

Van Den Bergh Jos, 'Patrick Van Caeckenbergh - Les Loques de Chagrin'. Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp (BE). Artforum, vol.56, nr.1, September 2017, p.345.

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Patrick Van Caeckenbergh

ZENO X GALLERY

In his exhibition "*Les Loques de Chagrin*" (The Rags of Grief), Patrick Van Caeckenbergh seemed to create his own universe by staging an eclectic group of works and installations that at first appeared to eschew clear interconnections. In an installation near the entrance, one saw three snakeskins filled with eggs, hanging vertically from an iron broom handle. It seemed that something had dripped out of these dead bodies into two chamber pots placed under the ends of the snakes' tails. This eerie assemblage was accompanied by works including a sort of small sideboard, a display cabinet, an enigmatic collage, and a scale model of the entire installation itself, all carrying the same mysterious title, *The Cosmogonic Indigestion (The Greedy Snakes)*, 2016–17 (each with additional numbers or words). An accompanying text explained that this installation comments on human gluttony. The egg symbolizes the origin of the world, while a snake, which molts periodically, is associated with rebirth.

In *Der Anatomische Mensch (Et Puis Pourquoi Sommes-Nous Faites en Viande?)* (The Anatomical Man [And Then Why Are We Made Out of Flesh?]), 1990/2017, the inside of the lid of an enlarged, open cigar box is covered with more than a hundred small monochrome pictures appearing to show various flesh tones. These various skin colors placed side by side, like stamps in a philatelist's album, are in fact cutouts from porn magazines. Stacked inside the box are more recognizable prints showing human flesh. The outside of the container bears an odd word: SCHIMMELPENNINCK, the name of a cigar manufacturer. Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, in the words apocryphally attributed to Freud, but in this case, there is clearly a stranger, more multilayered story being implied.

The work that gave the show its name, *Les Loques de Chagrin. Fabularum (La Vie d'Ésope)* (The Rags of Grief. Fabularum [The Life of Aesop]), 2009, was a space set off by freestanding panels that resemble a kindergarten classroom. Inside it are bizarre images of pairs of animals: A squirrel gazes adoringly at a rat, a dog perches on a donkey, a cat and owl sit side by side, a pig suckles a dog, and so on. Are these lessons in tolerance, in living in playful harmony—the lion lying down with the lamb, as the Bible suggests—despite our more aggressive instincts? On the outside of the makeshift room we see eleven pages of enlarged text about the ancient Greek fabulist by Jean de La Fontaine, who wrote his own versions of Aesop's fables in the seventeenth century. The combination of La Fontaine's elegant treatise on the room's exterior and the heartwarming and cozy atmosphere within made this installation a perfect example of a successful synthesis of reason and feeling.



The most “normal” pieces—the mixed-media installation *Les Ames Mortes* (Dead Souls), 2009–17, and *L'Hêtre à l'Image* (été 2011) (The Beech as an Image [Summer 2011]), an elaborate drawing—both have trees as their subjects. In the latter, it is a huge family tree, but instead of his parents and other ancestors, Van Caeckenbergh has depicted the men—all the men, in fact—who inspired his art. The portraits of illustrious writers, artists, and scientists such as Georges Perec, Charles Darwin, and Alexander Calder hang side by side in the tree but among them all, I'd guess, Van Caeckenbergh's practice has been most deeply affected by Friedrich Nietzsche, the philosopher who in 1882 wrote *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (The Gay Science)—the title of which comes pretty close to defining the artist's approach. Like a happy scientist, Van Caeckenbergh comments on and corrects our world, making it more his own, through a luckily never-ending, or eternal, return.

—Jos Van den Bergh

Patrick Van
Caeckenbergh, *Les
Loques de Chagrin.
Fabularum (La Vie
d'Ésope)* (The Rags
of Grief. *Fabularum*
[The Life of Aesop]),
2009, mixed media,
7' 2¼" × 10' 2" ×
14' 7¼".