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A GIFT TO THE DARK

A Group Exhibition presenting works by Beatrice Alici, Paulina Aumayr, Sarah Fripon, Alex Macedo, Esther Martens, India Nielsen, King Rhomberg, Georgia-May Travers Cook.

Curated by Sayori Radda.

13.01-11.02

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“The intense light of reason and revelation combined, cannot shed such blazonings upon the deeper truths in a man, as will sometimes proceed from his own profoundest gloom. Utter darkness is then his light, and cat-like he distinctly sees all objects through a medium which is mere blindness to common vision.”

Hermann Melville, *Pierre* (1852)

A Gift to the Dark showcases eight international artists based in London, Milan and Vienna, whose works explore notions of Sigmund Freud’s concept of the *unheimlich*. The etymology of the *unheimlich*, translated into English as the “unhomely”, stems out of and is in direct contrast to the *heimlich* (the “homely” or familiar). As such, the *unheimlich* (or, the uncanny¹) generates an eerie, estranged or frightening effect, of a thing or occurrence that originates from the unfamiliar within the familiar, or vice versa. Freud stresses that “‘The Uncanny’ is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar.” Triggered by a present-tense external force, the *unheimlich* is a repressed subconscious erupting to the fore in a hybridised, concocted manner. As the title suggests, *A Gift to the Dark* unearths the uncanny from within dark romanticism and explores its liminal planes and uncertain territories.

Rather than shying away from the sinister tropes inherent in the works, *A Gift to the Dark* celebrates their uniquely charged motifs and timely subject matter by recognising their authentic avenues anchored in the *unheimlich*. Whether apparent through technique, medium, motif or subject matter, each work reveals a potent confrontation with the *unheimlich*.

¹ “The *unheimlich* has been inadequately translated into English as the uncanny; the word which better captures Freud’s sense of the term is the “unhomely”. Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 2016.

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In Georgia-May Travers Cook's *The daydream*, a woman sits in a domestic setting, vacant yet poised, suspended in an uncanny gesture: Does the smile encapsulate an ecstatic moment or a composed tranquillity? Her eyes glare into an unknown territory beyond the canvas, while the plaits wistfully envelop her neck. Within the iconography of art history, hair has always represented a mythical intimate extension of womanhood and depicted power as well as veiled mysteries.

In terms of materiality and its effect within painting, both Alex Macedo and Beatrice Alici distinctively extract the light from within the dark, generating an eerily dream-like or sacred effect. In his works, Macedo incorporates the traditional glazing technique common to old master paintings, where multiple layers of red umber are applied, and top layers are withdrawn allowing illumination from beneath. Alici paints nocturnal scenes of sublime women in naturalistic ethereal settings, where figurines emerging from the dark are endowed with supernatural qualities, depicted as goddesses, witches, incubuses and more.

In unsettling ways, both India Nielsen and Sarah Fripon explore distinct limitations and consequences in the communication of language, creating estranged incomprehensible junctures. Transferring an old fur coat into a shaved fur rug or canvas, Nielsen's works display encrypted letters and sigils transforming each piece into an undefinably self-referential object of magick. For Nielsen, "they are beings in their own right." In similar ways to Fripon, Nielsen's *My Tongue is a Vessel (Slim Shady kisses a fan at a concert, 1999)* interrogates the absurd strange functions of image-making, mass-consumerism, popular culture and its empty gestures. As Mark Fisher rightly exclaims, "Capital is at every level an eerie entity: conjured out of nothing, capital nevertheless exerts more influence than any allegedly substantial entity."² Indeed, King Rhomberg's lithography *Avaritia* also incongruously critiques the gluttony, greed and overconsumption of a parasitic elite through dark romanticism and sinister humour.

In *Fragment 1*, Esther Martens captures a suspended grotesque cry originating from a convulsed horse's mouth. Abstract figurines that oscillate between conditions of the human and non-human, such as animals and folkloric characters, are aesthetically referential to inanimate porcelain objects. As such, the viewer is confronted with a speculative space encapsulated by strange phantasmagoric and absurdist figurative compositions. Are these figures portrayed as alive or inanimate?

²Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 2016

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In contrast, Paulina Aumayr's work *Wieder Da*, which translates as 'back again', depicts a shuddering moment of self-reflection: A woman is suspended in a moment of delirium as she catches her reflection in the mirror and recomposes herself and the encompassing space around her.

