

Press release

Paul Pfeiffer | *Incarnator*

10 September - 30 October, 2021

Opening: Thursday, 9 September, 2021, 3 - 8 pm

Exhibited for the first time in Madrid, *Incarnator* by Paul Pfeiffer is a multi-media installation consisting of a single projected video channel and a series of figurative wooden carved sculptural objects. In this work, Pfeiffer used as his starting point the revered role of the 'encarnador' - a sculptor of holy Catholic figures created as the focal points of religious observance. *Encarnadores* are celebrated for having the power to apparently breathe life into inanimate sculptures, creating life-like effigies that seduce the eye into believing that consciousness has been awoken in simple carved wood and paint. In the Philippines, this power of reanimation can be observed through mass devotion to the Santo Niño de Cebú, a religious icon brought to the islands as a gift from Spain in 1521 by Magellan, making it one of the oldest Christian relics in the country. This sculptural tradition continues in the present, through the production of Catholic idols carved by *encarnadores* and used for personal and communal devotion.

Central to this group of objects in Pfeiffer's installation are the composite parts of an almost life-size carving of the pop star Justin Bieber. Though presented in parts, the sculpted figure is carved in resurrection form, complete with the phrase 'Son of God' tattooed across his chest. Bieber was discovered as a twelve-year-old child via a video performance he posted on YouTube, and was quickly propelled to world superstardom by an industry quick to capitalise on the power of youth. Since then, his image has come to represent an iconic, eternally youthful innocence, a phenomenon made palpable in the devotional intensity of his concert performances.

Pfeiffer introduces an unusual layering of technologies between these carved wooden sculptures, video fragments, 3D scans and 3D prints. Automated and mechanical reproductive techniques are seamlessly integrated into traditional manual crafts; live bodies become pixels become wood grain become vibrant devotional objects. Other elements of the video production—a camera, an audio recorder, even digital footage itself—is also replicated in traditional carved wooden form in the installation, inverting and scrambling the teleological map of technological evolution, and collapsing together regional, national, ethnic, religious and racial differences into a hybrid array.

Echo of Magellan's 1521 'discovery' of the already-inhabited Philippine Islands resonates within Pfeiffer's exhibition, five centuries later in 2021, staged in the capital of Spain. Similarly, echo of Ruy López de Villalobos's naming of the Philippines for a seventeen-year-old Prince Philip II in 1544 resonates in Pfeiffer's depiction of a heaving mass of teenage fans, depicted in his video work venerating Bieber on a stage in México, the fateful point of departure for Spanish colonial encounters in the Asia Pacific Islands.

Incarnator was initiated during the artist's six-month residency at Bellas Artes Projects in Bagac, Bataan, Philippines in 2018 where it was originally exhibited at Bellas Artes Projects curated by Diana Campbell Betancourt.

Paul Pfeiffer (b. 1966, Honolulu) lives and works in New York. He has received numerous awards and fellowships including a Fulbright-Hayes Fellowship and the Bucksbaum Award from the Whitney Museum. In 2011, he was the subject of a retrospective at Sammlung Goetz in Munich, Germany. Selected exhibitions include the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge US; Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Chicago; the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; MUSAC León, León; Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin; Baibakov Art Projects, Moscow; Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo; Blanton Museum of Art, Austin; Artangel, London; Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, Manila. His work is held in international collections including LACMA, Los Angeles; Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin; Pinault Collection, Paris; Castello di Rivoli, Turin; and MoMA, New York.