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REVIEWS

Soshiro Matsubara: LoveSick

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by Gabriela Acha

The philosopher Alain Badiou regards love as a construction of the perspective of two, starting with the very moment after which the world is experienced in a new and different way. A widespread understanding of romantic love is one absorbed in this miraculous and existentially intense encounter, which is sometimes compared to a state of madness.¹ If looked at as a mere chemical reaction, it can be simplified as a set of neurotransmitters sending signals in the brain, achieving a high that resembles one drugs might provide; likewise, abstinence can lead to depression and withdrawal symptoms. Love abstinence and its derived feeling of sickness is pervasive in countless stories, real and fictional, that have been immortalized in poems, paintings, sculptures, and even dolls. The turbulent affair between Expressionist painter Oskar Kokoschka and composer Gustav Mahler’s widow, Alma, stands out because, among other reasons, Kokoschka dealt with his love sickness by commissioning a life-size doll meant to look like Alma to fill the emptiness after their split. Alma’s doll was a symbol of Kokoschka’s desperation, as well as testimony to his uncontrolled desire and abusive behavior. This unusual denouement caught the attention of Japanese-born, Vienna-based artist Soshiro Matsubara, who first learned about the Austrian artist in Tokyo; later on in Austria, he learned more about the story that eventually became an ongoing reference in his own work.

In Matsubara’s solo exhibition *LoveSick* at the Berlin gallery *Schiefe Zähne*, the color purple predominates, conditioning a setting composed of paintings, sculptures, readymade objects, and a mock-up of the gallery space. The feeling of scale is altered by the unusual size of the works—rather small and low positioned—which make the viewer feel like they’re looking into a dollhouse from the outside. All in all, the show recalls Kokoschka and Alma’s story, as well as the fascinating creepiness surrounding the commissioned doll. A mock-up of *Schiefe Zähne*’s space, titled *Love sick house syndrom* (2018), rests on one of the side shelves, hinting at voyeuristic intentions. In the middle of the room is a pale, red-haired, seemingly haunted doll head, which leans on a cushion that in turn leans on a purple carpet and composes the central installation, *Alma Mahler* (2018). Around it, two paintings portray a red-headed couple about to melt into a kiss—Kokoschka and Alma, perhaps. In another corner, the glazed ceramic sculpture *Lovers (the caresses)* (2018) depicts a man hugging a woman tenderly from behind. The man’s head color is different than the rest of his body, and his gloomy gesture transmits a sprout of desperation, while the other figure remains indifferent, recalling Kokoschka’s painting *Die Windsbraut* (1913-1914), which materialized his paranoid outbreak prior to the breakup.

Lovers’ tragedies, sensual moments of intimacy, and miscellaneous objects manifest the idea of passionate love in Matsubara’s work. This risky, contingent, and miraculous encounter that unties a romance was present in most of the pieces shown at the exhibition *Sleeves of Desire II*, running at the New York–based gallery *Brennan & Griffin* in 2017. In the installation *Lovers in Grey I and II*, two miniature couples made of ceramic performed different sexual acts, each in different postures, on a gray-painted canvas placed on the ground, whereas a set of glazed ceramic *Autumn Leaves* seemed to wink to cliché narratives of love comedies such as *Autumn in New York* (2000).

Kokoschka was again a main reference in the exhibition, as well as the Belgian Symbolist painter Fernand Khnopff, whose fixation with his sister Marguerite as muse for his work raised rumors and turned him into a symbol of “forbidden” love. Khnopff’s seminal painting *The Caress* (1896), portraying Oedipus in his encounter with the Sphinx, is the influence behind Matsubara’s clay, plaster, and gesso sculpture titled eponomously. Again, the picture of a couple sensually interacting gives shape to the wall work *Indestructible Object* (2017) and the ground sculpture *The Kiss* (2017), both made of glazed ceramic. The first’s title might ironically refer to the fragility of both the work’s material and the depicted romance, whereas the latter might recall Rodin’s 1840-1917 work of the same title depicting Francesca da Rimini’s and Paolo Malatesta’s tragic encounter right before getting killed by Francesca’s husband. The sculpture was inspired by Dante’s *Divina commedia* narration, which was based on a true story. Rodin himself was involved in a story of madness when his partner Camille Claudel couldn’t overcome her mental instability aggravated not only the failure of their union, but the impossibility of succeeding as a woman artist due to the misogyny and moral restrictions of the time.

Matsubara’s artistic process often starts by gathering images from old magazines and objects from antique shops. His collection of *objets trouvés* expands beyond the exhibitions and composes his own personal cabinet, part of which he sells online through a shop he calls Haus der Matsubara. In 2018 Haus der Matsubara was presented at *Bel Ami*, a Los Angeles–based gallery named after Guy de Maupassant’s novel about the young womanizer Georges Duroy. From the most childish and quirky drawing to the most elaborated, surreal ones, the Instagram shop platforms a wide selection of treasures acquired by the artist over time, a core part of his practice along with his own paintings, sculptures, and installations.

In Matsubara’s work, the Western art historical heritage, as well as tragic manifestations of romantic endeavors, are twisted and reinterpreted, driven by his fascination around desire and its by-products. His approach through voyeurism and appropriation follows Badiou’s idea of the “two” and the crucial moment in which all changes, and after which all can potentially be destroyed. Moreover, Matsubara’s settings at the gallery spaces are subjectively constructed, as the ideas of romanticism and love are constructed, displaying the pieces of an imaginary puzzle whose final outcome only the artist knows.



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Soshiro Matsubara *Alma Mahler*, 2018, “LoveSick” at Schiefe Zähne, Berlin, 2018
 Courtesy: the artist and Schiefe Zähne, Berlin. Photo: Hannes Schmidt/ Schiefe Zähne

[1] After Frank Tallis’ theories on love, put together in the book *Love Sick* (Arrow Books, 2016) and the article “Falling in Love Is Like Smoking Crack Cocaine,” published in the blog *Psychology Today* in August 2012 by Shauna H Springer Ph.D. Alain Badiou (with Nicolas Truong), *In Praise of Love* (London: Serpents Trail 2012), 28–30.