

NATURE MORTE BERLIN

Weydingerstrasse 6 Berlin 10178

www.naturemorte.com / naturemorte.berlin@googlemail.com

Rajkamal Kahlon: *Blowback*

Opening: September 13, 2013, 6-9 pm

Exhibition: September 14 – November 2, 2013

Nature Morte Berlin is pleased to announce BLOWBACK, a solo exhibition of new works by artist, Rajkamal Kahlon from September 13 – November 2, 2013.

Blowback is a CIA term, a metaphor for the unintended consequences of covert operations against foreign nations and governments. The September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were instances of blowback from American clandestine operations in Afghanistan. In the exhibition, BLOWBACK, Rajkamal Kahlon borrows the term to explore the relationship between early anthropological portraiture and modern terrorism. Through Kahlon's works, a relation of causality appears between Western representations of formerly colonized subjects and acts of political retaliation labeled as terrorism today.

The works in BLOWBACK present “native” subjects, found in 19th and 20th century Dutch and German anthropological archives, reimagined as terrorists. The works attempt to give life, and maybe a voice, to the people whose haunting and anonymous images are still entangled within European imperial archives. The presence of the black and brown bodies in western societies is frequently perceived as threatening. Exaggerating and playing on this fear, Kahlon weaponizes those who had been reduced to subjects of science, unworthy of autonomy. Doing so, Kahlon shows the uncanny connection between past and present imperial images.

BLOWBACK builds from another recent project, “Double Take”, which is comprised of a series of life-size water colour portraits and altered 19th century engravings that rewrite the original pedagogical function of colonial propaganda. The exhibition also draws on recent research by the artist into two separate archives last autumn. The first period of research, funded by the Lambent Foundation, at the New York Head Quarters of the American Civil Liberties Union, delved deeper into their archive of torture documents, death certificates and autopsy reports created since the start of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and released under a series of Freedom of Information Act lawsuits. The second period of research, funded by the Goethe Institute, took place at Amsterdam’s Tropen Museum, looking at both the museum’s anthropological books and extensive colonial photography collections which included early 20th century anthropological expeditions to measure and study native bodies.

In BLOWBACK, Kahlon’s reflects on the possibility of translation from the archive to the artwork. The works in BLOWBACK include a range of techniques that all aim at restoring the dignity of colonized photographic subjects. Through the different visual mechanisms of her works, Kahlon attempts to offer a living and acting presence to those people who have been dominated, studied, robbed of their image, categorised, and finally, silenced for eternity by the very archive that nevertheless preserved their muted image.

Between painting and sculpture, functioning as a form of three dimensional collage, a life-sized cut-out of a dark-skinned man stands in the centre of the space as a distant echo to Da Vinci's famous “Vitruvian Man,” representing the mathematical perfection of human proportions, an image that is often understood as a symbol of European modernity. But in place of some of his four arms and four legs, this dark Vitruvian Man possesses rocket launchers and machine guns, merging together ideals of beauty and terrorist violence, modern rationality and colonization. This central cut-out

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piece is accompanied by matching thaumatropes, a 19th century spinning pre-cinematic optical toy that blends two separate images into one performing the concept of the retinal afterimage. In addition a stop-motion animation that offers movement to the cut-out figure is projected onto the gallery window. Together the works construct a relationship between the still and moving image, between painting and sculpture, the past and present and constructions of victim hood and revenge. The last component of the show is a large drawing on canvas of the profile of the dark skinned Vitruvian, holding a rocket launcher under his arm, forming the silhouette of a Christian cross. This drawing, like two smaller portraits also exhibited, has the particularity to be pencil drawings on canvas, with elements of painting. Starting her artistic process from archives, Kahlon renders the graphic quality of her original source, black and white pictures of colonized people, through the use of graphite and paint, presenting a transformed scientific record marked by the hand of the artist.

Rajkamal Kahlon is an American artist living and working in Berlin. Appropriating from ethnographic and military strategy books from the 19th century colonial era, Kahlon destroys and subverts representations of the colonial Other. Integrating grotesque and criminalized bodies into sanitized narratives of our histories and present reality, she opens a space for a painful but liberating introspection. Through Kahlon's work, one is always both colonizer and colonized, powerful and powerless. Examining the unspoken truth of our actual history against its official representation, Kahlon applies sharp humour to shatter the belief in the absolute legitimacy of our own position.

Kahlon received her MFA from the California College of Art and is a past participant of the Whitney Independent Study Program and Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Kahlon's work has been exhibited in museums and foundations in North America, Europe and Asia, including the 2012 Taipei Biennial, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Wilhelm Hack Museum, NGBK, Queens Museum of Art, Artists' Space, White Box and Apex Art. In 2012 Kahlon received a Stiftung Kunstfonds Arbeitstipendium, a Goethe Institute Künstlerstipendium, a Pollock Krasner Foundation Award, and a Lambent Project Grant. Kahlon is the past recipient of the Joan Mitchell Painting and Sculpture Award and a Lambent Artist Fellowship. In 2013, Kahlon will participate in WHW's Meeting Points 7, a two-year multi-city, art event spanning Europe, the Middle East and Asia.