

# Maude Léonard-Contant & Monia Ben Hamouda NYX

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Milano

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Category

Art, Exhibition

## NYX

### Maude Léonard-Contant & Monia Ben Hamouda

The exhibition *NYX* at Istituto Svizzero in Milan arises from a deep dialogue between artists Maude Léonard-Contant and Monia Ben Hamouda, drawing inspiration from the mythological figure of Nyx, the Greek goddess of night and chaos, and Anne Carson's book *Nox*, which delves into themes of pain and loss. These influences merge to create an exhibition that explores the complexity of language and memory as means to express the ineffable and untranslatable.

Maude, born in a multilingual environment and shaped by her personal experiences, creates sculptures that bear witness to her memories and emotions. Her works, crafted on a base of medicinal pink clay, incorporate texts and materials evoking places and significant moments of her life, such as oxidized steel sheet, rooster and peacock feathers, and Himalayan salt. Each element is carefully chosen to evoke sensations and images tied to her childhood and past experiences, and the way Maude manipulates materials reflects a deep and emotional connection to her work.

In her work, Monia repeatedly deals with the meaning of language or the untranslatability of certain words (but also feelings). Her new work developed for the exhibition is a radical gesture: the artist dispenses with the forms from Arabic calligraphy often used up to now and plays with the visual and sensual power of turmeric.

In the second exhibition space, Monia's drawings and Maude's two small sculptures offer a more intimate and introspective atmosphere. These works continue to explore the theme of language and memory, inviting the viewer to delve into the depths of the human experience and confront the challenge of expressing the inexpressible through words.

**Maude Léonard-Contant** (1979, Joliette) originally from the Lanaudière region (Canada/Turtle Island), formerly Atikamekw territory, has been living in Switzerland since 2013. Her chosen territories since relocation are Central Switzerland, Poschiavo and Basel, where she works and raises her family. Her artistic work is fuelled by a back-and-forth between language and matter, as well as by reminiscences of a time when the more-than-humans ruled her life. She studied in Montreal (UQAM, Concordia University) and Glasgow (Glasgow School of Art). She is the recipient of several awards including the Frey-Näpflin Foundation's work year and UBS Foundation recognition grant, the Spot on Prize, the Christina Spoerri Prize, and the Prize of the Lucerne Kunstgesellschaft. She has exhibited her work in different venues, among others: Museum of Fine Arts Chur; Kunsthalle Basel; Mayday, Basel; Swiss Art Awards, Basel; Darling Foundry, Montreal; Abrons Art Center, NYC; Tramway, Glasgow; and recently held solo exhibitions at Kunstmuseum Luzern (2023) and Kunsthau Baselland (2022).

**Monia Ben Hamouda** (1991, Milan) is a Tunisian-Italian visual artist, based between Milan and al-Qayrawan. She earned a BFA at Brera Academy of Fine Art in Milan. Her work was exhibited in venues like: Kunsthalle Wien, Wien; MAXXI, Rome; MUDEC, Milan; FRAC Bretagne, Rennes; MUSEION, Bozen; MACRO, Rome; La Casa Encendida, Madrid; ChertLüdde, Berlin; Kunsthalle Mainz, Mainz; Ar/ge Kunst, Bozen. She is currently a finalist in the Maxxi Bvlgari Prize 2024. She was awarded the Vordemberge-Gildewart Foundation Grant (2024), the Italian Council for Contemporary Art (2023), the Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant (2022), the Art Business Accelerator Grant (2020) and the Ducato Contemporary Art Prize (Special award, 2021); she was also a finalist of the Club Gamec Prize VI (2022). Her work is featured in public collections such as: MAXXI, Rome; FRAC Bretagne, Rennes; MACRO, Rome; FRAC Corsica, Corse.

