

Even here, I exist PELES EMPIRE

Barakat Contemporary is delighted to present the German artist group Peles Empire for the first time in Asia with the exhibition Even here, I Exist. Peles Empire is a collaborative duo consisting of the artists Katharina Stoeber and Barbara Wolff. Their name comes from Peleş Castle, summer home of the Romanian royal family in the highlands of the Carpathian Mountains. Each of the castle's hundreds of rooms boasts styles from different historical times and places without any hierarchical order, ranging from the Gothic to Art Deco, Rococo, Oriental, Renaissance, and Italian Baroque styles. In 2005, the members of Peles Empire attached A3 paper printouts to the wall of their Frankfurt apartment living room, working from photographs of Peles Castle's interior to produce a full-size recreation of the princess's chambers. Bringing mismatched pieces of flea market furniture into their living room now filled with beautiful photographs of mahogany furniture and candlesticks from the castle, the artists gave their new space the name "Peles Empire." The artists opened up an unauthorized bar in this space, inviting acquaintances and artists every week. This later expanded into running a gallery of the same name in a different space modeled after the Peles Castle, where they invited other artists to show. This project of replicating the castle, which itself mimics the various architectural styles of the world, gradually attained an abstract quality through its process of duplication and the addition of other heterogeneous media, compressing and dismantling the original images. The collaborative project, which began with a simple idea, has evolved over the past fifteen years, blending many heterogeneous elements. _____

In essence, the artists use the tension generated from the mixing of intrinsically different elements as the driving force for their work and deal with the characteristically contemporary concept of "hybridity" as an important theme. They combine different times and spaces with disparate media, mixing things that are traditionally divided along dichotomies—from their own clashes as a duo to divisions of "original and copy," "historical" and "modern," "elegant" and "lowbrow," and "two-dimensional" versus "three-dimensional." The artists have consistently adopted the easily obtainable A3 size paper as a format for their work. Peles Castle, filled with expensive and colorful furniture, is converted into cheap paper and easily torn paper is once again transformed into a form that appears to be as sturdy as marble. Incorporating new materials such as pottery, concrete, wood, and jesmonite, they have steered their work in a direction where replication departs from the initial image and assumes its own originality. The artists present their working process as the final work, and the images from previous work and exhibitions are reincorporated once again into new artwork, blurring the hierarchy between process and result. In this way, the artists are attempting to break down the inherent order of classification and hierarchy within us. _____

In this exhibition at Barakat Contemporary as well, Peles Empire tries to achieve cultural hybridity and the nonhierarchical combination of disparate elements. By first taking photographs of the gallery floor and then attaching them to the walls, the artists create a site-specific that blurs the boundaries of space. The artists also researched Korean ceramics for the exhibition, drawing inspiration from comb-patterned earthenware, Silla-era clay dolls, and Goryeo celadon. The concept of Celadon, in particular, is expanded in this exhibition into a diverse cultural narrative. One of the origin stories behind the English word Celadon is the name of a character in the 17th-century pastoral comedy *L'Astrée* (1627). In *L'Astrée*, the character of the shepherd Céladon wears a light green ribbon, and Europeans found the color of Chinese porcelain reminiscent of this image. Delving into the "Celadon" story, the artists find the concept of Arcadia, the pursuit of a utopian ideal within a simple bucolic life. Art has a long history of pursuing perfection, and the artists draw a connection between Goryeo celadon artists, who shattered their pottery works if they were imperfect, with this pursuit of perfection, together with their own questions about when a work of art achieves perfection. This approach by Peles Empire, as its members incorporate the artistic process and its broken by-products in the results of their work, poses questions about the pursuit of perfection in both the history of art and the contemporary era. _____

The exhibition also derives its title, *Even here, I exist*, from the concept of Arcadia. Arcadia has been continually represented in numerous works of poetry, literature, and art, amongst the most prominent of these being the French painter Nicolas Poussin's work *The Shepherds of Arcadia*, in which the words "Et in Arcadia Ego" are inscribed on a tombstone. The ego ("I") here is sometimes seen as symbolizing death itself, alluding to the fact that while human beings forever aspire to ideals, all things come to an end, and there is no such thing as perfection. The variations on this cultural interpretation continue into the artists' *Cleopatra series*. The images of Cleopatra that appear in the work come from a Gobelins tapestry in Peleş Castle. Like many other things in the castle, the Cleopatra images appear transformed from their original though the European perspective, depicted like Jesus as he appears in traditional sacred art. While the tapestry is a weaving that occupies three-dimensional space, it bears painting-like qualities, and the artists were drawn to the contrasting aspects of Cleopatra as both a romantic feminist icon and as a powerful ruler who defended her land against the Roman Empire. At the same time, she is said to have chosen to end her life by snakebite—and snakes, which have played key roles in legends around the world, can be seen in the vase patterns and wallpaper of Peleş Castle depicted in the exhibition. Braided cords, representing a more abstract form of snakes, tie back in with the ribbon of the shepherd Céladon. These cords are used to apply designs to the artists' pottery, which also resemble the patterns of combed earthenware. The artists further expand the link between the exhibition theme of "Arcadia" and their ongoing Cleopatra motif as they evoke the use of Cleopatra in *Arcadia* (1993), a play by the Czech-born British playwright Tom Stoppard._____

In these ways, the work of Peles Empire forms an endlessly cycling space where stories unfold infinitely like the ouroboros motif of a snake eating its own tail. In this space, history and present are intertwined, stories and objects hold equal standing, real spaces are compressed into digital images, and images installed in real space repeat themselves, folding and unfolding. The copy assumes a new originality as the original disappears; artworks that are both something new and references of what came before transform amid this endless cycle. Sharing their work in Asia for the first time with this Korean exhibition, Peles Empire are poised to carry on absorbing the cultural DNA here and reproducing it elsewhere. All the quotations and keywords in this document will serve as hints toward symbols that can be found in the exhibition. Like detectives looking for clues, the audience can find traces that combine history and various contemporary cultural symbols in the exhibition._____

PELES EMPIRE_____

Peles Empire is a two-person collaboration composed of the artists Barbara Wolff (b.1980, Romania) and Katharina Stöver (b.1982, Germany). They studied at the Stedelschule School of Art in Germany, the Slade School of Art in the UK, and the Royal Academy. Since the establishment of the group in 2005, Peles Empire have also run a variety of exhibition spaces under the same name, first in London, England and Cluj, Romania, and now in collaboration with other artists in operating a space in Berlin, Germany. Peles Empire's major solo exhibitions include Austria's Kunsthaus Graz (2019), Germany's Kunst Verein (2017), Wilhelm-Hack-Museum (2015), and Kunstmuseum Stuttgart (2013), and England's Glasgow Sculpture Studio (2013), and London Cell Project Space (2013). Major international group exhibitions include the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Scotland (2019), the Skulptur Projekte Münster in Germany (2017), the Sprengel Museum in Hanover, Germany (2017), the KW Institute in Germany (2015), and the UK's ICA (2011) and Frieze Projects (2011). The works of Peles Empires are currently held in leading permanent collections including the European Central Bank, the KAI 10 / Arthena Foundation, Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, and Sammlung für zeitgenössische Kunst der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Germany.