

NATHALIE DJURBERG & HANS BERG
A JOURNEY THROUGH MUD AND CONFUSION WITH
SMALL GLIMPSES OF AIR

FEBRUARY 28 – MAY 26, 2019

WALL PANELS OF THE EXHIBITION

INTRODUCTION

Nathalie Djurberg and Hans Berg create animated worlds with sculptures, sound, and moving images, capturing inner states—the deepest darkness, the wildest euphoria. The films show us feverish daydreams about roleplay and desire, full of comedy and darkness and set to hypnotic music. They overturn any notions of normality as well as our understanding of memory, time, and space. Djurberg uses stop motion, a laborious animation method in which a series of stills gives the illusion of movement. It is a process without a script, carried out in close dialogue with Berg, whose music adds layers of meaning.

The exhibition moves through archetypal landscapes—the dark forest, the illuminated stage, the closed chamber. In these ominous settings, dramas unfold between the figures, in which they experience painful or also grotesque situations, driven by unconscious, inner desires. Viewers thus directly take a voyeuristic perspective and have to find a way to relate to the excesses and vulnerability of the figures. Just as the title of the exhibition, *A Journey Through Mud and Confusion with Small Glimpses of Air* indicates, the works depict a meandering voyage through labyrinthine underworlds, up into light and air, and back down into the shadows—through wallpapered rooms and underbrush, coiling music loops and wormholes in time. For the two Swedish artists, this is their first large-scale survey exhibition in Germany. In addition to a look back at older videos, the exhibition presents a number of large installations that have rarely been displayed as well as more recent works, which also include a virtual reality environment.

THE PARADE

A large flock of birds—pelicans, flamingos, turkeys, eagles, a dodo, and a snowy owl—parades on what looks like an illuminated stage. Their body structures are varied. Feathered lumps totter on graceful legs, strut on short stumps, spread their wings, flap and squawk. These brightly colored sculptures consist of simple materials, such as painted canvas, wire and clay, with visible traces of how they were made.

People are said to resemble birds. Inversely, the poses and gestures of the birds in *The Parade* (2013) seem human. But birds, which developed from dinosaurs, existed long before humans, and connect us to something primordial and frightening. The two foppish men in bird masks tiptoeing around the woman's body in *I Wasn't Made to Play the Son*, one of the five films that are included in *The Parade*, seem to be driven by primitive urges and sadistic desires as they cut out parts of the woman's body and yank out her teeth. What takes place is clearly not "for real," yet the visualization of repressed aggressions overwhelms the viewer. The violent scene reflects vulnerability and power struggles in our contemporary world.

It is the medium of colorful modeling clay, which is generally associated more with the realm of children, that first gives the artists the chance to show human—for the most part inhibited—misbehavior with its most abysmal facets. What also arises from this for viewers is another state of tension, which is shown in the discrepancy between the playful medium and the scene actually presented, which takes place in the realm of adults and is thus again "real" or "authentic."

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FILM SPACE

In this space, a selection of early animations from 2004 to 2012 is presented. Poetic, humorous worlds are soon transformed into scenes of violence, bestiality, sadism, and oppression, in which victims become executioners. Transformation and the relation to nature are central topics in many of the films, such as *Turn into Me* (2008), in which the forest blithely reclaims a dead body, and *Putting Down the Prey* (2008), where the hunter takes the shape of the killed walrus.

There is no lack of social satire in these works. *The Parade of Rituals and Stereotypes* (2012) stages a host of strongly characterized figures—judges in beauty contests, provocative young women, and personalities from the religious world—who perform absurd rituals in an imaginary world dominated by frivolity and the emptiness of appearance. In *Tiger Licking Girl's Butt* (2004), a tiger repeatedly licks a girl's bottom in a pink bedroom, while the question appears: "Why do I have this urge to do these things over and over again?" In *Florentin* (2004), the familial atmosphere of a playful moment between a father and his two little daughters becomes increasingly ambiguous; the boundary between play and punishment, jealousy and perversion is delicate.

THE POTATO

The Potato (2008) resembles a mythical beast. Here, the cave reappears as the backdrop for a scenographic sculpture, with cavities where three dark films are screened. In *Once Removed on My Mother's Side*, the demented, hopelessly repulsive mother practically smothers her stunted daughter and caregiver. *It's the Mother* is a nightmarish scene in which a mother is overpowered by her children, who one-by-one push their way into her womb and back to an unborn state. *We are Not Two, We are One*, in which a boy who is conjoined at the hip with a bushy wolf tries to cope with life, also focuses on ambiguous identity. Traumas and assaults, deviations and compulsive behaviors recur in the works. Alienation constantly lies just under the surface. As a whole, these works convey the impression of tangled, impenetrable underbrush, a subconscious that we can only master with difficulty.

THE EXPERIMENT

This installation takes the viewer to a prehistoric jungle, in which the size of the vegetation makes humans seem insignificant in comparison. The plants and succulent flowers are both attractive and repulsive. When *The Experiment* was shown for the first time at the Venice Biennale in 2009, it was awarded the Silver Lion and represented a breakthrough for the artist duo. Three men sporting the insignia of the Catholic Church—the ring, the censer, and the purple cope—harass a few naked, young women, who literally turn themselves inside out in order to please. In *The Forest*, a couple is in a dark woodland, surrounded by toadstools and ominous birds. In *Cave*, we witness a form of self-injury, as a woman's body starts to take on a violent and conflicting life of its own. Victim and perpetrator are encapsulated in the same being. The setting is a cave with an interior that is eerily similar to a dollhouse. The force and materiality that infuse human and nonhuman bodies alike seem to vibrate with life—and death.

