
RAQIB SHAW

OF BEASTS AND SUPER-BEASTS

PARIS DEBELLEYME

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Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac is delighted to present *Of Beasts and Super-Beasts*, the first solo exhibition of Raqib Shaw, an Indian-born artist living in London. Shaw's works on paper are displayed on both floors of the gallery.

These drawings, displayed along the walls, superpose wonders, curios and vanitas. They are exhibited as if on sideboards, like those represented in the *wunderkammer* of Renaissance princes or the paintings of Veronese. The viewer comes into the gallery space as though one enters the hall of a château where a feast has been laid out: it is the artist's invitation to dream and voyage through art and its references. These references borrow from a powerful imaginary world, one that brings together mythological man-animal characters. The characters evolve within precious and fantastical settings, fitted and chiselled like the work of a goldsmith.

Stemming from his *Paradise Lost* oeuvre in 2011, the anthropomorphic figures have heads like birds, crocodiles or even tigers, somewhere between gods and heroes. They hold bowls with griffon bases, pitchers with swan neck handles, and other avian-adorned pieces. Inspired by the Empire style typical of European—and more specifically French—art from the early 19th century, Raqib Shaw began to create a universe that culminated in his Parisian exhibition *Of Beasts and Super-Beasts*.

Architects Charles Percier and Pierre Fontaine, commissioned by Bonaparte (later Napoleon I), had the foresight to impose a style that highlighted the fundamental rules of Antiquity, particularly of Roman art. The Empire-style ornamentation is predominated by a symmetry that ties in with the Louis XIV-style hieratic equilibrium. The iconographic repertoire calls on antique heads, victories, specific drapes and symmetrical, symbolic ornaments. The swan, the palmettes and the allegories brighten a style that is otherwise severe and measured. The two architect-decorators diffused this style all across Europe, and published the famous "interior decorator compendium related to all furnishings" (1812). It is precisely this compendium that fed Raqib Shaw's imagination.

For the exhibition at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Shaw has pursued this approach by focusing on drawing, the ornament, painting, style and its perception. The drawings, presented in the form of an installation, invite the viewer to consider the décor both in the details and as a whole. Each work is a line drawing repurposed with ink and paint and then further enhanced with enamel, lead glass and gilding. This precious aesthetic is intended to recreate a phantasmagorical universe, one where the mysterious and the unusual reign, and where the experience of the sublime may lead, according to the artist, to "sensorial overdose".

Raqib Shaw's style is almost akin to that of the Consulaire style: that of General Bonaparte returning triumphantly from Egypt, laden with strange treasures. Sphinxes, man-animal hybrids and gods, triggered the imagination of the Western world, which was recovering from revolutionary bloodshed and readying itself for Napoleonic wars. As we pass from a monarchy to an empire, we pass from one style to another. Art is thus more political than ever, and Percier and Fontaine's style illustrates this new power. Raqib Shaw creates, in the *Suite Of The Rouge Boudoir Of Beasts*, a universe where the animal expresses the uncivilised nature of this sensual and excessive force: where violence is standard. Like Jérôme Bosch's mysterious figures, Shaw expresses, via the animal, the contemporary anguish of a misleadingly regulated world—one where fundamental instincts are repressed and carefully concealed. In the ornamentation, Shaw includes characters that are always present and active. These paradoxes are visible through the syncretic digression from furnishing types, such as the mantle clocks of rigidly styled Egyptian temples decorated with Greek ornaments and the garlands of fruit worn by a ram's head masccaron. Raqib Shaw enriches the furniture, candlesticks, ancient Greek kraters, chandeliers and motifs faithful to the classicism of the Empire with deceptively bucolic animal scenes, with bears and monkeys indulging in activities that parody our own perception of society and power.

Of Beasts and Super-Beasts seems to go beyond the decorative in order to question the role of art in Western society. How has art served to codify the social rapports between humans? Does increased sophistication enable humans to escape from their own animality?

In 1998, Raqib Shaw left his native India and Kashmir for London, where he studied and still lives today. He graduated from London's Central Saint Martins College, and has since presented his work within group exhibitions, including "Without Boundary" at the MoMA in New York (2006), "Around the World in Eighty Days" at the ICA in London (2006), the Suntory Museum in Osaka, Japan (2009) and the 17th Biennale in Sydney (2010). His recent solo exhibitions include a show at the Metropolitan Museum in New York (2008) and the Kunstthalle in Vienne (2009).