ALMINE RECH

Ali Cherri
Les Veilleurs

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The [mac] musée d'art contemporain de Marseille presents the exhibition Ali Cherri, 'Les Veilleurs', based around Ali Cherri's totems *The Gatekeepers Fire and Water*, acquired by the Musées de Marseille in 2024. For the occasion, the [mac] has invited the artist to select works from the collections of the Museums of Marseille, ranging from Antiquity to the contemporary world, to set them in dialogue with his own sculptures, drawings and videos. In an immersive, cinematic scenography, Ali Cherri offers a fresh look at these works through the themes that are dear to him: sleep, vulnerability, animality, hybridisation, the gaze, the face, maturity, resistance, the representation of living figures, etc.

Jean Negroni's voice-over, reciting from the film Les statues meurent aussi, the famous anti-colonial film essay by Alain Resnais, Chris Marker and Ghislain Cloquet (made between 1949 and 1953), resonates at the heart of Ali Cherri's exhibition 'Les Veilleurs'.

"When souls are dead, they enter history; when statues are dead, they enter art. This botany of death is what we call culture. (...) Civilisations leave behind them these mutilated traces like the pebbles of Tom Thumb. But history has eaten everything up. An object is dead when the living gaze that rested on it has disappeared."
— Quote by Chris Marker, spoken by Jean Négroni, in the film *Les statues meurent aussi* by Alain Resnais, 1949-1953

About 80 pieces are on show, combining different types of work: sculptures, lapidary, paintings, archaeological objects, photographs and videos. Ali Cherri chooses them in the same way as he selects the actors for his films, from a brickmaker in Sudan to an elderly woman in a Cypriot village. It's an opportunity to take a fresh look at Marseille's museum collections over the long term, through the eyes of a major contemporary artist.

The Gatekeepers Fire and Water are part of a set of four totem poles created as part of Manifesta 13 in Marseille in 2020. Invoking figures inspired by the animal kingdom, the aquatic world or monstrous fictional beings, The Gatekeepers, presented at the Musée des Beaux- Arts de Marseille, paid homage to the souls of all the naturalised animals housed in Marseille's Museum of Natural History, located just a few steps away in the opposite wing of the Palais Longchamp. To create these works, Ali Cherri collected curiosities, bought at auction or from antique dealers, from Marseille and elsewhere. Stripped of their ritual power or their original nature as they travelled along, the artist sought to restore to them a presence, an aura that had been lost. In addition to questioning the trajectory of cultural goods in the Western world, the artist also reflects on the elements that she grasps through their materiality, but also through their history.

"The chimera sculptures I make by combining archaeological objects with my own creations highlight these layers of forgery. I buy works on the legal market, often suspecting that they are fakes. What interests me is this authority over the 'true nature' of things: counterfeiters have a signature, just like artists! What's more, the way I look at these objects is essentially aesthetic; their significance is of no interest to me. I keep them in my flat or my studio, until I figure out how to use them. I do this intuitively, without any preconceived ideas."
— Ali Cherri, 2024

Ali Cherri has devised a scenography in which the objects escape traditional or Western museographic narratives, as well as established classifications by geographical area or chronological period. This shift overturns heritage value systems.

Deprived of descriptions of their origins and authenticity, the objects, presented on an equal footing, seem to be observing us. Some, displayed on luminous tables without casting a shadow, seem to lose their cultural roots and the soil in which they were born. The rooms of the museum, plunged into semi-darkness, reinforce a controlled theatricality.

The masks, faces and animal or hybrid figures in the exhibition invite visitors to experience otherness. They extend the history of the construction of national knowledge and narratives as they unfold in the museums of Marseille - be they fine arts, archaeology, science or ethnology - or, on the contrary, deconstruct it.

Like the totem poles of the indigenous peoples of America, Ali Cherri's Gatekeepers carry symbols, beliefs and stories. Their non-linear narrative is constructed by accumulation and superimposition, by rebound and hybridisation. They are part of the tradition of erecting totem poles near the gateways of certain communities.

In this exhibition, Ali Cherri follows the journey of the historical object from its discovery to its entry onto the art market or into a museum. By exploring what these objects say about history, society, nature or culture, he highlights what they reveal about each individual: the magic by which they are transformed into values, fetishes, idols and totems.