

György KEMÉNY

Fészek '68

26 January – 19 February 2021

Laocoön, Jeanne d'Arc, Oppenheimer, Robert Kennedy and Twiggy encountered each other in 1968, at György Kemény's exhibition held at the Fészek Művészklub [Fészek Artists' Club] in Budapest. In his exhibited works, Kemény elaborated art historical, historical and contemporary references with his exceptional humour and playfulness, applying the characteristics and formal elements of pop art in a virtuoso way. Using a particularly European, or more specifically Central European approach, he occasionally combined serious themes with a visually playful manner. The exhibition can be considered an important milestone for the international reception of pop art, and also a pioneering – and in the light of later consequences unfortunately unrepeatable – event in the Hungarian art scene of the era. Vintage Galéria's current show presents selected works from this exhibition.

In 1968, the exhibition included playful installations and jaunty pieces such as *Twiggy mint Jeanne d'Arc* [Twiggy as Jeanne d'Arc] (1967), in which the artist had drawn parallels between the British icon of popular culture and the iconography of a historic character, or *Keresztapa reggelije* [The Godfather's Breakfast] (1967), which evokes the works of Daniel Spoerri, as well as *C'est ça* (1967). Two works contain autobiographical references: the *Gyerekkori önarckép* [Self-Portrait as a Child] (1968), in which Kemény utilized a photo taken at the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto, and a family photograph, from which the title of the painting derives, and the *Önarckép* [Self-Portrait] (1968), which is a ninety-degree rotated and enlarged detail of the artist's face. The use of photographs, and especially press photos is emphatic throughout the exhibited works: the artist incorporates such images into the surface of *Hommage à Oppenheimer* (1967–68) and *Twiggy*, while the starting point of the work titled *Megölték Kennedyt* [Kennedy was shot] (1968) was also a press photo.

The works are characterized by vibrant colours and unusual object applications for which the artist used up the stock of a smaller toy store. For instance, in case of *Karambol* [Car Crash] (1968), which shows a comic-like sequence, two toy cars collide. Despite the cheerful overall impression, some of the works actually deal with really troubled subject matters. The ironic paraphrase of an antique work, the *Laokoön-csoport* [Laocoön Group] (1968) depicts the death of the priest and his sons defending Troy, *Gyerekkori önarckép* concerns the Holocaust, *Hommage à Oppenheimer* (1967–68) displays the Cold War-era fear of the atomic bomb, and *Megölték Kennedyt* (1968) deals with the assassination of Robert Kennedy. The use of painted (Mickey Mouse) or appliqué (rifle) children's toys in such context predates the artistic strategy prevalent decades later (analysed by Ernst van Alphen). Besides the victims, perpetrators are also emphasized – Kennedy's case draws even more attention to the assassin than to the assassinated. The contradiction between the seemingly vibrant and cheerful visuality and the serious, at times tragic topics, as well as the ironic approach that permeates the works reflects a particularly Central European perspective on pop art emerging from the United Kingdom and the United States.

Kemény came across the works of the U.S. representatives of pop art, the initial inspiration of his work, at Galerie Sonnabend (Paris) in 1963. The library of Fészek Művészklub, led by Éva Molnár, also provided access to wider knowledge of international tendencies during the period – even in the lack of travel – through the subscribed magazines and the reproductions published therein. Molnár also organized a number of exhibitions, including Kemény's, which could not have taken place at larger institutions more visible to the public eye, and under control concerning ideological meaning and style. The creation of Kemény's exceptionally fresh artworks, playfully reflecting on international tendencies, was partially made possible by this very opportunity.

Another exhibition would have taken place the following year – featuring two works made for this occasion, *Konzervatív szék* [Conservative Chair] (1969) and *Giacometti-láb* [Giacometti Leg] (1969), both welded from tin cans, implying Warholesque references – however, according to the artist's recollection, the exhibition was prevented by the "Kilencek" [Nines] group, known for their conservative views and their loyalty to the system. In a peculiar way, while Kemény could not arrange a one-man show, many of his posters in the style of the works exhibited in 1968, such as *Új fürdőruhák* [New Swimwear] (1969) or *Biopon* (1969), were printed and placed out on the streets. Nonetheless, such a work, also bearing the influence of pop art, *Szekkó* [Secco], made in 1970–71 (and recently restored), could only be realized in a private residence instead of in public space. The mural – a masterpiece regarding the reception of pop art in the Eastern Bloc – was brought to life in a manner typical of this time, in a maid's room, and was made along a complex, and partly New Left inspired iconographic program, with the contribution of a group of youth embodying the counterculture with their views on politics, culture and everyday life – the later democratic opposition.

(Of the works exhibited at Fészek Artist's Club and mentioned above, the current exhibition does not include two artworks kept in public collections, the *Gyerekkori önarckép* and *Hommage à Oppenheimer*, and the *Laokoön-csoport* is missing as well.)