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Beatrice Alici

Beatrice Alici (b. 1992) is a Venetian Artist based in Milan. She studied at the Liceo Artistico of Treviso and at the Academy of Fine Arts in Venice. Her recent series of paintings are linked to the theme of a "Contemporary Eden," consisting of nocturnal scenes in which figures and natural scenes coalesce into each other, exploring notions of femininity and its representations throughout history. Female figures are endowed with supernatural elements depicted as goddesses, witches, incubuses and more. As opposed to depicting these figures using daylight, Alici's work focuses on illuminating them through the light reflected by the moon in its various stages, therefore rendering colors and scenes in a delicate manner. Recent group exhibitions include Galleria Michela Rizzo, Italy (2022), Venice Time Case, Italy (2022) and Opus Focus, Italy (2021).

Paulina Emilia Aumayr

Paulina Emilia Aumayr, born in 2002, Vienna Austria, lives and works in Vienna. 2021- present- Academy of Fine Arts Vienna (class of Daniel Richter). Confronting, observing, and reflecting on one's experiences and self are central essences of Aumayr's works. Figurative imagery lead the way, leaving open-ended and translucent spaces through implying sceneries without being self-definitive. Matters around childhood, patriarchy and memory invite the viewer into Aumayr's manner of coping and permits a certain amount of self-disclosure. Working with oil allows her to access and engage with her patient pace of creating. For Aumayr, the process is very calm and thought-provoking. An intimate personal memory or experience will spark the basis of a new work. Aumayr recreates such memories through self-shot and staged photographs that are finally painted onto the canvas as bleeding into one another in a multi-layered manner, in return permitting a new language to the initial image. Aumayr always uses the reversed side of the canvas, which allows for an earthy-toned and raw-textured motif to be created. Scratching thin layers of diluted oil paint across the rough surface of the beige reversed canvas, leaves soft pastel tones fading in an uncanny dream-like affect. Aumayr's latest works incorporate a new medium, cyanotype, where the base layer of the painting consists of print. From there, she incorporates oil paint, amalgamating the carefully selected images into one, allowing for a new a dialogue to appear. Aumayr's works are strongly influenced by her personal experiences that allow her to convert such into a broader context. Her paintings will often pair the organic with the inorganic and address primordial relations between man and animal as well as the human and non-human. Formally, she is inspired by figurative work and its expressionistic entities. Painters such as Marlene Dumas and Francis Bacon were early impacts that initially drew Aumayr to further explore the act of painting.

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Sarah Fripon

Sarah Fripon (b. 1989) is a German Artist from Zeitz and is based in Vienna, Austria. She completed an MA in Fine Art at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna in 2021. Working with acrylic on canvas, Fripon's uncanny paintings resemble stock photographs, snapshots or screenshots of motifs that simultaneously appear familiar yet disturbing. Through citing and reflecting on manipulatively misleading proliferating images in advertising within our global network, Fripon captures the Zeitgeist of a crisis-ridden, paradoxical absurdism in which society is continually feeding itself through deceptive capitalist super-structures with no means to an end. Likened to a fleeting moment captured in long shutter-speed, the blurred effect and characteristically subdued colour palette apparent in Fripon's works, resemble the aura of an intangible long-lost dream or memory. Recent group exhibitions include Harkawik Gallery, 'Talking About C', New York (2023), Fünfzigzwanzig, 'Pending Objects Part 1', Salzburg (2021) and Palais Lichtenstein 'Die Akademie Schläft Nicht', Vienna (2020). Amongst others, Fripon's work is housed in the permanent collection of the Wien Museum.

Alex Macedo

Alex Macedo (b. 1995) is a Luxembourgish artist based in Vienna, Austria and is currently studying Fine Art under Henning Bohl at the University of Applied Arts Vienna. Painting in oil on canvas or aluminium, Macedo investigates intersecting relations between archaic functions within art historical religious iconography, Catholicism and contemporary popular culture. Executed in the traditional scientific painting technique known as 'glazing', often applied during the renaissance period, Macedo incorporates multiple layers of semi-transparent burnt umber, that create a distinct symbiotic effect of light and dark tones that bring forth luminosity from within the canvas. Such is achieved by retracting existing umber from the top layers of the surface allowing for lighter underlayers to shine through the foreground. Selected motifs are often a pastiche of iconic images circulating in the network of contemporary society. Archaic, art historical iconographic motifs are for example, taken from widely circulated and reproduced images such as contemporary postcards; and are juxtaposed with motifs of contemporary popular icons such as cult football players, renown characters from TV Series, trends in fashion or hip-hop album covers. Historical iconographic motifs are stripped from their original meaning and clichés, creating uncharted territory. Macedo's works explore aligned structures inherent in religion, its art historical iconography and contemporary popular culture: the art of storytelling, fanaticism, ceremonies and the glorification of the iconic figure or emblem. Recent Group exhibitions include Ostra, 'Ostreoidea' (2022), Czech Centre, 'Days of Unearthing' (2020). Recent Solo exhibition includes Franz Joseph Kai 3, 'L'orange est parti' (2021).

