

Mendes Wood DM Brussels presents 'Cada cosa es Babel' by Mariana Castillo Deball, opening on Saturday, November 4

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Cada cosa es Babel

Mariana Castillo Deball

November 4 – January 13

Preview: Saturday, November 4, 5–9pm

Mendes Wood DM, Brussels

13 rue des Sablons/Zavelstraat
Brussels, Belgium



Image: Mariana Castillo Deball from the series *Cada cosa es Babel*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo, Brussels, Paris, New York.

And what happens if we look the other way around, if we read contemporary art as future archeology?
– Mariana Castillo Deball

An object, eroded by time, crumbles in the palm of a hand. A tower collapses. A stonemason is hammering, chiseling stones. In her second solo exhibition at Mendes Wood in Brussels, *Cada cosa es Babel*, Mariana Castillo Deball shows a selection of linocut prints on handmade paper, made in collaboration with paper producer Gangolf Ulbricht and printed at Keystone editions printing workshop, both in Berlin. For this series, the artist started by drawing deconstructed fragments of existing imagery of the tower of Babel – details from seventeenth-century engravings and the paintings of Pieter Bruegel the Elder, among others – and remixing these elements in new constellations that make up new layers of stories. As the title of the exhibition suggests: everything is Babel, everything tells a story and leaves a mark, even or exactly, there where it fails and falls in ruins, leaving behind its origins.

“And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there. And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly (...) And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” [11:2-4] This is how the story of Babel begins in the book of Genesis in the Christian Old Testament. The enterprise of the tower's construction finds its premature end with god's confusion of tongues – the multiplication of languages. A number of thinkers and historians have asked where this story begins to make sense to us, as story: in the plotlessness of a universal language, efficiently progressing towards a unified goal, or in its turn of plot, there where people stop making sense to each other as they speak, suddenly, in different tongues? One interpretation of the story is that Babel has “made its name”, not in spite of the divine spell, but because of it. The Hebrew name Babel (בבל) derives from the verb *balal*, which means to confuse or confound. The Arabic noun *balbala* or *balbala* refers to disorder, confusion, and chaos. And it may be the case that the English word babble has its origins in the word Babel, although it could also be an onomatopoeia for the sound that babies make, *before* they have acquired linguistic abilities. In either case, Babel, or babble, is what comes before and after a universal language that is set to unite people on earth with the divine knowledge of the heavens.



Image: Mariana Castillo Deball from the series *Cada cosa es Babel*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo, Brussels, Paris, New York.

Jacques Derrida writes that “[t]he ‘tower of Babel’ does not merely figure the irreducible multiplicity of tongues; it exhibits an incompleteness, the impossibility of finishing, of totalizing, of saturating, of completing something on the order of edification, architectural construction, system, and architectonics.” In a recent text in *Ixiptla*, a research journal edited by Mariana Castillo Deball, she writes that the forum of ancient Greek society is both a physical space and the people that assemble there. Something similar can be said about the tower of Babel. It is both an architecture and the materialization of a monolithic language, or what such language strives to achieve: the utopian project of absolute (heavenly) knowledge, which is bound to fail. And Babel, as Derrida points out, is also the failure itself, which signifies the event in its trace. Babel in ruins. This failure is told in the scattering of people in different directions “upon the face of the whole earth”, and this scattering also finds its visual echo in the works shown in this exhibition.

The drawings by Mariana Castillo Deball show the tower in various stages of building and collapse. A woman is holding a drawing of the tower, on another drawing we see a community of builders having set up camp in the vicinity of the tower that is under construction. Another drawing shows Babel in ruins. Other pictorial elements Deball include ethnographic objects from the Museo Nacional in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: clay figurines made by the Karajá indigenous people of Central Brazil; *petecas* (old shuttlecock-like objects made from straw and feathers for a game that partially resembles present-day badminton). These motifs have trickled in from other projects the artist worked on, simultaneously – just as Babel, as a story, a building, and a ruin, is of ongoing interest to her.



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Having transferred these drawings to linocuts, Castillo Deball printed them on paper made by Gangolf Ulbricht, with whom she has worked before. Out of these prints, which she destroyed and tore into snippets of different size, she fabricated new sheets of paper in three different colors: grapefruit pink, pistachio green, and chocolate brown. These paper sheets, 56 x 76 cm in size, are reminiscent of an archaeological excavation site, with shards of pottery captured in the soil, frozen in time. Some of these papers are kept in this state, while others provide the surface and background for a new round of prints, so that the linocut drawings begin to repeat themselves through different layers.

A story moves forward through its turns of plot and time that passes. This is also how our relation to things, human-made things, intensify over time. Multiple readings are possible, the object is seen through

different eyes, it does no longer speak for itself. More than exposing a single image that emerges from a process, the works in this exhibition show the process of the work itself, the practice of telling through matter and time – of story upon story in an ongoing construction that strives towards perfection, but leaves scatterings in its trace.

– MM Goosen

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