

Tami Katz-Freiman: "The Dream Circus Or: Why did the D.J. Commit Suicide?"

Kader Attia belongs to a special breed of artists, who in another incarnation might have become anthropologists or scholars of culture. As a member of the north-African community in Paris, Attia examines the conflicted identity of his uprooted culture vis-à-vis the seductiveness of consumer culture and the Western world of material abundance. His work is rooted in the complex relations between these two cultures, and he executes it in a reflective and critical manner pervaded by dark humor and cynicism.

At the core of Attia's work is the world of north-African immigrants in France, Muslim religious practices, and their encounter with consumer society. One of the terms that Attia frequently employs in his works is "hallal," the Muslim term for meat slaughtered according to Islamic rites. In his work **Hallal** (2004), Attia transformed the interior of his Left Bank gallery into a high-end boutique in which every fashion accessory was supposedly created by a trendy young designer. Attia registered the brand name "Hallal" at the National Institute for Industrial Property, and marketed it in a widespread campaign. Overnight, the brand's religious name and the fake campaign created around it transformed the boutique into a sought-after fashion label.

Like many others, Attia believes that consumer culture has indeed come to replace religion. In almost all of his works, he underscores the gap between cultural stereotypes and fantasies related to gender and to otherness, and ridicules the longing for brand names and labels. His ironic and nihilistic position is directed against religion as well as against Western consumer culture. In both cases, he believes, what is at stake is a cynical exploitation of human distress.

In his work **Big Bang** (2005), which was created especially for the interior courtyard of the Jewish Museum in Paris, Attia distilled the symbols of Judaism and Islam – the Star of David and the crescent – into a charged, ball-shaped image, in which these two elements are intertwined. This gigantic ball was suspended between earth and sky, resembling an enormous disco ball, or a meteorite threatening the Earth.

At the center of the spectacular installation **The Loop**, which is included in this exhibition, another disco ball is suspended in mid-air. Even though this time it is composed of mirrors that seem to decidedly transform it into a decorative element, its role as a harbinger of disaster becomes increasingly clear. It hovers over a surreal scene, at whose center appears the hyper-realist figure of a Sufi dervish, dressed in white and raising his arms to the sky as he whirls around. As the viewer enters the large circus tent, this figure reveals itself to be part of a dream-like scene that includes four more figures: three break dancers who are spinning on their backs, and a D.J. (made in the semblance of the artist), who is dangling from the mirrored ball, hung on the electric wire connecting his earphones and orbiting over his post in an endless loop. All this takes place to the sound of a screeching record that is stuck on the word "God," and which echoes repeatedly as part of the general ecstasy of this dream circus, transformed into an apocalyptic trance party.

In contrast with his earlier works – such as **Dream Machine #1**, which was exhibited at the 2004 Venice Biennial, or the work **Hallal** (of which a second version appeared in the Art Basel Miami Beach Art Fair of 2004) – it seems that here Attia's ironic, neo-Pop point of view has given way to a sarcastic gaze, pervaded by an almost tragic concern for the fate of mankind in an age of consumerism and commercialized faith and religion. By creating an incongruent mix of club culture (the disco ball), street culture (breakdance), and the fashionable quest for spirituality (the whirling dervish), Attia expands his range of interests from a preoccupation with archetypes of identity and belonging to clearly spiritual pursuits, and to deep philosophical questions about faith and religion. Being drawn to the comforting bosom of religion, he believes, is akin to choosing the right brand names. This is also true, as his latest work reveals, about the search for new age spirituality and mysticism.

For the apocalyptic pigeon installation **Flying Rats**, which is currently on display at the 2005 Lyon Biennial, Attia created a gigantic iron cage, in which he placed life-size sculptures of children whose flesh is made of dough. Hundreds of real pigeons peck at the children's flesh in front of the bewildered spectators. In this extreme work, the dark, pessimistic mood that already became evident in **The Loop** several months earlier reaches a horrifying, breathtaking form of expression: the entire scene appears like an apocalyptic food chain gone awry. The children themselves have become merchandise, bird feed, a mutation of the consumer object.

It is this shocking revelation that may provide the clue for solving the related mystery of the suicide committed by the D.J./artist, the visionary of horror whose soul tired of this world...