## NYX

### Maude Léonard-Contant & Monia Ben Hamouda

Nyx is the Greek goddess of the night. She was born from chaos and emerges from the ocean each evening. She has lent us her name for this double exhibition featuring Maude Léonard-Contant and Monia Ben Hamouda. The exhibition title, *NYX*, was conceived during an email exchange with the two artists. An exchange of ideas between Basel, Milan and Rome. The title also draws inspiration from Anne Carson's book *Nox*, where the Canadian author and poet explores themes of grief and loss, crafting an elegy on her brother's death, even though "Words cannot add to it." Maude shares Anne Carson's Canadian roots and a penchant for cold and ice, and both artists share the poet's preoccupation with language as a (sometimes inadequate) artistic material. In discussing language, the Roman *Nox* became *NYX*. More an image than a word, it embodies the night and the potential of chaos, as well as a creative moment—a resurgence from darkness. For Maude and Monia, the goddess Nyx is also linked to death and healing processes, themes that have preoccupied both artists in recent months, which resonate in their new works produced for this exhibition. Furthermore, there is a notion that the goddess herself is watching over the exhibition project, perhaps having once endowed us with the language and words we use to think, speak and write about this project. Maude and Monia both grew up between languages. Maude's mother tongue is Canadian French; later she studied in English. Today she lives in German-speaking Switzerland, engaging with the German (that she speaks) and Swiss German of the people around her. Monia is the daughter of an Italian mother and a Tunisian father, and grew up speaking Italian in Milan. She knows Tunisian Arabic from long summer vacations in her father's homeland. For Maude and Monia, their installations, sculptures, paintings and drawings are also a means of communication. Moreover, the written word was central to the collaborative evolution of *NYX*. I think we all share a great sensitivity for language. And yet, we all sometimes lack the words to express our emotions or vulnerabilities. This, too, is addressed in *NYX*. In Maude's practice, language often serves as the initial catalyst. "Language", she tells Monia and me, "helps me to find forms." Writing for her frequently replaces sketching. For the exhibition in Milan, Maude developed new sculptures, each resting upon a foundation of pink medicinal clay ("sitting",

as Maude puts it, adding that clay is the colour of the soil it comes from, and that she only recently discovered the pink earth). The installation is nourished by three texts in which Maude interweaves memories of growing up, specific places and figures from her childhood, and three deaths (of a tree, a neighbour named Laval, and a chicken). Fragments of these narratives can be found in the titles of her works and in her sculptures, where inverted letters occasionally coalesce into words and sentences. These letters are crafted from sheet metal and dusted with a delicate layer of pink clay. Maude originally wanted to use honey as an adhesive for the clay, but it didn't stick to the metal, so she ended up using Vaseline. Maude writes me that she actually has somewhat of an aversion to Vaseline, but while applying the petroleum jelly to the letters, she realized the tenderness of this gesture: the healing earth and the care towards her sculptures. Exploring and learning from materials are important to the artist. She develops close relationships with her "beloved materials" as she writes to me, viewing them as vessels of emotional resonance intertwined with memories and an immediate haptic engagement through touch and manipulation. The roster of materials employed in the creation of the sculptures evokes a myriad of associations and realms: pleated organza, poppy blossoms, peacock and cock feathers, Himalayan salt, selenite (a translucent crystal), oxidized sheet steel, and porcupine quills. For Maude, each material is tethered to places and memories: the corrugated roof of her family's sheepfold, the crystals ingested by her neighbour (an almost mythical figure), the salt from the lickstones that the cows formed into sculptures with their tongues, the healing earth that her mother used to heal wounds, the poppy flowers from the garden, whose effect is healing or harmful depending on the dosage, or the silty bed of the river where Maude swam as a child. "I must admit," Maude wrote me a few days ago, "I don't yet know what effect this work will have." According to Maude, the sculpture group could be a kind of ritualistic space whose energetic presence permeates the exhibition space and beyond. The letter sculptures ("Oh, what a flood last summer", "Unfathomable volumes of water", and "Sieh mich ein letztes Mal an!" ('Look at me one last time!') I have never been that high in July") evoke the mighty force of expansive bodies of water. My mind wanders to the liminal zone between water and land, where the sea meets the shore. The substrate of scattered medicinal clay reminds me of this mutable terrain.

Some of the sculptures seem to be marooned, or emerge from the sand like ethereal apparitions (or memories?). Maude's works are always about excavation, about revealing the hidden (from the sand, from memory). Perhaps these sculptures also allude to language itself: its capacity to solidify memories, to fix them (like the sentences surfacing from the sand), and yet its inherent inadequacy in capturing certain emotions in words. The muddy riverbed beneath my feet, the feeling of running my fingers over silk.

