Croy Nielsen, where there is a green window just behind the sculpture. It reminds me of the compositions in paintings by Fernand Khnopff.

How did Fernand Khnopff’s compositions influence your sculpture?

Fernand Khnopff’s paintings often feature bold straight lines in vertical and horizontal directions. For example, you can see it in »Portrait of Marguerite Khnopff« or »Femme Mystérieuse«, etc. That is one important element that shapes his work.

This sculpture is not influenced by his paintings, but the way the sculpture is placed in front of the green window reminded me of his compositions.

You sometimes take off the heads of your sculptures. For example, the head of the »Portrait of Alma Mahler« you already presented at OKEY DOKEY in Düsseldorf.

The work exhibited at OKEY DOKEY was made for the show LOVESICK ㊦ at Schiefe Zähne, a gallery based in Berlin, in 2018. For that exhibition, I simply put the head on a pillow on a carpet. And I arranged two kiss paintings just above the line of sight of the head.

When only the head is on display, it also reminds you of the head of the Alma dolls. On the other hand, when the Alma doll (including the body) and Kokoschka are together, it evokes a fantasy of the doll and him.

Neon red hair seems to be a recurrent theme in your exhibition.

That’s because I set Alma’s hair color to red. I somehow felt it was appropriate.

What is the »Haus der Matsubara«, and why do you like to collect things?

HAUS DER MATSUBARA ㊦ is an antique shop that I run on Instagram. Strictly speaking, it is not an antique shop, because I also sell newer pieces. The Instagram account says »gift shop«. Either is fine. It is a shop. I have been trying to sell items because it is a shop, but I have only sold items a few times so far. I have also done a few pop-up shops in galleries or project spaces. On those occasions, sweet friends or artists bought some items. I was happy. Anyway, it’s not meant to be a business. I’m failing. It is completely in the red. I haven’t had a physical store so far, but I plan to have one in the entrance hall of my apartment (really tiny) in the near future.

»Haus der Matsubara« began when I was buying tattered drawings at a flea market. They were nothing special, simple, but they attracted my attention. The paper edges were torn, and their condition was not good. I brought them home and cleaned them, worked on the folds with an iron and removed the dirt. That made me happy. Since then, my collection has gradually grown.

Although, I don’t like collecting. Rather, I’m not good at throwing things away. So, I’m afraid of collecting things. However, if I find something good and it fits my budget, I tend to buy it despite my resolution. Most of the time, I can’t buy items for the reason that I don’t have the budget. These days, I don’t have a budget, so I’m not looking for things to buy, because if I find something interesting, I will still want it.