György Kemény (1936) visual artist. Kemény studied graphics at the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts between 1956 and 1961, and spent a year working in Pál Gábor's studio before starting his studies. At the beginning of his career, he created prints, then turned towards graphic design from 1963, and was active in a number of genres at the same time. The artworks presented at his solo exhibition, held in 1968 at the Fészek Művészklub (Budapest), and his *Szekkó* (1970–71), a mural covering all free wall surfaces of a room, are key works regarding the international reception of pop art. He also designed the catalogue of the neo-avantgarde *Iparterv I.* exhibition (1968) and the poster for the *Iparterv II.* exhibition (1969). In 1975, at an international poster competition in Warsaw organized on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the end of World War II, Kemény won the shared first prize with his poster (*I am György Kemény...*, 1975), a conceptual and at the same time autobiographical piece, which thematized his survival during the Holocaust. His further conceptual works and installations also stand out in the Hungarian and international art scene with their characteristic humour and irony, which permeates Kemény's entire oeuvre. Due to his poster designs in the field of applied graphic arts, and his versatile and innovative practice as a designer of magazines and books, Kemény is an important figure of Hungarian visual culture. Literature: László Beke: *Beszélgetés Kemény Györggyel* [In Conversation with György Kemény], 24. 10. 1968., manuscript, 25 pages; Dávid Fehér: „KEMÉNY / POP. Kemény György és a pop-art” [KEMÉNY / POP. György Kemény and the Pop Art], *Artmagazin* 90 (2016), 32–41.

Daniel Véri

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Karambol [Car Crash], 1968

fibreboard, wallkyd, toy cars and objects, 100x140x4,3 cm

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Megölték Kennedyt [Kennedy was shot], 1968

wood frame, glass, newspaper, wallkyd and toy rifle, 57x72x3,5 cm

C'est ça, 1967

wood, wallkyd, newspaper and gingerbread, 30x18,5x2 cm

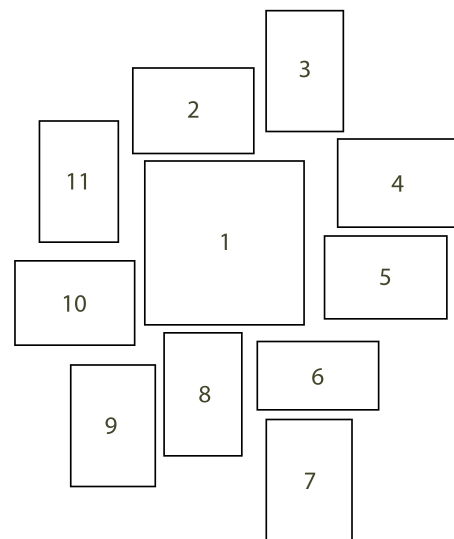
Twiggy mint Jeanne d'Arc [Twiggy as Jeanne d'Arc], 1967

wood, wallkyd, newspaper and objects, 71,5x100x1 cm

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Documentation related to the Fészek Művészklub exhibition in 1968:

- 1 Invitation
- 2 *Hommage à Oppenheimer* (1967–68, in the collection of the Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest)
- 3 In the foreground: *Giacometti-láb* [Giacometti Leg] (1969), in the background: *Konzervatív szék* [Conservative Chair] (1969)
- 4 *Gyerekkori önarckép* [Self-Portrait as a Child] (1968, in the collection of the Peter und Irene Ludwig Stiftung, Aachen, on long-term loan at the Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest)
- 5 *Oroszlánok és egyszarvúak* [Lions and Unicorns], 1968
- 6 Installation view. In the foreground: *Laokoön-csoport* [Laocoön Group] (1968), in the background from left to right: *Gyerekkori önarckép* [Self-Portrait as a Child] (1968), *Twiggy mint Jeanne d'Arc* [Twiggy as Jeanne d'Arc] (1967), *Keresztpapa reggelije* [The Godfather's Breakfast] (1967), *Gyümölcsök* [Fruits] (1968), *Karambol* [Car Crash] (1968)
- 7 *Gyümölcsök* [Fruits], 1968
- 8 *Magyar Mezőgazdaság* [Hungarian Agriculture] (1967, in the collection of MANK, Szentendre)
- 9 A *Magyar Mezőgazdaság* szobor felállítási terve a Mezőgazdasági Vásár főterére [Installation plan for the *Hungarian Agriculture* sculpture at the main square of the Agricultural Fair] (1967–2021)
- 10 *Labdák* [Balls], 1968
- 11 Installation view. In the foreground: *Laokoön-csoport* [Laocoön Group] (1968), in the background from left to right: *Karambol* [Car Crash] (1968), *Oroszlánok és egyszarvúak* [Lions and Unicorns] (1968), *Hommage à Oppenheimer* (1967–68)



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Keresztpapa reggelije [The Godfather's Breakfast], 1967

wood, wallkyd, newspaper and objects, 49,5x72x1 cm

Önarckép [Self-Portrait], 1968

plywood, wallkyd, 55x102x1 cm

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Konzervatív szék [Conservative Chair], 1969

welded cans, 92,5x43x43 cm