

CHELSEA SMILES

Smiling is one of the most complex forms of human communication and can be ambiguous in its meaning. Our everyday polite smile serves our social needs, as it has its roots in ape's gestures of servility. Teeth, once our ancestor's weapons, have now become modern status symbol. Disgusting and beautiful at the same time, teasing and erotic, and still threatening. A smile can be artificial, intentionally done, or can truthfully express pleasure and happiness. Moussa Kone developed this huge installation of drawings entitled *chelsea smiles* (formally based on one drawing from his *diabelli* series, 2011) while he was on artist residency in New York from 2012 to 2013. At that time he was regularly visiting the gallery opening nights in Chelsea, Manhattan's gallery district, where "*brilliant smiles were all around*", according to Moussa Kone. His artist studio was located in a more remote area of the city, where these types of smiles were rather scarce.

Finishing the series, by chance the artist heard of a method of torture which is called the *Chelsea Grin*. It is more a modern myth than reality, said to have been invented by London's gang scene and appeared in pop-cultural movies. The wounds achieved by cutting one's cheeks from the corners of the mouth upwards towards the ears result in a permanent scar. The *chelsea smiles* in this sense also describe the ambiguity of being an artist, confronted with various expectations and serving the needs of the art business. The wave-like movement created through a thoroughly order of the single drawings reflects the process of transmission in society, "*how values are passed on from one individual to the other, how we are affected by whom and what surrounds us*" (Moussa Kone). The artist creates an abstract pattern by placing the sets of teeth on different areas of the paper. In the combination of several drawings this lays down tracks of social interaction and exhibits on a larger scale the connections and the space in between the single drawings.

The series with its vast contrasts of black and white areas is defined by the gentle transition from light into darkness. For this purpose Moussa Kone is using the classical techniques of crosshatching with pen and ink, creating a subtle but strong shining around the white areas on the paper, transcending softly into the black of the pigmented Indian ink, applied with a big brush. It is a perfect example how opposing sides can be unified in one image in a constant state of struggle. They mutually imply each other and finally belong together without ever becoming resolved. Moussa Kone leaves it to the viewer to decide how to respond correctly to the *chelsea smiles* and where oneself can get into line. Will you smile back?

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