

ARTFORUM

Naoki Sutter-Shudo

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English is Naoki Sutter-Shudo's third language, following French and Japanese, which may help explain why the Los Angeles-based artist's practice in painting and sculpture evinces such sensitivity for the interstices between one language and another, for those words that do not have precise correspondences in another idiom. This appreciation of nuance also informs the title of his recent exhibition, "*Mœurs*," which refers, in French, to both customs and morals. And within the etymology of *mœurs* a sense of measurement and rule, of moderation and modesty, reverberates.

In one of the works in the show, Sutter-Shudo evoked a morally controversial episode from French history, dating back to October 1941, when the Vichy regime decreed that statues and monuments made of copper alloys be removed from public spaces and melted down in order for the metals to be extracted. Though the selection was supposed to pertain solely to works lacking artistic or historical interest, Marshal Philippe Pétain adopted an exquisitely political criterion: Statues of radicals such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Jean-Paul Marat, Jean-Sylvain Bailly, Denis Diderot, and Charles Fourier would be taken down. In *Quelques sculptures parisiennes enlevées en 1942–43* (Some Parisian Sculptures Removed in 1942–43; all works 2018), Sutter-Shudo paints this pantheon within a nebulous black, with neither perspective nor spatial coordinates, stripping these monuments of any gravity and embedding them in a historical purgatory.

Language returned as a protagonist in the sculpture *Human*. Formed of that word's five letters, the work expresses a stereotyped notion rendered tangible by typography: a highly simplified rectilinear grapheme. Arranged in a circle, or rather a pentagon, the letters lean against one another in a precarious equilibrium that perhaps conveys the fragility of the human condition. At the same time, they form an enclosure that remains empty on the inside—a habitable space or a roofless shelter that can nevertheless be pitched anywhere, like a tent.

Human is distinguished by its craftsmanship, which lies at the heart of Sutter-Shudo's practice. The work has been made out of eleven types of wood, each with a different grain and color. In this way, the artist reinvents the art of intarsia, a technique of fitting together pieces of wood that was traditionally used to create virtuoso trompe l'oeil effects that compete with perspectival painting as well as to decorate marriage chests and jewelry boxes.

In nine mixed-media boxes exhibited on a table, the artist pursued, in his own fashion, the cult of packaging in Japanese culture. Created from wood, Plexiglas, or cardboard, the most intriguing pieces were tied up with twine, sealed, adorned with bows, knotted, bolted, or wrapped in netting, rendering the question of how to open them a veritable brainteaser. Like the sound of an unknown language, the packaging remains impenetrable. The boxes' sibylline titles (*Justib*, *Jingolb*, *Blinb*, *Toler recil*, *Tama teb*, *Anul mab*, and so on) further reinforced their opacity, providing no clue for identifying the contents. Once again, Sutter-Shudo raises questions of access to a foreign linguistic code in which a secret or novel way of seeing reality is encrypted and safeguarded.

—Riccardo Venturi

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.

View of "Naoki Sutter-Shudo," 2018. Photo: Aurélien Mole.

