

500 Review

Epistemological diazepam

Xavier Robles de Medina, 'I will go away into the wild wood, and never come home again',
Alice Amati, London, 1 September - 7 October 2023

500
REVIEW

500 REVIEW
22 SEP 2023



Xavier Robles De Medina, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Directed by David Hand (supervising a team of sequence directors), Walt Disney Productions, 1937, 2023, bronze, 24 x 32 cm, (detail). Photography by Tom Carter, courtesy Alice Amati.

ALICE AMATI

People who study art are perhaps especially haunted by the question of their own futility. Can we really learn anything from, say, a painting, and if so, what kind of knowledge would we get from it? Is there really so much to read and write about art, or is the best we can hope for a half truth cloaked in allusion and literary pretension? Right now I'm surrounded by literally thousands of books about art, and I'm reassured by their mass and volume and self-confident typefaces. But what's this castle built on? Can we trust what it tells us?

Xavier Robles de Medina's exhibition, 'I will go away into the wild wood, and never come home again', addresses this anxiety like an epistemological diazepam. It's an exhibition that seeks to produce knowledge, employing strategies associated with intellectual rigour such as crisp detail and academic citations. Yet it also reflects on its own uncertainty, its apparent precision taking you by the hand and depositing you in the wild wood of the title, where nothing is clear. It takes time to make things out. It is not necessarily reassuring when you do. But it's good to have some company there.

The show's meaning emerges from an accumulation of fragments that the artist has encountered and reassembled. For example, mounted on one wall is a text screenprinted onto canvas, a historical essay that meanders through the colonisation of Suriname to the events leading to the artist's own birth there in 1990, via an Indian flower, a toppled statue of a queen and an aeroplane crash. Despite the citations, the essay is poetic rather than scrupulously academic, evoking rather than defining its threads of causation. We have to imagine what these might be. It gives a sense of the sweep of history through the small incidents by which it is experienced.

The largest work in the show, Gorillas in the Mountains of Southern Nigeria: World's rarest great ape pictured with babies, BBC News, 9 July 2020, is a meticulous painting of a photograph from an article celebrating the survival of some gorillas at risk of extinction. The artist encountered it more or less randomly on the internet, so why has it taken such a prominent position in a show concerned with his search for a sense of place in the world? It seems to be an attempt to find knowledge, while acknowledging the limited means by which we can access it.

ALICE AMATI



Xavier Robles De Medina, *Gorillas in the mountains of Southern Nigeria[...]*, 2022, Acrylic on wood 114 x 200 cm.
Courtesy Alice Amati

In this respect, and in his repeated evocation of a forest, Robles de Medina resembles Jacques Rancière's idea of the 'ignorant schoolmaster', one who 'does not teach his pupils his knowledge, but orders them to venture into the forest of things and signs, to say what they have seen and what they think of what they have seen, to verify it and have it verified'. Visiting the show helped me to reflect on my own adventure into the forest, and maybe, if you're reading this, you can verify what I see and think, or am I lost?