



A sculpture for the Ahmed Family

/Chris Evans im REC

A sculpture, a colour photograph, and two framed letters make up Chris Evans' solo exhibition in the exclusive small space REC on Liniestraße. Initially, it may resemble the mixture of conceptualism and formal play that one often encounters in galleries these days, but there is a lot more to it than that. "A Sculpture for the Ahmed Family" (2005/2006) is a continuation of Evans' self-willed investigations into the relationship between artist and patron. Previously he has asked such unconventional collaborators as police officers to conceive a part of his work ("The Rock and the Judge", 2005) and directors of multinational corporations to come up with designs for public sculptures ("Radical Loyalty", 2002–2005). Unlike spectacular projects such as those undertaken by "The Yes Men", for example, it is not about sleeping with the enemy in order to reveal his inhuman intentions. Evans' work is situated somewhere beyond political correctness, posing sophisticated questions about the conditions under which art is being produced and, in this case, attacking cultural (mis)interpretations from a surprising angle.

"A Sculpture for the Ahmed Family" is based on his personal encounter with justice Syed Refatt Ahmed, who belongs to one of the richest families in Bangladesh. Discussing the family's influence within Bangladeshi society in relation to the country's faltering democracy, Ahmed talked about "rising above all that is commonplace and forging a neutral and passive path through the polarities". We learn this from the correspondence between Evans and Ahmed that effectively provides us with the key facts behind the rest of the exhibition: Ahmed's mother – an imposing figure portrayed in the photograph – has suggested the Banyan tree as an appropriate metaphor for the family, and the small black plaster sculpture in the middle of the space depicts the

tree. Considering that, according to Hindu mythology, the Banyan tree represents eternal life due to its seemingly ever-expanding branches, this choice is hardly surprising. However, Evans expresses scepticism in his letter since he has learned that the tree is also known as the 'strangler fig': its roots gradually spread around a host tree, which it occasionally kills. Grateful for Evans' investigations, Ahmed hopes that "this will not detract from the benevolent picture my mother was attempting to draw in using that analogy". The work deals with different ideas of self-representation and the genre of portrait. There is an interesting correspondence between the almost fragile model of the Banyan tree – appearing as anything but powerful and enduring – and the photograph of Mrs Ahmed. Dressed in sari and sunglasses, she strikes a formidable pose, seated in an armchair in front of several framed portraits of other Ahmed family members – all of them male.

As already mentioned, it is not the first time that Evans has subverted the idea of an artist-commission, approaching what might be considered as centres of power in terms of money and influence, and asking them to submit the proposal for what in the end becomes stereotypical "art works" – in this case the sculpture. But in fact the work as such takes place around the sculpture, as the photo and the letters form equally important parts of it. At one point I found myself wondering whether the whole story might be fake, but considering Evans' previous projects and his specific working method this seems most unlikely. Even though there is a great deal of humour involved, the straightforward and sincere manner in which he pursues and concludes his projects form an important part of their qualities.

Henrikke Nielsen

Chris Evans, REC, Liniestraße 85, 24.11.2006–20.01.2007