

## **Conventional Signs**

**Ilona Balaga**

Conventional Signs – an iconic conceptual combination, that also embodies the need to decode meanings, creating dilemmas within our spheres of consensus or lack of consent. Where is the line drawn between the spaces of fantasy where signs and symbols function freely without commitment, and between daily reality, in which sign and symbol have active and binding functions of instruction and warning?

Ilona Balaga extracts Mickey Mouse from the world of fantasy, forcing him to land on reality's solid ground. He is no longer wearing the magician's hat; his headgear is now a hat transformed into an urban traffic signal, marked in the language of symbols and signs that regulate, permit, warn, and limit our movement. The symbols only resonate the larger mechanisms of control, but the space is controlled and monitored consistently through technological means and human statistics. Mickey is entrapped by a mechanism of force and control.

Balaga freezes Mickey Mouse as a mask on the wall between two fluorescent cones of separation and distancing, appearing as an icon in the Museum's "apsis." The mask, in its stagnant state on the wall, is expropriated from the Magic Kingdom, taking on all markers of myth. Mickey's two white-gloved hands implanted in the fluorescent traffic cones, wave at people or call for help. Balaga "booby-traps" the interval between reality and imaginary.

In the tone of the interval and at the point of animated encounter lies the conflict. The signs are camouflaged as paintings and the paintings are disguised as signs, shifting in opposite directions. In a mixture of languages, the painting is placed at the edge of the abyss of representation; a geometry of control and instruction in contrast to the painting's iconic abstract. The road signs are painted with considerable blur, traces

of the mighty flood that violates the sign's geometric graphics. Like the fusion between abstraction and flooding, the painting lives and breathes the great flood that has just passed. An ecological apocalyptic vision.

A recreated enlarged drawing by Leonardo da Vinci in which Mickey Mouse's paws are assimilated into the waves of floodwaters connects fantasy with prophetic vision. The act of washing continues with black ink covering the faces of the children who are members of the Mickey Mouse Club.

Balaga leads us through the pathways of fantasy and their signing systems, then brings us back to reality. The adorable image of Mickey Mouse that was part of the childhood narrative for many of us, is stripped of its magic and heroic role to become just one more cultural sign. Through it, Balaga raises issues of signs and conventions, pointing to mechanisms of control and their covert and overt language of symbols resonating through consciousness.

**Avi Ifergan**