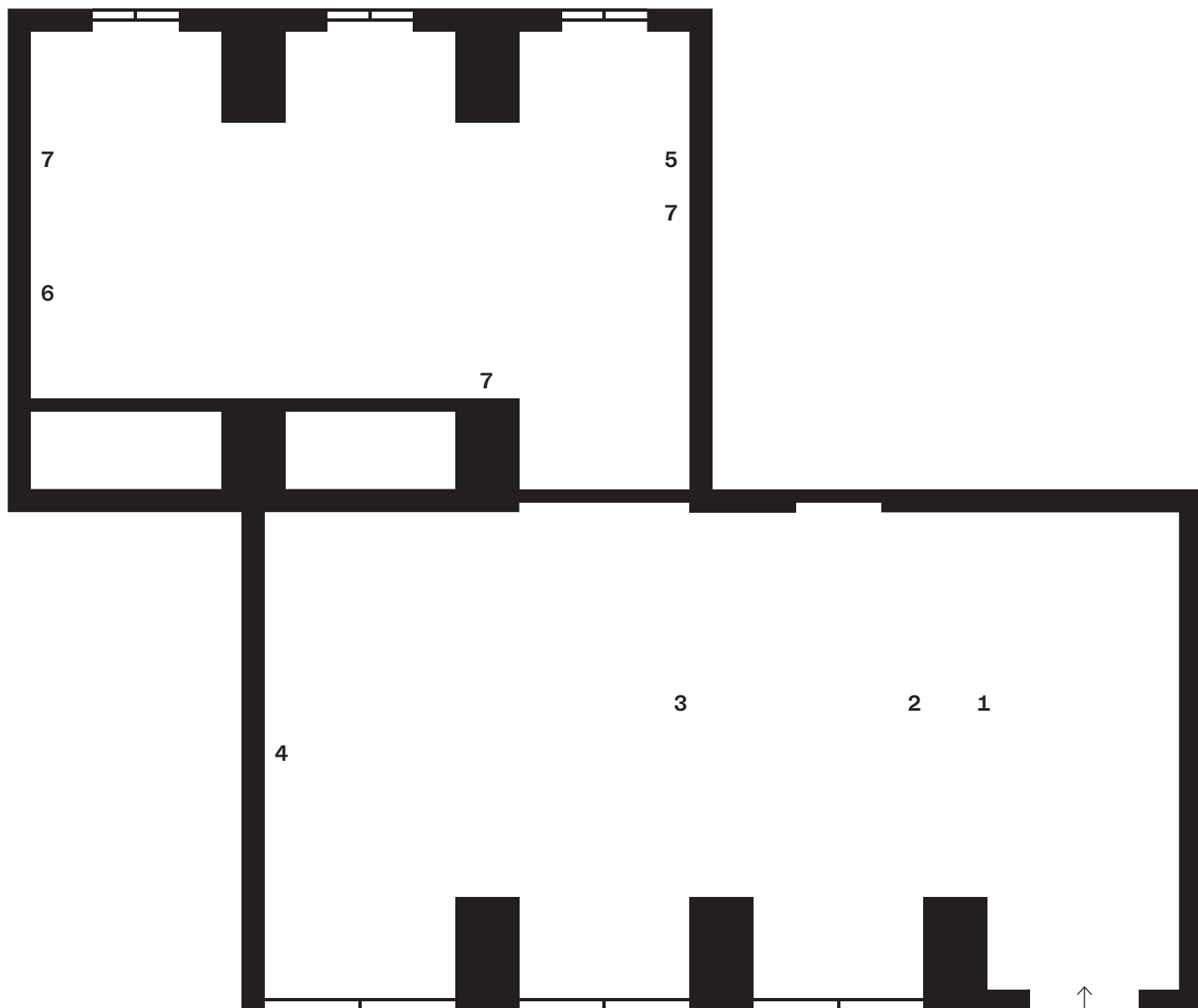
The area between Maude's installation and Monia's work serves as a zone of transition, or also contamination. A pivotal aspect in the collaborative development of this exhibition was exploring how the two works engage in a dialogue with each other, how they contaminate each other (in a positive sense). The turmeric from Monia's work *Burial of all meanings* leaves delicate yellow traces that mingle in places with the pink-hued medicinal clay and on Maude's sculptures, which, in turn, cast their stories onto the yellow-painted wall.

