

In the exhibition *One Step Forward, Two Steps Backward*, Martin Sæther and Mickael Marman probe various systems of meaning. Across paper-making, video montage, painting, and bricolage, materials, icons, and linguistic forms are recast through different production processes. The exhibition is set in a retail unit-turned-gallery – a MIX kiosk until 2023 – at Romsås Senter. While Sæther documents the 1970s buildings at Romsås through montaging shots of interiors and elements such as painted Leca-block walls in the video work *House to live in*, Marman restages elements from a different setting in his work *PRDA*: a reconstructed tripartite OSB board from the PRADA store in Oslo. Functioning as a signboard during the building process, the pre-cutting of the panel – as with the ex-kiosk – stripped the board of the ‘original’ commercial purpose. This parallels Sæther’s collages and Marman’s polyptych painting *#521786*, where reworked paper napkins and painted footprints from auctioned shoes generate different meanings. Sæther’s and Marman’s works do not offer the historical ‘truth’; rather, the works render visible how materials, icons, and linguistic forms shift across different models for understanding – from mythical to commercial systems, from manual to machinic production, and from the potato as crop to a globe as a record of the world.

Bertolt Brecht’s 1953 text on Erwin Strittmatter’s play *Katzgraben* addresses the staging of the post-war farming conditions in the German Democratic Republic (Deutsche Demokratische Republik). Brecht comments that in the play the tractor overtakes the ox (*‘der Traktor ersetzt den Ochsen’*) – marking the turn from animal labour to machinic production processes.¹ For Brecht, in addition to staging the overturning of previous farming practices, *Katzgraben* renders a political shift linked to how the systems that structure both human life and human understanding of the world operate. He argues that, through the play, elements like roads and tractors are *‘dichterisch gestaltet’*, writing that ‘prosaic’ elements – such as the potato and the tractor – are recast as ‘poetic’.² In his 1949 work *The History and Social Influence of the Potato*, Redcliffe N. Salaman argues that ‘[p]erhaps the most remarkable of the aliases assumed by the potato is that represented by the term *Pomme de terre* [‘earth apple’] and its various mutations’ – such as the German

¹ Brecht, ‘Erwin Strittmatters *Katzgraben*’, in *Sinn und Form* 5, nos. 3–4 (1953), 101.

² Ibid.

term *Erdapfel*.³ Unlike the apple – represented as the fruit of Paradise in works like Albrecht Dürer's painted panels from 1507 – the potato is not a Christian icon connected to the Fall. Rather, from the 1500s, the *Erdapfel* was linked to the crop's role in European farming as 'almost the sole food of the masses' across parts of the continent.⁴

Apart from the crop, *Erdapfel* is also the title of a terrestrial globe produced in Nuremberg in the 1490s. The *Erdapfel* is a record of the textile trader Martin Behaim's understanding of the world, with various geographical and cosmological works, alongside mythical and astrological material, informing the globe. While lacking the American continent and the poles, the model represents various mythical islands, such as Thule. In his *Naturalis Historia*, Pliny the Elder writes that *Ultima Thule* is the 'farthest of all', treating Thule as the end of the world.⁵ Instead of functioning as a map for navigation, the purpose of Behaim's globe was commercial, providing information on trade and various products and materials such as metals, stones, and textiles. This information, along with mythical islands such as Thule and astrological elements like the zodiac, is represented through icons and text painted on the textile covering the globe's paper-and-glue structure.

Sæther's collages are constructed through a manual process involving cutting and reworking different paper materials. Linking historical paper-making practices and industrial production, paper napkins from the 1960s–1980s and untreated pulp are cast against the textured surfaces of wallcoverings, such as the *strie*, various textiles, and building materials like Leca. In Sæther's collages, elements from the napkins – like printed patterns – and the surfaces of wallcoverings and textiles are thus restaged as part of a different system of meaning, with markings of past lives registered in the material. In the video work *House to live in*, Sæther splices black-and-white shots printed on transparent plastic film, constructing a montage documenting various 1950s and 1960s interiors, wood panels, and Leca-block walls. These shots are intercut with black-and-white shots of Sæther's paper collages – linking the interiors and building materials with the artist's practice and the resulting works. Restaged in the paper collages and video work, elements like the printed napkin patterns and the surface textures of the *strie* and the Leca blocks operate as a form of *Nachleben* ('afterlife'). What marks the afterlife of these elements in Sæther's works is

³ Salaman, 'Names and Aliases', in *The History and Social Influence of the Potato* (Cambridge University Press, 1949), 133.

⁴ Salaman, "'Vertues', Vices and Values', 122.

⁵ Pliny the Elder, *Pliny's Natural History: In Thirty-Seven Books*, book IV, chapter XVI, trans. Philemon Holland (Printed for the Wernerian Club, 1847–48), 37.

not the act of overturning or reproducing the 'original' function and meaning of materials and forms; rather, through the practice of restaging, Sæther renders visible how these elements are in flux.

In Marman's *PRDA*, the first 'A' of the brand's wordmark is lost through the act of reconstructing the pre-cut PRADA signboard. From the brand's role as the Official Supplier of leather products to the Italian Royal Household from 1919 until the 1940s, to becoming a commercial brand during the 1980s with bags produced from industrial materials such as nylon, the PRADA wordmark is connected to different historical systems of meaning. In Marman's work, the wordmark as a commercial icon has an afterlife through *PRDA*. Returning to the German 'earth apple', this afterlife parallels the shifting historical understanding of the term *Erdapfel*. The title of Behaim's globe is linked to the *Reichsapfel* – regalia marking the position of Christian rulers such as Maximilian I; apart from this reference, the recasting of the term during the 1500s generated a linguistic link to the potato. In turn, both Behaim's globe and Marman's *PRDA* render visible how linguistic meaning shifts. From probing linguistic forms, Marman moves to icons and material records in the work *#521786* – a polyptych of nine panels, with footprints as overlapping markings on the painted surfaces. The title of the work references the number of a listing from an online auction, linking the footprints to the resale of a commercial product. Unlike the elements represented on Behaim's globe, the footprints on the painted panels are not commercial icons; rather, the markings operate as a form of *vestigia* – material records of human action.

Instead of overturning or reproducing the 'original' function and meaning of materials, icons, and linguistic forms, Sæther and Marman recast paper napkins, building materials, footprints, and the PRADA signboard through the practices of paper-making, montage, painting, and bricolage. Like the *Erdapfel* (*Reichsapfel* regalia–globe–potato), these forms operate as part of different historical systems of meaning: the commercial and the mythical, the manual and the machinic, the icon and the *vestigia*. While Behaim's globe functions as a record of his understanding of the world, the *Erdapfel* also marks the shift from a world lacking the American continent, the poles, and the potato. Returning to the *ex-kiosk* at Romsås Senter, Sæther and Marman render visible how the systems that structure both human life and human understanding of the world are in flux – as in the paper collages, video work, signboard, and polyptych, where 'prosaic' materials and forms are restaged as 'poetic'.