

BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Nicolás Guagnini:
Asociación Psicoanalítica Argentina



Installation view: Nicolás Guagnini: *Asociación Psicoanalítica Argentina*, Bortolami, New York, 2019. Courtesy the artist and Bortolami, New York. Photo: Kristian Laudrup.

If I don't know I don't know
I think I know
If I don't know I know
I think I don't know
—R. D. Laing

Nicolás Guagnini's exhibition *Asociación Psicoanalítica Argentina* at Bortolami was a twisted riddle, a psychoanalytical conundrum. Supplemented by a performance titled *Analysis*, the show was dense with signs and possible signifiers that warped interpretative norms.

The exhibition consisted of 15 vitrified glazed ceramic pieces on clear glass plinths of varying sizes, arranged in a procession diagonally, bisecting the gallery. These figurative sculptures depicted multiple elements, such as stacked severed heads, ears, hands, feet, eggs, noses, sphinxes, etc., functioning as open-ended signs. Separately the banal symbols evoke rote responses—an egg alone signifies fertility, creation, purity, and hope—but combined they scramble explanation, leaving room for more. *Superego Enigma* (2019), a fittingly titled sculpture, consists of an egg balanced atop a finger wherein the rest of the hand is the head of a sphinx whose body has large protruding breasts and an ear on its ass. Such an amalgamation of symbols creates a quasi-surreal, hybrid creature that feels equal parts myth and horror. The runny, liquid quality of the white glaze on some of the pieces could be read as milk and/or cum, and thus female and/or male.

A predominant motif throughout the exhibition was heads—piles of them. Six of the 15 sculptures amassed varied numbers of the severed body part. *Self-Palindrome (For Tunga)* (2019) included two, conjoined heads, each with one oversized ear, a sculpture possibly depicting the act of making one's self understandable forwards and backwards, yet making the whole a little nonsensical. On the front and tail ends of this cryptic parade, four sculptures—two to an end—displayed linen flags with differing images of mazes, which may have been a key for the show, alerting us to the fact that we were lost in a labyrinth of connotations. Despite the presence of almost all other body parts, there were no eyes rendered in any of the sculptures. Hollow eye sockets were the closest to anything resembling eyes. Perhaps they were omitted in order to allow the viewers to project value without a returned judgment.

Analysis took the form of a 50-minute psychoanalytic therapy session wherein Guagnini was the patient and the art historian David Joselit acted as the therapist. Lying on a Freudian-style couch covered with the requisite Persian rug, Guagnini cogitated on elements of the show in a way only a therapy session could rouse. He spoke about the death of his mother, success (or lack of) as an artist, and how he grew into his ears ("all paranoia begins in the ear"), among other things—making himself acutely vulnerable to the listening audience. He mentioned other artists in New York, some of whom were present and some who were not, citing their art making as examples of different working methods and acknowledging his reverence for them (Ebecho Muslimova's practice and how it engages cruelty, for instance). The dialogue further entangled viewers, adding more readings and implications to the already loaded artworks. Guagnini recounted a dream of a two-headed turtle, with a second head where its tail should be. This animal was subsequently deemed unable to exist due to its inability to shit, being "full of shit." Intentionally or unintentionally, "I can't put my finger on it" was a common phrase repeated throughout the performance and also serves as a precise summation of the show.

Guagnini may have his own ends when it comes to his use of signs—his accompanying text states, "psychoanalysis is ethnographic"—but a conundrum arises when one is privy to his inherently personal interpretation and can't help but project. Destabilizing symbols is a tricky task, lest one fall into a labyrinth of one's own making. Here, Guagnini overloads significance as a means of maintaining control and staving off paranoia while exploding explication.