Monia's artistic works frequently delve into her bi-cultural and bilingual life (and their associated biases and misunderstandings). Through her father, she has learned about Arabic calligraphy, a prominent facet of Islamic art emerging from Arabic script and the context of image prohibition in Islam, in which texts (often from the Koran) become an ornamental image. For several years now, Monia has channelled her interest in calligraphy into her installations. She employs laser-cut steel shapes oscillating between image and writing, between precise forms and painterly abstraction, between drawing and sculpture, and combines them with spices (turmeric, cinnamon or chilli powder) that provide a visual and olfactory context. Her new work *Burial of all meanings* builds upon these gestures in an even more radical way: the installation, with its fragrant, vibrant yellow turmeric, is created using a concrete mixer. The shapes and traces of the spice on the wall and floor could only be controlled to a limited extent; the machine's rotating movements suggest a sense of violence. The abstracted characters have vanished. Their absence is also an expression of Monia's struggle with language, seeking the 'right' words given the state of the world. In a Zoom call, Monia tells Maude and me about the untranslatability of the Arabic word 'qaher', often translated as 'anger' but actually encapsulating a sense of persistent, indignant powerlessness in the face of oppression and racism. The limits of language. The impossibility

of adequately expressing emotions with words. For Monia, *Burial of all meanings* is also a reflection on her own position as an artist, grappling with her privilege of being able to voice dissent with her voice and through her works, and the frustration of linguistic inadequacies and how statements can be misunderstood, mistranslated or instrumentalized. The turmeric, with its anti-inflammatory and fortifying attributes, serves as a reminder of moments of healing and care. Similar to Maude, who carefully rubs the tin letters with Vaseline, *Burial of all meanings* also demands Monia's care and attention—the spice must be repeatedly replenished throughout the duration of the exhibition.

The second exhibition space serves as a kind of counter-space: the grand, sweeping gesture of the large hall gives way here to an atmosphere of intimacy and introspection. Monia's small-format drawings function as exercises of the hand and mind. They emerge quickly from the direct movement of her drawing hand, guided by intuition and with minimal influence from conscious thought. Perhaps they are an attempt to capture emotions directly from the body through the hands onto paper. Maude's two small sculptures—*How the heat wilts my silks* and *Giving her utmost at dressing the dead chicken*—are partly wrapped in silk. Their circular forms and entwined feathers echo the lines of Monia's drawings. "Tongues of fire," remarks Maude. Tongues of fire—for memories, experiences and emotions that we cannot always describe with words alone, that find no place in the sometimes rigid forms of our languages. Tongues of fire that speak to the state of the world. Something is burning in my mind, and the turmeric itches pleasantly unpleasantly in my nose.

Gioia Dal Molin, May 2024



- 1**  
Maude Léonard-Contant  
*A*, 2024  
Fluorite, Himalaya salt, selenite, tempered steel  
5 × 29 × 40 cm
- 2**  
Maude Léonard-Contant  
*Unfathomable volumes of water*, 2024  
Engobe, glazed stoneware
- 3**  
Maude Léonard-Contant  
*Oh, what a flood last summer*, 2024  
Galvanized steel letters in various sizes,  
coated with healing clay, poppy petals, cattails fruits
- 4**  
Monia Ben Hamouda  
*Burial of all meanings*, 2024  
Steel, iron, engine, turmeric, enamel  
Dimensions variable

- 5**  
Maude Léonard-Contant  
*How the heat wilts my silks*, 2024  
Glazed stoneware, pleated silk organza, porcupine quills,  
dupion silk, silk cocoons  
15 × 48 × 35 cm
- 6**  
Maude Léonard-Contant  
*Giving her utmost at dressing the dead chicken*, 2024  
Peacock feathers, porcupine quills, rooster feathers, silk, stoneware  
13 × 50 × 35 cm
- 7**  
Monia Ben Hamouda  
*Rage moving through generations*, 2024  
Charcoal, oil pastels, ink on ivory paper  
29.7 × 21 cm