

## Monika Stricker: Beastly Arboretum

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"I'm a man with no power, does that make me a woman?" asks Aaron Dinkins, the only Mattel staffer indicated with his full name in the gray, almost Orwellian conformity of the company, in the film *Barbie* (2023). On the other side of the world, in Barbieland, every Ken could have the same doubts regarding his own anatomy and social condition: does the lack of a penis make him a woman?

We might transfer this dilemma to the men depicted over the last five years by Monika Stricker (1978, Düsseldorf, DE). Faceless men, legs spread, displaying their anatomy in the foreground, without a sexual member. What remains after this bloodless act of castration? A rounded bag of skin, soft and vulnerable, exposed to view, the same one that is the protagonist of the ceramic sculptures. In both cases, the artist represents a mutilated identity, because it is deprived of that factor that identifies the male in the patriarchal society: penis, success, power.

This time Monika Stricker has apparently been gentler with her male subjects: the figures are whole, the genitals no longer in the foreground. The three paintings in the exhibition depict the same falling man, seen from different vantage points, as if captured in three film stills. The arrival point of that body is unknown: the man might crash onto the ground, or he might continue falling, forever turning and twisting.

This uncertainty, the lack of ground beneath one's feet, is the equivalent of the ungory castration that happened in the previous series: what is missing is a horizon, a clear fate, a definite identity. The stylemes of the patriarchy – penis, success, power – are not in sight for this figure, lost in the gray indefinite state of an identity that has abandoned the patriarchal model of manhood, but has still not understood how to be "Kenough." Instead, the ground is a firm presence for the right foot depicted by Stricker in the effort to rise in an upward leap. It is her own foot, recurrently represented starting in 2022. The artist investigates the anatomy of one of the less exposed parts of her body in great detail, without concessions or embellishments. While she exposes herself through self-portraiture, on the other hand she eludes the external gaze, because she cannot be recognized. A well-known statement attributed to Mike Kelley asserts, "I make art in order to give other people my problems." When I spoke with Monika about the selection of works she would be including in the exhibition *Beastly Arboretum*, she told me that many of

the subjects of her paintings came from her anxieties, but also from her fascination with those subjects. Painting male bodies is a way to talk about herself, about her discomfort in relation to men and the envy of their bodies. Likewise, in the new series of works of this show, the German artist represents chimpanzees and gorillas – the gender of the primates is not defined, they could be male or female – in the act of "chestfeeding". A way to dissect her own apprehension regarding the exclusive and excluding mother-child relationship.

This is a theme that concerns me personally, as Monika emphasized somewhat awkwardly during our conversation. When we spoke at the start of the summer I was nearing the end of my pregnancy. Since giving birth, a few days after having conversed with Monika, I haven't passed one day without breastfeeding. I quickly got used to the idea of a small person requiring my presence to be nourished: my days are organized in a cycle of two hours at most, and for practical reasons my daughter and I are literally always together.

During this period I have often thought about Stricker's works and her ambiguous feelings about motherhood: the thought of a creature that depends for survival entirely on others can be claustrophobic, above all when seen from the outside. Actually, it is an ambivalent relationship: on the one hand, the dependency of the smaller, defenseless creature on the person that feeds her, and on the other the relationship of submission to the rhythms and the will of the small person on the part of the bigger one.

It is the same relationship of dependency represented by the only work in the show depicting a little dog, which stares forward with a mixture of hope and trust, waiting for a human being to pay attention and to care for it. For the German artist, the dog is the symbol of domesticated nature, rendered fragile and innocuous by virtue of its relationship with human beings.

Portraying nude men, her own feet, dogs or primates, Stricker's works confront us with a bare-faced vulnerability. In their presence, we are out of our comfort zone: we are embarrassed voyeurs, witnessing intimate relationships of submission and interdependence.