

## -- SHIP OF FOOLS --

'The Ship of Fools' (1490-1500), painted by Hieronymus Bosch, is an amazing and enigmatic work of art in the collection of the Louvre. In art history, the scene of a frivolous group of people gathered in a boat adrift, ignorant of their direction, is a known allegory on the human condition. It is exemplified by the book 'Ship of Fools' (1494) by Sebastian Brandt, in which a ship sets off from Basel to Narragonia, the paradise of fools. The frontispiece of this book, drawn by Albrecht Dürer, may have inspired the painting of Bosch.

The panel shows a joyful group of people in a boat. They seem to engage in a rowdy party of drinking, eating, singing, playing, fighting and vomiting. The figures in the centre of the scene – a nun playing the lute, a friar and two boats men – seem to be involved in a game of trying to bite into a pancake suspended in air, without using their hands. On the left, a woman beats a man with a jug. On the right, a guy hangs over the railing and vomits into the water. Sitting on a makeshift rudder, a little man dressed as a fool drinks from a cup. The whole scene is dominated by a mast topped with a bouquet of flowers in the middle of which an owl – symbol of wisdom - is hidden. The boat appears adrift; a vast landscape in the background stretches toward infinity.

Likely, the drunken protagonists are a satire on the clergy, neglectful of the Holy Church and the well being of its believers. But it's not only nuns and monks who are blamed. Here, the whole of mankind appears to have lost its way. We drink and fight, we flirt and play silly games, living a purposeless life of stupidity. The only exception is the fool himself: with his back turned to the others, he seems to be absorbed in a world of his own.

It is tempting to recognize in the fool a figure of the artist. This is what Mitchel Breed seems to have done when he initiated his project 'Ship of Fools'. The project includes an exhibition at the Dokzaal in Amsterdam, coinciding with the Amsterdam Gallery Weekend Capital A (November 27 – November 30, 2014). Participating artists are Andreas Arndt, Fritz Bornstücker, Chad Burt, Alex Dordoy, Fiona Mackay, Alex Pollard, Emma van der Put, Ernst Markus Stein, Marion Verboom, James Kerr, Amanda Wasielewski and Hazel Watling. With curating artist Mitchel Breed, this adds up to thirteen participants – the same number as the occupants in Bosch's ship of fools.

Most of the artists have met at De Ateliers, an artists' run institute in Amsterdam. At De Ateliers, beginning artists work in a private studio for two years, supported by experienced artists who do weekly studio visits. Many participants have experienced their working period as a trip into the unknown, individually as well as collectively. In a way, the studio is like a vessel adrift and the participating artist a boats man without a clear sense of direction. A working period at De Ateliers is a risk as well as an adventure and a joy.

In a way some of these artists perfectly match the allegory of the ship of fools. Andreas Arndt for instance, who once set off in a self made survival boat at the Stadhouderskade to sail to his hometown Karlstadt in Sweden, tormented by heavy

rains, expensive petrol and a cat who ran away, reaching no further than the polders north of Amsterdam. Or Berlin based painter Fritz Bornstücker, whose artistic position is comparable to that of the jester, poking fun at each and everyone. In the work of Mitchel Breed, a reoccurring theme is that of the lost artist, drowned in freedom.

One should note that madness or sailing are not themes of the show. The title of the exhibition is better understood as a metaphor for the journey each artist has to undertake: free to go wherever he or she wants to go, risking to be swallowed by unknown waters. For every artist, navigating the art world is a tricky thing. This strange world inhabited by artists, collectors, curators and critics is magical, ludicrous, seductive, confusing, amoral, glamorous – totally crazy. But that is not exceptional. So is life itself, as Hieronymus Bosch had already figured out.

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