

IN SEARCH OF THE MIRACULOUS

Press release - by Amy Gadola

The allegory of the ship of fools originates from Book VI of Plato's *Republic*, in which a dysfunctional crew, overconfident in their maritime capacities, mutiny, take possession of a ship, and make free with the stores; thus eating and drinking, they proceed on their voyage in such a manner as might be expected of them.

The concept comprises the framework of the 15th-century book *Ship of Fools* by Sebastian Brant, which served as the inspiration for Hieronymus Bosch's painting, *Ship of Fools*: a ship—an entire fleet at first—sets sail from Basel, bound for the Paradise of Fools. In Bosch's painting, a cast of characters sail aboard a small boat, a slender tree taking the place of a mast. In the center, a nun and a monk are trying to eat a *crepe* without using their hands as they are observed by the two oarsmen. Peripherally, the rest of the crew play havoc: a woman strikes a supine drinker, a man is trying to catch a roaster goose, a swimmer reaches toward a plate for more food, a man vomits. But in this malarkey, the only one who remains calm is the Fool himself. Turning his back to the madness, the fool contemplates his own plate, and his own fate, in solitude.

The cultural motif of the ship of fools belongs to a robust Renaissance tradition of multidisciplinary compositions romanticizing a maritime voyage that would bring a crew of imaginary heroes, ethical models, or social types, if not fortune, then at least the figure of their destiny or their truth (see: the *Ship of Princes and Battles of Nobility*, 1502; the *Ship of Virtuous Ladies*, 1503; the *Ship of Health*, 1413). The paradigm of the ship of fools stands alone, however, in that it is the only vessel that had a real existence. A custom quite common to Germany and Flanders, madmen were handed over to boatmen, the seamen instructed to rid a particular city of problematic denizens. Sent along the Rhineland rivers, the cities of Europe must have often seen these "ships of fools" approaching their harbors.

Michel Foucault explores at length of this expulsion practice in his tome *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. He writes:

[There are] many signs that the expulsion of madmen had become one of a number of ritual exiles ... Thus we better understand the curious implication assigned to the navigation of madmen and the prestige attending it. On the one hand, we must not minimize its incontestable practical effectiveness: to hand a madman over to sailors was to be permanently sure he would not be prowling beneath the city walls; it made sure that he would go far away; it made him a prisoner of his own departure. But water adds to this dark mass of its own values; it carries off, but it does more: it purifies. Navigation delivers man to the uncertainty of fate; on water, each of us is in the hands of his own destiny; every embarkation is, potentially, the last. It is for the other world that the madman sets sail in his fools' boat; it is from the other world that he comes when he disembarks ... Confined on the ship, from which there is no escape, the madman is delivered to the river with its thousand arms, the sea with its thousand roads, to that great uncertainty external to everything. He is a prisoner in the midst of what is the freest, the openest of routes: bound fast at the infinite crossroads ... The land he will come to is unknown—as is, once he disembarks, the land from which he comes. He has his truth and his homeland only in that fruitless expanse between two countries that cannot belong to him.

This disconnect of water and land—the disambiguation of where man controls fate and destiny and where he does not—is ubiquitous in visual history. From Turner to Géricault to Homer, the irrational seeps into the image of the seascape. It was Bas Jan Ader's interest in fate, failure, adventure, and absence that led him on his ill-fated journey to cross the Atlantic—an attempt to search for that which lies between his life in the U.S. and his birthplace of the Netherlands—in a 12-foot sailboat, a choir performing in his Los Angeles gallery as he departed. But this disconnect also has profound implications in terms of contemporary life, in which migrants at sea are trapped between lands in which they cannot stay and lands in which they are unwelcome.

Incorporating painting, video, and performance, *In Search of the Miraculous* will take its title from Ader's accursed final project while also drawing upon the rich tradition of maritime painting that seeks to understand both the magical and the irrational of the sea through the solitary figure at the mercy of a body of water. *In Search of the Miraculous* will also explore the precariousness of migration; of what it means to leave one land for another and how the sea becomes both a prison and a homeland.