EARLY ANIMATIONS

My Name is Mud and *Untitled (Vargen)* (2003) are the earliest animation works in the exhibition. In *My Name is Mud*, mud bubbles up in a clearing and grow to become a mighty wave that rolls over the landscape, engulfing everything. Returning to nature is a recurring theme—mankind is neither at the center of the film nor at the center of creation. In *Untitled (Vargen)*, we encounter a wolf, an obnoxious character that reappears in other works, perhaps as the alter ego of the artist. Nathalie Djurberg uses the written word in a way that allows the image to outweigh the text. A

“broken” language of unfiltered rejoinders appears and disappears, as seemingly fickle or random as everything else in the work.

These early works by Djurberg signal a shift from painting to the moving image. The first clay animations that followed were simple scenes with female protagonists. These scenes gradually became more complex, were peopled with captivating and monstrous figures, and accompanied by Berg’s music. These works convey an open, occasionally tentative approach to what art can be. Djurberg’s choice of style and method allows her a certain freedom from art historical interpretation.

NEW WORKS I

In *Snake with a Mouth Sewn Shut, or, This Is a Celebration* (2018), we see a small, abandoned child and a mother dragon’s mental breakdown in a claustrophobic room. The text fragments in the film communicate their desperate cries. Mothers are a stock character in stories and myths—chastising and tender, caring and deadly. The mother figure in this work, herself involved in a painful struggle, is unreachable. In *Delights of an Undirected Mind* (2016), the nursery is filled with creatures resembling cuddly toys, but behave like an erotically uninhibited menagerie: a tiger, an octopus, a crocodile, a girl wearing lipstick and pajamas, a hare, two cucumbers and a plethora of other creatures, playing violent games interspersed with bottle feeding and tea parties. A virile matador, instead of dealing the bull a mortal blow, makes precise incisions in a soft cake. An absurd contrast arises again and again between the clichés: the matador who dedicates himself with an exaggerated weapon to an intricate activity that is more associated with women and thus exposes himself to ridicule. What the rhythmical repetition of this scene might signify in contrast to the children’s room remains open.

NEW WORKS II

The most recent works also include two sculptures: *Cheer Up—Yes You Are Weak and Yes, Life is Hard* (2018) portrays a group of animals partying at a table laden with greasy food, cigarette butts, and beverages spilling out of tipped over plastic cups. One might think that the festivities are already over, but perhaps they have just begun. As in plenty of Djurberg and Berg’s works, the animal world is represented in an anthropomorphized way and becomes expedient for staging the brutality and bestiality of human beings. *My Fixation with Making You Happy and Content* (2018) shows a group of birds having a meal together. The scene seems strained in a way that may seem familiar—tension caused by etiquette, competitive behavior, or relations that have become insipid.

THE BLACK POT

The artists’ collaboration originally started with Nathalie Djurberg’s films, for which Hans Berg then composed his music. For *The Black Pot* (2013), however, Berg first composed the music, and Djurberg then created the visual representation. The installation was made during a break from city life, when they were living in an isolated area and exploring the essence of music. Unlike previous pieces, this work is entirely abstract. Figures and scenes have given way to pulsating and morphing shapes and colors in a cyclical process, in which things appear and disappear, only to reappear in ever-new guises. The forms migrate from one screen to another. In this, the work resembles Djurberg and Berg’s description of their method: they do not work in order to arrive at an end, but instead find that it is the process itself that is important. The animation in *The Black Pot* is based on drawings made with oil crayons. This is a painstaking and slow technique: Djurberg draws on a latex-coated surface, then partially scrapes and wipes off the color with a spatula and a rag before drawing the next sequence.

CINEMA—NEW WORKS III

Three films in which the music is an essential element are shown on large screens in a dark cinema space: *Worship* (2016), with its sausages and diamond-encrusted bananas, reflects music video aesthetics—the poses, fetishism, and absurd scale. Various characters take us along into the world of the illusory community and simultaneously harsh pecking order of club culture. What it is really about, beyond the bling? Perhaps it is the primal urge to devote oneself to something greater: a feeling, belief, or pure lust for life. *Dark Side of the Moon* (2017) is set in a clearing in a forest, where the desires of the characters revolve around a mysterious cabin, into which only a chosen few are allowed. Temptation becomes the central theme in this fairytale setting. In *One Need Not Be a House, the Brain Has Corridors* (2018), pulsating music accompanies our journey through winding passages where characters appear, some of whom are familiar from previous films—a portrayal of dissolving memory, space, and time.

IT WILL END IN STARS

It Will End in Stars (2018) is an immersive audiovisual experience created in virtual reality (VR). Here again is the deep forest, associated with the collective, primordial memories that push to the surface again in folk tales and horror movies. The black-and-white charcoal drawing that sets the mood in this work is familiar from early films. As in them, the wolf reappears as our quaint guide through a shadow world with portals to other, entirely different dimensions. With VR, the artists are trying out a new narrative method, but in their own way, based on traditional analogue techniques—hand drawings and sculpted figures that have been painstakingly scanned and animated. The work is experienced in a setting that combines their handcrafted style with digital technology. It reminds us that the immaterial and the virtual should not be seen in opposition to the real. The experience instead resembles daydreaming, when we are sometimes closer to our feelings and impulses than in our physical “reality.”