

HENRIK OLESEN

JANUARY 24 – FEBRUARY 28, 2016

St. George endured various torture sessions including laceration upon a wheel of swords, where he was resuscitated three times before his execution by decapitation. The myth of St. George and the Dragon (killed in Beirut) returned with the crusaders following exploits in the Middle East. Made of plywood and found scrap metal, the “dragon” here takes the form of a famous Anthony Caro sculpture (*Early One Morning*, 1962, which belongs to the Tate Britain). Some interpretations of the St. George myth understand dragon slaying less as a killing than as an internal struggle, against ourselves and the evil among us. George is a military saint, armed against Satan and himself, self-decapitating (his lance was called Ascalon, also the name of Winston Churchill’s personal aircraft during World War II). As the patron saint of England, he is also represented in the form of a red cross upon a silver or white background: the St. George’s Cross inside the Union Jack. We can’t finally decide if the fake Caro is a war machine or a torture device, but its vermilion abstraction is already performing and misbehaving as a figure within a sort of mythic space.

For his second exhibition at the gallery, Henrik Olesen employs the color red, forms suggesting crosses, flags and arms, images of hanging meat taken from the Internet and collaged onto used plastic drop cloths, the head of George Harrison, sculptural and painterly abstraction in the modernist style and, by way of a starting point, the opening lines of Dante’s *Inferno*...

*Midway upon the journey of our life¹
I found myself with a forest dark,²
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.*

The Caro/dragon/machine could also be a Gate to Hell, marking the point at which a life becomes confused or where confusion becomes a sort of guide or way forward. Staging a confusion that is both existential and formal/aesthetic, Olesen displaces European signs and images to Chinatown, where they pick up energy and seem to seek a wilder, lighter combination. Reclaiming the silvered walls and floor left over from Merlin Carpenter’s last exhibition here (*Hands Against Hands*, which followed Stephan Dillemath’s exhibition *The DAMNED*, both 2015), Olesen pushes the bad Factory décor closer to the look of a walk-in meat locker. Stock images of animal carcasses are printed out and collaged to plastic sheeting: a flimsy, formalist, serial flesh becomes a kind of writing in the space. In the *Inferno*, the descent into Hell is also an ascent toward God. Everything here seems to seek displacement, changing senses and direction, abstraction wandering into figuration, bodies becoming signs, as an artistic practice attempts to open itself toward further, unscripted options. The installation, produced entirely on site, is a kind of theatrical machine playing out a torture session whose purpose is to generate fresh momentum. (Arab Christians believe that St. George can restore mad people to their senses: to say that a person has been sent to St George’s is equivalent to saying he’s been sent to a madhouse).

Meanwhile, uptown on 82nd Street, Galerie Buchholz presents another, concurrent exhibition by Henrik Olesen.

Gallery Hours: Thursday through Sunday, noon to 6pm.