

Zurich, 15th March 2024

Press Release

INTOXICATING OBJECTS: FETISHISM IN ART

10 April – 7 July 2024

Opening: Tuesday, 9th April 2024, 6 p.m.

The concept of the fetish is apparent these days in all manner of contexts. Sometimes, there is talk of „Swiss dialect fetishism“ in the media and, at times, even the word „progress“ seems to have become fetishised in today’s society. This widespread fetishisation goes back to the primordial human obsession with objects. What is clear is that things tell us stories. This is evident, not least of all, in many works of art. Together with the renowned cultural critic Elisabeth Bronfen an unparalleled panorama of thematic clusters and cross-connections within the collection of the der Graphische Sammlung ETH Zürich has been created in the search for such narratives.

Ever since art objects and artists gained cult status, which is to say, since the Renaissance, art history has been replete with both openly displayed and deeply hidden passions. These passions bind the recipient to the art objects or their makers, and do so in a way that requires some explanation. The word fetish itself originates in the colonial context in which it was used to describe the heterogenous objects and practices of the Other, and which were unfamiliar to Europeans at that time. On the one hand, a sacred object to which magical powers might be ascribed or to which a subjective meaning might be attributed, was equated with idolatry. On the other hand, this might extend to an object or body part that psychologists viewed as being charged with sexual connotations or as a substitute for repressed sexual desires. And so tales of the fetish or „thing made magical“ (from the Latin *facere* – to make – and the Portugueses: *feitiço* - magic) could be woven in many ways to describe the intoxicating obsession with objects and the mysterious fetishisation that pervades human reality.

This exhibition looks at some striking and remarkable gestures from the colourful field of art history and also explores some grandiose and bizarre exaggerations of banality. Fetishistic mechanisms in the arts can be found from the Middle Ages to the Romantic era and right through to the present day, Works by **Barthel Beham, Wenzel Hollar, Johann Heinrich Füssli** and **Max Klinger** are shown alongside works by **Urs Lüthi, Louise Bourgeois, Robert Gober** and **Sylvie Fleury** — all under the umbrella of the artistic quest for different codings and portrayals of sexuality and new forms of allegory. Not every portrayal of Adam and Eve can be described as innocent. Not every Judith triumphs over Holofernes in the same way. There are several femmes fatales in the collection of the Graphische Sammlung, kneeling over a decapitated male head. There are women in chic gloves and divas with Mercedes stars in place of nipples.

Together with cultural critic Elisabeth Bronfen, our long-standing Conservator of the collection, Alexandra Barcal, has trawled through the immense holdings of the Graphische Sammlung and so, with fresh eyes, addressed the question of the extent to which fetishism, in all its historical complexity, has underpinned the notion of Self and Other. What can such a multi-faceted revision tell us about today's fetishisation of objects, technologies and gestures? That also helped to identify thematic repetitions and surprising parallels over the centuries. These are highlighted in the exhibition in the style of Aby Warburg's legendary iconographic studies. In keeping with his Mnemosyne Atlas, the selected works are grouped according to individual chapters such as *The Magic of the Commodity*, *The Weapons of a Woman* and *In the Thicket of Materials*.

Elisabeth Bronfen was Professor in the Department of English Studies at the University of Zurich from 1993 onwards. She retired in 2003. Since 2007 she has been Global Distinguished Professor at New York University. As a cultural critic and author, she researches and teaches in the field of literature, visual culture, psychoanalysis and gender studies. Her books address such issues as portrayals of death eroticised, night images and the cultural heritage of Shakespeare in current-day TV dramas. In 2022, she curated the exhibition "A Woman is a Woman is a Woman" at the Kunsthaus in Aargau. In late 2023, her novel «Händler der Geheimnisse» was published by Limmat Verlag.

Practical Information

Curatorial team	Alexandra Barcal, Conservator 20th - 21th centuries, Graphische Sammlung ETH Zürich, and Prof. em. Elisabeth Bronfen, cultural and literary critic, formerly Professor of English Studies at the University of Zurich
Events	There will be a wide range of events accompanying the exhibition. For details, see: https://gs.ethz.ch/en/agenda/
Opening times	Daily, 10:00 a.m. to 5 p.m. Closed: 15th April 2024 from 12 a.m. (Sechseläuten), 1st May 2024, 9th May 2024 (Ascension Day), 18th–20th May 2024 (Whitsun)
Entry	free
Press/media contact	Julia Burckhardt, Graphische Sammlung ETH Zürich, Tel +41 44 632 40 46; presse@gs.ethz.ch
Website	www.gs.ethz.ch