

SEBASTIAAN BREMER

Sebastiaan Bremer on "Spilaio" at Hales Gallery,
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Hales Gallery, London is currently hosting an extraordinary installation *Spilaio*, its fourth solo exhibition with Dutch-born, New York-based artist Sebastiaan Bremer. The exhibition, taking its title from the Greek word *spilaio*, meaning 'cave', comes to life through an amalgamation of various elements, objects and media combined to create a single large-scale installation occupying the entire space of the gallery. The exhibition explores ideas from Bremer's recent exhibition at MOCA Tucson in Tucson, Arizona (MOCA Bas-Relief (Mike-Papa-Bravo)). In *Spilaio*, Bremer delves into the world of myths and archetypes, engaging with ideas of the sacred. Caves have long been regarded as entrances into the Underworld and in a similar way the installation functions as a gateway into the different layers of Bremer's practice and an exploration of his inspirations, from classical sculpture to totemic objects and modernist photography. The artist transforms the gallery into a mystical dark cave and grotto-like space, inhabited by artist-made, industrial and found objects as well as image projections which also act as the only source of light. All the objects bear a significance to the artist. Like Plato's ancient Greek allegory of the cave where shadows of the objects are confused for their real essence, the shadows in *Spilaio* deceive the eye creating an image constructed from different layers, making the viewer question the

levels of reality within the space. Bremer commissioned composer Josephine Wiggs to write the audio component of his multi-media installation. Just as Bremer manipulates objects and surfaces to create new layers of meaning, here sound, perceived at first as perhaps the hum of a machine – the audio equivalent of a found object – is manipulated, layered and transformed, given contour and pattern, a new intention.

Born in Amsterdam in 1970, Sebastiaan Bremer attended the open studio programme at the Vrije Academie in The Hague (1989-91) before moving to New York in 1992. Key shows by Bremer include Tate Modern (London), The Brooklyn Museum of Art (New York), Het Gemeentemuseum (The Hague), MOCA Tucson (Arizona) and Warhol Museum (Pittsburg). Bremer's work is represented in major private and public collections such as Victoria & Albert Museum (London), MoMA (New York), LACMA (Los Angeles) and The Rabobank Collection (The Netherlands).

'I have been making art work on photographs in one way or another for a long time. First by drawing little dots on the actual photos, then that practice expanded into using dyes and scratching – any way to 'insert' myself into the emulsion of the printed picture. I wasn't just interested in

the image on the photograph, but also the object of the photograph itself, what it represented. This object can be a talisman, an object with power.

Around 2012, I started to carve more into the photos I was using, and this sculptural practice made me think increasingly about the three dimensionality of my works. The surface is as much a part of the work as the image on the photo, and the history of photography starts practically with the depiction of sculptures, partly because they were easier to photograph and did not move, but also because you can create an ideal, controlled view of the object. Rendering it in two dimensions makes it frozen in time and space and light. To me, sometimes, when you see an older sculpture in the round, it is not as magical and 'old' as a picture of it.

The sculptures that Picasso made and Brassai shot were mostly made in a dark studio in the countryside, shot with one light at night, mostly, or with the lights of a car outside, shining in. The sculptures, especially rendered like that with the dramatic lighting and hard and long shadows,

feel close to the primitive sources that inspired them. Art is forever linked to its predecessors, and these works emanate from this, especially in the black and white two dimensional state. They are an echo and shadows of the long mysterious chain of events that make up our inventory of images today, and there is still an undercurrent of this magical power in each successful piece of art, I think.

The works I showed in 2014 in MOCA Tucson and 2015 at Hales, collaging these heroes of photography and sculpture and painting together was a search for a commonality of spirit, and this shamanic exercise was not an attempt to quote art-history – as much as find the spirit hidden inside. For my new work at MOCA Tucson, I brought all the work I had been preparing in my studio, and was thinking of making a mural inside a space at the museum as I had been invited to do. When I arrived, it seemed logical to try to work with similar influences and coordinates (Papa – Picasso / Brassai Bravo / Mike Moore) but instead of flattening it, I wanted to see if I could re-inflate the pictures (in 2D) of sculptures on a wall, with the help of whatever materials I could find. I used some projectors to shine images on the surface of the bas-relief in a similar but inverted way I usually work- drawing on the pictures, now sculpting under the pictures.

