

HOŠEK CONTEMPORARY

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RASMUS SØNDERGAARD JOHANNSEN - WOUND

Opening reception: 29th July 2022, 7 - 10 pm

Exhibition period: 29th July - 13th August 2022

Curated by Linda Toivio

It all started from a modest family house in Denmark and an aspiration for an appropriate home worthy of welcoming guests. Coming from a humble background, Rasmus Søndergaard Johannsen's grandparents were of limited means, yet as the custom at the time required, a guest living room was an essential feature in any respectable household. This special living room was only reserved for visitors as its purpose was to demonstrate status and wealth. Heavy curtains embellished with tassels were a fundamental design element. Besides rare special occasions, the family members were never allowed to casually spend time in the room or interfere with the precious interior. Hence during 60 years, the curtains were never touched or moved, until Johannsen's grandmother passed away.

Intrigued by the symbolic and decorative role of tassels as well as their similar functions in diverse contexts, Johannsen's fascination is materialising in *Wound*. He is exhibiting three pairs of tassels on an exaggerated scale: one pair from the military realm, one from the domestic sphere and a third pair from the erotic field. Both the tassels and their connecting ropes are entirely hand-made and hand-wound from thin string or leather. The creation of each tassel required several phases, which the artist meticulously learnt during a two-year research and experimentation process. He familiarised himself with new textile and woodwork techniques, but also adapted them for the production of oversized tassels, as they each measure approximately 1,5 metres.

Appearing in a vast range of cultures throughout the world, tassels have been widely used and worn since biblical times, initially for religious purposes, before becoming a frivolous garment or furnishing feature in Europe. In the Middle East for instance, tassels were worn as talismans or to repel demons and protect from evil spirits. In 16th century France, the intriguing art of tassel making was the specialty of *passemmentiers*, who would only master their profession after a seven-year apprenticeship. In some countries, scholars attached tassels to their graduation caps, marking the transition from student to graduate and signalling a certain intellectual superiority. The appearance and symbolism of tassels has evolved over time and while their contemporary purpose is primarily the embellishment of our surroundings, the once artisanal fabrication has mostly been taken over by mass production.

A typical tassel consists of a skirt and a head. The head contains a turned wooden part under the wound string, giving structure and a distinctive shape following the type of tassel or its function. A suspension cord or rope is attached to the top of the head, connecting the tassel to its counterpart. The hanging loose strings form the lower part or the skirt of the tassel, allowing a refined and enticing motion.

In a domestic environment, we find tassels holding draped curtains in place. These decorative tassels draw our gaze to the curtain, while portraying elegance and attention to detail. The curtains would habitually be made of heavy, expensive fabric, such as velvet or damask, and be potentially sensitive to sunlight, dirt and excessive daily handling. Once a

symbol of power for the aristocratic and royal families, tassels were later adopted by ordinary folk; tassels were thought to display wealth and social status, in an effort to showcase a “proper” household. Made from four kilometres of turned ruby red pearl yarn, the domestic tassels presented in the exhibition are a replica of the curtain tassels in the artist’s grandparents’ special living room.

Fashioned with precious looking materials and specific weaving techniques, military tassels indicate a rank and a degree of power. Often seen ornamenting sabres or bayonets, they command respect, admiration or even fear, as they sway from side to side, calling attention to the weapon with each movement. For *Wound*, Johansen is recreating tassels worn by officers in the French military in the 18th century. Both the tassels as well as their connecting rope are made of shimmery gold yarn.

Sophistication, pleasure and pain; erotic tassels offer both visual and tactile dimensions. Hanging from sex toys or BDSM equipment, they insinuate a possibility for new experiences and sensorial stimulations, roleplaying and discipline. The erotic tassel acts as an adornment, drawing attention to the actual object, but it might also metamorphose into a whip, arousing curiosity and imagination. It suggests a power dynamic between the dominant and the submissive, emphasised by the choice of material: black leather. The elaborate rope between the two tassels is hand-braided with five leather strands.

Perceived as superfluous, tassels seemingly exist to alter something, typically embellishing, complementing or giving meaning to another object. They are however, often items of importance, asserting status and dominance, but also empowerment. The ambiguity of the exhibition title reflects the harm that those with power can inflict on others. Authority, status and dominance might lead to the misuse of a position of power, ranging from intimate partner abuse to institutional violence and structural inequalities. *Wound* presents the tassel as the main object, as its role shifts from a defining element to the main subject. Magnified, it is the abnormally large size in particular, which tears it off the background and mundanity, making it the focal point. Here, the artist is focusing on tassels as individual objects in their own right, while at the same time exploring the common denominators of the military, domestic and erotic realms.

Text © Linda Toivio

Hošek Contemporary

Established by Petr Hošek in 2016, Hošek Contemporary is a gallery and art residency located on a historical cargo ship next to Fischerinsel in Mitte, Berlin. The gallery focuses primarily on site-specific pieces, performing arts and experimental sound works. During the spring and summer months, the gallery is hosting weekly improvised and experimental music installations, with local and international musicians.

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