

MATRIX Conrad Atkinson: Dorothy, Jack, Théodore, Diego, and a Horse of a Different Color

October 4 through December 31

A new MATRIX installation by Conrad Atkinson, Dorothy, Jack, Théodore, Diego, and a Horse of a Different Color, will be on view in Gallery 1 from October 4.

Born in England in 1940, Conrad Atkinson is one of the most influential artists of the 1980s and '90s, yet his own work remains little known to the general public. During the 1970s, in Great Britain, Atkinson was extremely active in bridging the concerns of the language- and process-based conceptual art movement with the more politically oriented work of various community arts groups. His work of this period, often produced in conjunction with unions or other labor organizations, became a model for much later art that sought to lessen the proverbial gap between art and life and adopt a more engaged and responsive position. Tim Rollins + Kids of Survival and Group Material, two New York-based art collectives, among others, trace their origins to Atkinson's influence.

For Atkinson, who has been on the faculty in the Department of Art at UC Davis since 1992, this exhibition will provide an opportunity to create a major new work based on his first-hand observations of America. "The installation attempts to deal with the idea of migration and its metaphors in culture," writes Atkinson. "It attempts to show how the complex issues of 'home' and 'immigration' are central to our society today and have particular relevance to California at the present time." The piece will weave together images and metaphors drawn from four primary sources: Frank Baum's book *The Wizard of Oz*, the writings of Oakland native Jack London, Théodore Géricault's monumental history painting *The Raft of the Medusa*, and Diego Velázquez's painting *Las Meninas*.

Using these disparate references, Atkinson intends to "critique nationalisms and xenophobias [as well as] argue for the position of the artist as both central to and in dialogue with society." *The Raft of the Medusa* of 1818-19, for example,



which appears simply to represent the survivors of a famous shipwreck, is loaded with metaphor and allegory and was, for Géricault, a work very much made in the spirit of social engagement.

Atkinson writes: "*The Raft of the Medusa* as an event [was] a...criticism of the contemporary lack of enthusiasm for change [and] inability to develop a critique of existing conditions. The metaphor of *The Raft of the Medusa* revolves around the idea of migration and, in a sense, the cutting adrift of a wide range of

peoples across the world by the major powers; a similar notion in the 1970s was Kissinger's much-discussed 'Lifeboat Theory,' related to aid, whereby nations which weren't considered viable, e.g., Bangladesh, would be thrown out of the lifeboat of Western aid processes.

"The methodology that Géricault used is surprisingly contemporary and completely at odds with the myth of the romantic isolated artist....[H]e interviewed survivors...he interviewed the surgeon who survived to discuss the diseases and the physical states of the survivors on the raft...he commissioned the ship's carpenter to rebuild the raft as he had originally built it on the ship. Géricault was well aware that he was competing with the newspapers in his view of the event. He behaved like an investigative reporter and his was a public investigation. He even painted it in public with such spectators as Delacroix visiting to watch."

Lawrence Rinder
Curator

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Public Programs

Artist's Talk

Wednesday, October 4, noon
Gallery 1
Free with museum admission

Above left: Conrad Atkinson: detail of sketch for MATRIX installation, 1995.