

Suspended – On the Lightness of Stone

26 April 2012 to 15 July 2012

What do myths and legends focussing on the process of becoming, being, and passing have to do with the folds of the new museum roof? And what do stones have to do with lightness? The exhibition “Suspended – On the Lightness of Stone” brings together and juxtaposes anthropological issues and statements expressed through art in an inspiring, floating manner, so to speak.

The exhibition “Suspended – On the Lightness of Stone” features mobile installations by the South African artist Justin Fiske. Towards the end of February Fiske arrived in Basel from Cape Town, carrying with him countless small screws, pieces of cedar wood, and umpteen kilometres of fishing line. With the help of these materials and hundreds of pebbles he collected from the banks of the Rhine, Fiske created a series of fascinating installations which can be set in motion by the viewers. The animated stones appear to be floating in mid-air, defying gravity. Next to that, Fiske’s installations enter into a playful, sensuous dialogue on human existence and transiency with selected ethnographic objects from the museum’s collections and the remarkable roof architecture designed by Herzog & de Meuron.

String and stone instead of bits and bytes

Although Justin Fiske is a representative of the Digital Natives generation, his installations reflect a critical attitude towards virtual realities. In the early years of his career, and with the help of moving grid patterns – illusions of space developed as screensavers – Justin Fiske attempted to retrieve digital simulations to real life and convert them into analogue realities. Instead of interconnecting bits and bytes, he used string and stones, gradually learning how to view the complexity of matter and how to understand it. Uncovering and displaying the mechanical quality of things and finding out how they are made, how they work, and how they are interrelated, are issues of primary importance to the artist.

His works provide the poetical nexus that visually interlinks the exhibition hall’s architecture with the ethnographic objects from the museum’s collections, creating a stage on which anthropology, art, and architecture enter into a dialogue with the visitor, and endorsing Richard Sennet’s credo that head and hand, science and technology, and art and craft should never be detached from one another, at the cost of understanding as well as expression. The filigree pebble-stone formations inscribe themselves through movement into the architectural space. At the same time, however, they serve as the poetic lenses through which the visitors are given the opportunity to view and explore the ethnographic objects on display. His art installations feed on opposites such as motion and standstill, image and shadow, heavy and light, timelessness and transiency. In the course of his life, Justin Fiske has immersed himself in a wide range of fields, including design, mathematics, engineering, literature, and philosophy, providing starting- as well as endpoints for his involvement with key questions in culture. Always on the search for a path of his own,

he finally settled for art as his medium to give expression to the knowledge and skills he had acquired in other fields.

Grasping the mechanism

For the exhibition Justin Fiske and curator Franziska Jenni assembled artefacts from a large range of cultures. Grouped into eight separate stations, they provide insight into the unbelievable richness of material culture. Since time immemorial, material objects have helped to lend human beings a sense of identity on their journey through life. Although the different stations make reference to specific cultures on the basis of the objects' origins, they actually address panhuman issues. Throughout history and across cultures, humans have tried to explain and understand the world around them by means of myths and legends, creating myriads of forms and versions in an attempt to give expression to the forces of good and evil and to understand the mechanism underlying the process of becoming, being, and passing.

The interaction between installations, space, and objects tends to shift the frame of reference of one's own perception and reveal the subjective nature of one's judgments. The exhibition forges links between tradition and modernity, creates transparency, and mediates a novel image of otherness, detached from the usual clichés. "Suspended" sees itself as filter, catalyst, and inspiration all at once.