Tucson has a particular place in the US, it is by all accounts the oldest continually inhabited area in the country, and

there is a stronger sense of place there than found in many other cities or locations in the US, as far as I have seen in my travels. The walks and runs I had in the early morning were almost spiritual events: the desert landscape was intense, there seemed to be some magic in the air, infusing inanimate objects with life. Giant birds loomed, tortoises clambered, and rabbits ran and hid. It was inspiring and gave me a real push. It enabled me to forge ahead and make this sculpted work by blending two projected images on the wall, the images suddenly turning into a totem pole of sorts, blended with prehistoric echoes. This regurgitation I find endlessly fascinating, looking at how images reoccur in our own practice, but also in human development at large and how ideas keep bubbling up and yet can often still seem new- these constants of humanity are a trip. However far we go we are still also stuck in this everlasting present and our blueprint, our underlying organism, our humanity infuses everything we do. A cave painting from 20,000 BC seems as urgent as any painting made today.

I ended up building the painting out – like a bas relief on the wall, instead of painting flat. I made it with two distinct groups of ingredients, one all foam and plastic, the other all organic materials: clay found in the dried riverbeds, dyes peeled from cacti, branches found on the ground and stones gathered. In the end I found I had created an altar of sorts, to modernism, to people, to spirits, indeed to whatever I felt that day.

When the show in Tucson was done and the opening was over and the works were finished and hanging on the wall, it seemed only logical to do this again, but now not as a bas relief but as a sculpture in the round. However, not just a sculpture, but to make each element of light and reflection become part of this larger space, to turn my practice of drawing and carving on top of pictures inside out, and again sculpt underneath the images projected – but now adding sound, too.

The summer following the MOCA Tucson opening I spent in Greece, and when you go you expect one thing, one period. What you get of course, is the whole layer-cake of existence – all funnelling into the present. This shaped the show in London to a great extent. Pictures I took of the Kouros, busts and archetypes of The Thinker and The Wrestler found their way into the work- and I tried to get them to be humorous, alive and make them in a sense – contemporary. The language of translation – the projectors, the low resolution quality of the iphone imagery- these are all part of the work. This work, less an

altar, more a depiction of a cave with its famous shadows, and humming with the background noises from my Brooklyn studio to echoes of the rumblings of the subway, mixed with the rumbling of the over-ground train in Shoreditch – became a playground. In London, its own sense of place crept in of course, as this city with the river whose flotsam and jetsam keeps popping up on the riverbank, like some shards or remains hundreds of thousands of years old. All of this I wanted to be part of the show. Like Tucson and most of Greece, London is a layer-cake of history, going back millennia. This is the humming underneath the gallery floor.

The centrepiece I knew had to be a giant Golem, an amalgam of an archetype of a sculpture with one hand raised, but also similar to the image I exhibited at my previous show at Hales, of my dad aged eleven hopefully pointing up, in the everlasting pose of leadership and direction found through the ages. The Golem I created first as a small sculpture in my studio in Brooklyn, NY, and made nine foot tall and fleshed out in London, out of wood, foam and plaster in a heroic effort with help in the gallery by Charles, James and Jonathan. The rest of the elements in the room were made with heat shrink wrap, which was much inspired by an installation of the group show I curated with SO_IL at the Storefront for Art and Architecture in the week preceding the Spilaio installation. I used the same material on objects that were echoes of the enigmatic sculptures by Man Ray, all coming together in this large colourful room, illuminated by shards of mylar and 3M material samples, and small bits found at the river's edge.

The room overflowed with references, too many to mention, but in the end all coming together in one giant song. It was a high wire act to make it- I tried not to have my instincts succumb to an intellect as I wanted it to feel and look as free as possible. When the colour came in and the projectors were all on, the '2D' pictures I had been making seemed to be perfect elements in the installation- not only as pieces by themselves, but also as elements of the composition as a whole. All four works are taking a corner in this boxing ring- The Guardian, Glaucon (Owly-Eyed) who happens to share the same name as Plato's brother who had heard the story of the cave allegory from Socrates – to Poor Joan, the Athena of the room, injured but not beaten. Then the sharp 'Es', the kissing hard element forged out of Moore's sculptures, still on the page – to the wild Jester in the corner representing pure energy. They surround the Emperor with no clothes and round belly, whose disjointed arm is still pointing, and the Golem, who is inanimate but rumbling, a male and female hybrid – ready to stand tall and defend. Then the little crystal from which emanates the little father figure, echoing the same pose, again.