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Esther Martens

Esther Martens (b. 1992) is a Viennese and Canadian artist based in Vienna, Austria who completed a BA in Painting and Animation at the University of Applied Arts Vienna in 2020. Martens primarily works with oil on canvas and oil on copper by painting expressionistic and abstract figurines that oscillate between conditions of the human and non-human, such as animals and folkloric characters. Distinct to her approach and inspiration, Martens will source porcelain objects from auctions, flea-markets and the internet to create an eerie pastiche of motifs on the canvas, that translate the inanimate glossy three-dimensional materiality of porcelain onto the two-dimensional canvas through paint. As such, the voyeur is confronted with a speculative space encapsulated by strange phantasmagoric and absurdist figurative compositions. The transformed motifs on the canvas of the acquired porcelain objects, indeed, are charged with imperialist histories and Martens takes importance in highlighting as well as unearthing controversial subjects within class-struggle, race, gender and identity politics. Recent renown group exhibitions include Parallel Vienna, 'Footloose' (2020), Krinzinger Projekte / Krinzinger Galerie, 'Tomorrow is Cancelled' (2018) and MAK, 'Ästhetik der Veränderung' (2018).

India Nielsen

India Nielsen is a true 90's kid, raised on Cartoon Network's revival of vintage animation, MTV's coverage of hip hop's golden age, the arrival of the Internet and with it primitive incarnations of social media. It is only with hindsight do we appreciate how such information overload has led to an inherent distrust of facts and the redundancy of knowledge, how global connectivity has led to a detachment from our local communities and indifference towards our immediate surroundings and how instant digital interaction has led to an unappreciation of intimacy and insufficiency of both physical and emotional engagement. It is this dissociation that Nielsen explores within her work as she attempts to awaken the subconscious and reintroduce an emotional narrative into the visual and verbal language of 'online'. The works are therefore not representational or illusionistic, but functional, sigilistic, magick objects. Fragments of letters, words and image are carved into paint and shaved out of fur. Figures are animistic and mystical, swiped from pop culture, art historical books or transcribed from memory. India Nielsen (b.1991) lives and works in London. Recent shows include Darren Flook gallery in London, UK, imlabor gallery in Tokyo, JP and Annarumma gallery in Naples, IT. In 2023 Nielsen will have her first solo institutional exhibition at Kebbel-Villa in Bavaria, DE, as well as a solo exhibition at Lazy Mike gallery in Riga, Latvia.

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King Rhomberg

King Rhomberg (b. 1993) is an artist from Hong Kong based in Vienna. He is currently studying Fine Art under Professor Henning Bohl at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna. King works with mixed media including painting, ceramics, woodworks and printmaking in the forms of etching, lithography and screenprinting. His process is often experimental as he incorporates multiple mediums through a fluid, changing and reflexive approach. His works will often critique renowned figures from differing time periods through a satirical and humorous lens. Recent exhibitions include Art Austria, Vienna (2022), Never at Home, Vienna (2022) and A2Z Gallery, Hong Kong (2019)

Georgia-May Travers Cook

Georgia-May Travers Cook is based in London and is a BA graduate of Goldsmiths College (2018). Drawing upon art history, literature and autobiographical writing, Travers Cook stages domestic 'happenings' in her preferred medium, oil on linen. In response to these suspended scenes, the viewer slips into the guise of a voyeur, provoked to unpick visual cliff-hangers, whilst waiting for the calamity to resolve. The uncanny is at play as Travers Cook usurps the notion of still life in her presentation of these seemingly mundane scenes. Recent shows include Vortic, 'Fever Dream' (2022) and V.0 Curations, 'Stranger Than Paradise' (2022).