The False Arch

In architecture, an arch can either be considered true (a load bearing arch held together by compression) or false (an arch that has no structural purpose). It's similar metrics of truth and falsehood, legitimacy and lies, that Krystel Geerts makes her currency at her exhibition *Building of A Memory* at Museum Folkwang, Essen.

The Ancient Romans popularised and refined the load bearing 'true' arch in the fourth century BC and, by the first century AD, the Roman Empire was using false 'triumphal' arches to commemorate military victories, honour Roman emperors or mark the founding of new colonies. The arch had become a symbol of power; a tool for propaganda. Geerts' *La Chimera, 2024* formally assumes the aesthetic of a Baroque archway, a movement founded and spearheaded by the Catholic church in 17th century Italy with the explicit intention of inspiring Catholic faith in the face of Protestant reformation. Baroque architecture centered drama, emotion and ornament: a counterpoint to the reserved simplicity of Protestant architecture. Staying in Italy but in more recent history, the fascist architecture of the 1920's to 40's was utilised as a tool for propaganda by Mussolini's regime. For example, Rome's Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana (Palace of Italian Civilization), a limestone cube with 54 arches on each face, is considered a monument to the regime. It has been observed that the six levels of the building mirror the six letters in 'Benito' with the nine arches on each level corresponding to 'Mussolini'. The display and amplification of state power through the monument is clear.

Propaganda doesn't concern itself with truth, it trades in bias and prejudice rather than honesty and good faith. The archways of propaganda — from the Ancient Romans to Mussolini — have disregarded truth whether load bearing or not. It is these contradictions, both historic and contemporary, that Geerts reflects upon in the creation of her own architectural falsifications. On first impressions her arch *La Chimera* appears meticulously carved from stone, standing mighty at Museum Folkwang. The often modern materials Geerts employs are formed in such a way to create the illusion of endurance and robustness, blurring lines between tradition and experiment, and as a viewer draws closer to *La Chimera* the deception becomes clear. The arch is hollow and made from resin, the ornament is revealed to be crudely formed and misshapen, not expertly carved. The Chimera in Greek mythology was a beast composed of different animals: part lion, part goat, part snake. Geert's works are similarly hybridised, with intentional ambiguity around their makeup. The artist draws from a pictorial archive of architectural elements to create her own Chimeras. She borrows from architectural movements or styles across history and geography, producing works that are timeless as they are placeless — only ever a sum of parts.

Geerts considers *La Chimera* as a broken arch, neither structurally sound nor conventionally ornamental, but her intention is not to create sculpture that simply deceives. By breaking these historical constructs of strength and beauty in a formal capacity, Geerts questions these same dynamics in contemporary culture. Baroque architecture was designed to instill reverence, Geerts' constructions attempt to interrupt that very intention. She tells me: *"In contemporary society, capital and media have taken on a similar role. Spectacle is still used to shape belief*

*systems, but now in service of corporate and political agendas. Advertising and digital aesthetics function as new forms of worship, constructing meaning and dictating narratives."*
Geerts' practice is anti-spectacle. That is not to say her work doesn't impress — it absolutely does — only that the spectacle isn't performed in the way you'd first expect. Ornamental false archways, designed to be spectacular, imply a freedom of movement, a transitory liberty, but many of the empires and regimes that have employed the arch as a symbol of freedom could be seen as the most unfree. The triumphal arch can offer an illusionary, rather than an actualised, sense of liberty.

If Geerts' arches allude to a perceived freedom, her fence series instead carries the aesthetics of captivity and division. In the late 1980s & early 90's, amidst the collapse of the Berlin wall, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the first Gulf War, Cady Noland began her work on barriers and blockades; a subject matter she continues to tackle to this day. It's easy to imagine that this redrawing of international borders, shifting geopolitical power and newly found pseudo-accessibility was informing the conception of Noland's work at the time. For *Industrial Park, 1991* (most recently shown at her 2019 retrospective at Frankfurt's MMK), Noland installed a chain link fence extending out from a wall of the gallery. Her fence didn't render any areas inaccessible but it did determine how we, as viewers, could transit through space. Geert's *Fence I & II*, *both 2025*, borrow the form of real fences — designed in the most-part to keep people out or in — only with a revised design: lacking the capacity to restrict or divide. Materially, they are made from delicate fired porcelain and, in the Folkwang exhibition, they hang on the walls instead of cutting into the gallery. The fragility of Geert's fences and the lacking architectural intervention speak to the irrelevance of transitory freedom on a geo-political level: if a people are imprisoned what use is freedom of movement through a place of confinement?

Much like the global upheaval that Noland experienced in the 80s, present day borders are being redefined according to international hierarchies. For hegemonistic powers, borders are increasingly irrelevant: they're lines to be encroached upon or revoked when it suits them, often at the expense of nations without the means to resist. Geerts's output is no-doubt informed by these global upheavals but of course from a position of relative safety as an artist living and working in Europe. Its Western governments who maintain their own hegemony by stifling countries with less power and It's therefore in the context of the European art institution that Geerts' work may hold the most power to challenge.

Geerts is interested in highlighting and unsettling one's usual expectations. For *La Chimera* it's the expectation of strength in material and beauty in ornament that is under scrutiny. For Fence I it's the functionality of the fence that is brought into question through the beautification of her barriers. In Building of A Memory and across her practice, Geert builds her own false constructions: architectural additions and/or subtractions designed to have no structural integrity. Her output exists instead to challenge preconceptions of boundaries and hierarchies that govern space. She utilises the microcosm of the gallery or exhibition space as a conduit to consider the macro: borders, power structures and liberty.