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Regine Petersen

A STAR LIKE A SWORD

For the past fifteen years, Regine Petersen has been exploring the confabulations of historical myth. Her scope of interest has ranged from the impact of random cosmic events to cataclysms precipitated by messianic promises. In *Find a Fallen Star* (2010–2015), she looked at how a series of witness testimonies on meteorite falls have ended up embedded in the social, political, and cultural realities of their respective eras. In *A Star Like a Sword* (2016–2022), her most recent body of work, showcased in this exhibition, the artist turns her spotlight towards the ultimate of myths: the story of Jesus of Nazareth as told in the Gospels. The narrative is triggered anew by a cosmic visitor—this time, a comet.

Petersen places emphasis on specific passages attributed to the earliest of the four Gospels, the Gospel of Mark, and their degree of correspondence with the historically verified events of the First Jewish–Roman War (also known as the Great Jewish Revolt), which led to the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, in 70 CE, and to centuries of Jewish diaspora. The ambivalent and cryptic tone of those passages—which biblical scholarship often reframes in an anti-imperialist context as the product of a turbulent era of persecution, slavery, and subjugation under Roman rule—sets the tone for the artist's own multi-directional visual approach engaging with the hidden agendas beneath images and words.

To address how this genealogy of symbolisms and their often out-of-context interpretations have perdured in contemporary circulating imagery, Petersen extends her gaze to the tradition of Passion Plays, or Easter pageants, which grew out of the liturgy of the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages in Europe into elaborate scenic performances depicting the trial, sufferings, death, and resurrection of Christ. Their plots contained virulent caricatures of Jews as bloodthirsty and perfidious villains who betrayed and murdered the Messiah (see, the scapegoat narrative of Judas Iscariot). In her publication *Passion Play* (Eriskay Connection, 2023), Petersen casts light upon the Oberammergau Passion Play, one of the most celebrated and colossal productions of its kind, which has been staged in the quaint Bavarian village of Oberammergau since 1634, and its instrumental role in promulgating Nazi antisemitism. The story of the play unfolds next to daily life in the 1930s National Socialist village, and, with it, individual stories—some of civic pageantry and mob complicity, and others of endurance and resilience, such as in the case of the village's German-Jewish composer Max-Peter Meyer whose life trials and moral stance are reclaimed by the artist.

A Star Like a Sword showcases artworks pertaining to the two aforementioned ramifications. Literal and virtual ruins and artefacts, re-presentations and enactments on and off the stage, eloquently map out a depository of ideology, language, and imagination that has travelled through time and space to the present era: on the one hand, the sceneries of some of the most dramatic events and protagonists of the Roman-Jewish War alongside religious sites of pilgrimage recreation; next to them, archaeological relics, and excerpts from biblical and scholarly texts. On the other hand, actor postcards of the Oberammergau performances, which sustain, through their naturalised, clichéd memorabilia banality, the ethos of Christian doctrine and, later, Aryan propaganda.

All intertwines, comprising a whole that demands a closer look: A cumulus of temporalities, manners of speech, roles, costumes and authorities—the biblical next to historical writing of myth, the scriptural next to the secular character, the historian of the past next to the artist / researcher / collector of today, and the engravings and photographic reproductions, operating as a 'camouflaged' field of inscription; a hermeneutical debris that naturalises and perpetuates its mnemonic consistencies, fallibilities, and power structures,

determining whose voice can be heard and whose cannot; and here, under Petersen's lead, exposing the way in which its iconography and the aggression that it contains has been bequeathed and interiorised over time as a constantly evolving 'reservoir'¹ of prejudice.

Mark's obscure narrative impetus galvanises the discursive *modus operandi* of *A Star Like a Sword*. The visual assemblage on display reveals an opaque passage of subterranean conjunctions, whispers and 'complicit silences'.² By scrutinising visual symbolisms and language slippages whose defamatory power has been overlooked, Regine Petersen questions the contributions of religious myth and its intersubjective ideological and moral legacy to centuries of hatred and stigmatisation. The story she tells is of something that occurred in the past but is also happening now. Its patterns and symptoms persist, and its ramifications on the political culture of today, upon and beyond German soil, are as relevant and universal as ever.

Text: Natasha Christia

About the artist

Regine Petersen's practice is located at the intersection of photography and text. In her work she engages with historical events at the tension of their established and neglected narratives, using a variety of materials—her own photographs, archival imagery, literature—forming new relations. She is particularly interested in contradictory perspectives and making hidden histories visible. Her work questions the relationship between memory, history, storytelling and representation, while challenging photography as a tool of ideological processes.

¹The term 'reservoir' has been extensively employed by David Feldman, director of the Pears Institute for the Study of Antisemitism at Birkbeck, University of London. 'If we should use a metaphor to comprehend antisemitism, it is not virus but reservoir: a deep reservoir of stereotypes and narratives, one which is replenished over time and from which people can draw with ease. Indeed, the image of a reservoir may help us to understand not only antisemitism but also other racisms, both within and beyond Labour'. Ben Gidley, Brendan McGeever, David Feldman, 'Labour and Antisemitism: A Crisis Misunderstood', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 91, no. 2 (April–June, 2020), 413–421, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1467-923X.12854> [all URLs accessed 3 April 2023].

²Described by Prof. Aleida Assmann as one of the manifestations of 'defensive and complicit forgetting (protection of perpetrators)'. Aleida Assmann, 'Forms of Forgetting', *Herengracht 410, Research and Dialogue* (2014), <https://h401.org/2014/10/forms-of-forgetting/>.