
MIKAEL LO PRESTI

"THEY FLEW BY, BUT ONLY AS SHADOWS ON THE GROUND"

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"A fool with a heart and no brains is just as unhappy as a fool with brains and no heart. I am one and you are the other, and therefore both of us suffer, both of us are unhappy."

– Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *"The Idiot"*, *The Russian Messenger*, St. Petersburg, 1868-1869

Chances are, you have never seen it. And if you ever did, you probably first encountered it how I did: in a glimpse, in a rush, in a cab speeding up along Hyde Park. As I turned my head, we were already past it, and I struggled to make sense of the two dark figures that were positioned against the lit up stone wall. In an attempt to find out where I was and what was there, I reached for my phone and opened up Google Maps.

It should come as no surprise that it was a memorial; London is filled with those after too many wars and far too many dead soldiers. However, it was a bit of a surprise that this memorial was not honouring any soldier. In fact, it was not honouring any person at all. "The Animals in War Memorial", Google Maps informed me. It came with a 4.7 star rating, and - despite the most recent review just being a single star with the comment "Normal view" - I decided to return the following day. There, with a cup of coffee in hand to compensate for the cold morning rain, I was standing in front of the two creatures that I had not managed to figure out the night before. They were two donkeys, or possibly mules, cast in bronze. Onto their backs, several boxes and heavy military equipment had been strapped. Their bodies were captured as they were slowly striding towards what was an opening in the curved wall in front of them. Trudging along, as true beasts of burden, they were threatening to leave me all by myself at this plaza.

Not quite abandoned, but nonetheless left to my own thoughts, it was hard to make sense of the monument. Was it celebrating the efforts of the animals, as such, or was it rather celebrating the qualities that we ascribe to animals and that we would like to see in human beings? Similar to how horoscopes, caricature drawings, children's books and various other cultural artefacts, trust our perception of animal traits to say something about the essence of being human, was this portrait of the suffering donkeys merely showcasing the sort of service and sacrifice that a British soldier was expected to aspire to? There, in the rain and in the noise from the London morning rush traffic, the two donkeys were dutifully doing their master's bidding. But if indeed wanting to capture the intrinsic nature of loyalty - to answer to a higher calling during times of war - why pick a donkey?

Sure, we should trust the wisdom in the words, chosen by the Americans: "Better a donkey that carries me than a horse that throws me". However, if trusting that there is any truth offered by idioms and horoscopes, is not the donkey a bit more of a conflicted character? Is it not one that is gladly marching to its own drum, rather than simply surrendering to the task of carrying? Historically, its resilience has been interpreted as much as a willingness to resist as a willingness to endure. This conflicting set of connotations was made wonderfully complicated when standing in front of the memorial in London. While being the capital of an empire so vast that it covered a quarter of the globe, the donkey has been a commonly used as a symbol for anti-colonial struggle. In other words, it would be associated with the other side of so many of the wars that this memorial is supposed to commemorate. Headstrong and with an equally strong back kick, the donkey is defiant!

When thinking of what it has in common with human beings, it is its adaptability. The donkey serves as a means of transport for those who have close to nothing and is capable of going where war-ridden roads have left cars worthless. In contrast to the memorial that was unveiled in 2004, is a steady stream of images from armed conflicts around the worlds, which shows the donkey carrying the wounded for those that are wanting peace, rather than carrying the military equipment for those that are waging war. The donkey is thus intrinsically associated with survival instinct as much as it is associated with non-violence. It carried a 33 year old, who rode into Jerusalem as a humble king rather than as a military conquerer some 2000 years ago. That is if you allow yourself to trust that tale, or in the case of Fyodor Dostoevsky or Robert Bresson allow for the tale to be retold and reconfigured. At the heart of both the former's book "The Idiot" and the latter's film "Au hasard Balthazar!", there is the question: how would innocence fare in a world that is so profoundly corrupt? "Au hasard Balthazar!", Robert Bresson said in 1966 about his then newly released movie, "is about our anxieties and desires ... when faced with a living creature that is completely humble, completely holy, and happens to be a donkey: Balthazar." The film follows the life of this donkey from its birth to its death, and the horrible abuse that he suffers as Balthazar is passed on from one owner to the next. As such, it is brutally and undisputedly stating a hierarchy, that of man mastering nature. And similar to the two donkeys by Hyde Park, Balthazar is portrayed in the act of trudging along. But while refraining from humanising Balthazar, Bresson nevertheless manages to outline the human experience, and in this act he just ever so slightly unsettles the order of master and servant. They may carry us, but they may move us in other ways.

STANDARD (OSLO)
PRESS RELEASE

Mikael Lo Presti (born in 1989, Södra Sandby, Sweden) lives and works in Stockholm. This is his fourth solo exhibition at STANDARD (OSLO). Other solo exhibitions include "June-August", Galerie Frank Elbaz, Paris; "Händelsesförlopp", Kragerø Kunstforening, Kragerø; "Feast", Stormen kunst/dájdda, Bodø; "It Flakes and it Fades", Heerz Tooya, Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria; "Dancing moths, Running dogs and Sun-dried cloth", STANDARD (OSLO), Oslo, Norway; "A tree that will not rot", Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Germany. Selected group exhibitions include "Downtown Issues 3", Issues, Stockholm; "Before Tomorrow - Astrup Fearnley Museet 30 Years", Astrup Fearnley Museet, Oslo; "Stranger than Fiction", Galleri Magnus Karlsson, Stockholm, Sweden; Condo, Bureau, New York, USA; "Tegnebiennalen", Kunstnernes Hus, Oslo, Norway; "Maleriets Letthet", Kunstnerforbundet, Oslo, Norway; "Black Mountain: An Interdisciplinary Experiment", Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, Germany amongst others.

In connection with the exhibition, Mikael Lo Presti and Eivind Furnesvik, director of STANDARD (OSLO), will have a conversation regarding the exhibition as part of the gallery's ongoing series of talk titled "What Have We Learned?" The talk will be in English, is open to the public and take place at the gallery on Saturday April 25 at 14.00.

For further information please visit our webpage: www.standardoslo.no or contact Eivind Furnesvik at eivind@standardoslo.no or +47 917 07 429 / +47 22 60 13 10. STANDARD (OSLO) is open Wednesday-Friday: 12.00-17.00/ Saturday: 12.00-16.00. Sunday and Monday: Closed. Tuesday: Open by appointment.

Next exhibition projects:

Asal Peirovi
28.05.2026-27.06.2026

Art Basel
16.06.2026-21.06.2026

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