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Ursula Reuter Christiansen: Auf Messers Schneide

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All of life is a balancing act, and it's not just romance that can sometimes feel like a daredevil tightrope walk. In fact, it is our fundamental relationship with nature that is threatening to throw us off balance. We master nature, we think, but it teaches us otherwise and takes revenge. Glancing at current world events is enough to understand that we are dancing on a knife's edge (German: *Auf Messers Schneide*). Left or right, heaven or hell, loved or disliked, it doesn't matter; the fall is inevitable. If we fall, the tidal waves of a tsunami will sweep us into the abyss, or ruin awaits in the heat of blazing firestorms.

In the works of Ursula Reuter Christiansen (* 1943), these same forces are omnipresent. Especially the paintings of the German-Danish artist are permeated by an irrepressible high tension. Here, the strength of nature meets the depravity and discord of her subjects. With 28 works from the last thirty years, and new ones, *Auf Messers Schneide* puts the relationship between nature, mysticism, and humankind at the center of this exhibition.

In the counter-light of the sunset, yellow, blue, and purple blossoms, some of which have grown from bulbs, adorn the river landscape in *Rekonvalescens / Convalescence*, 2021. The idyllic scenery is interrupted by branches in the foreground. These are the roots of Yggdrasil, the mighty tree that embodies the entire cosmos in Norse mythology. In this lifeline beats a pulse, a sign of hope—like the glow of the evening sun—for the patient on the sickbed in the time of healing, of recovery. Here, death and life have wrestled with each other.

Along the opposite wall unfolds the series *La Chambre*, 1998. At first, in harmony with the surroundings, human and spiritual figures, male and female, exchange caresses. The boundaries between terrestrial and imagined beings are blurred and intertwined. However, chaos continuously takes over. Faces become grimaces, and darkness spreads. A madwoman peeps out of the thicket, reminiscent of Théodore Géricault's *The Hyena*. Plants, rain showers, blossoms, and faces clump together into a whole until the figures disappear entirely from their environment. Who is dominating whom here?

"*Is This My Star?*" wonders the creature in the cratered landscape in the painting from 2019. Born from the eruption of volcanoes, it represents the first or last human being on barren, scorched earth. An eruption is both an end and a new beginning, a grand gesture of the planet, and so this work in the exhibition marks the turning point, the transition into a deeper, more energetic world of alchemy and fire.

With a red cap and exposed torso, the artist sets a process in motion in *By the Bonfire / Ved bålet*, 1977, in which she lights up a fire. It spends warmth and light, conveys security, and at the same time, it is also the beginning of destruction.

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The central installation, *Zwischen Feuer und Wasser*, 2023, shows beauty in the cycle of devastation and renewal. Carried over by the storm or the tide, more than twenty fir trunks, like driftwood, populate the exhibition space. In memory of the glassworks in the Bohemian forests or the delicate ornaments of Christmas trees, Reuter Christiansen has created ten new glass objects, especially for the exhibition in Basel. Dried fern, leaves, ears of corn, as well as weeds have been burned and melted by the heat between two panes. They have acquired a white aura. The same plants are now pitch black but clearly recognizable, forming small frozen lakes with the resulting gases.

On the wall looms *Two Men in the Moor*, 2020, made during the Corona shutdown at the artist's studio on Møn, surrounded by wild nature. Beneath a dam in the larch forest, like worms, the two men wallow in the bog while a bird flying overhead stares at them.

On the opposite wall hang depictions of witches. The figures dance in the darkness of the night above the lambent flames. In *Witches' Sabbath I / Hekse sabbath I*, 2021, according to a Danish legend, one of the creatures with hanging breasts is killed with an icicle by the green hunter, whose mask is reflected in the light of the fire. The other witches in this series, however, seem to be alive and kicking.

Next to the passage to the offices hangs the vertical format, *Snow*, 1995. The painting speaks of the artist's inspiration and fascination with fairy tales, such as *The Three Little Men in the Wood* by the Brothers Grimm. The girl is picking strawberries in the snow and, at the same time, is surprised by a ghost rising from a bottle or from smoke.

In the back, right part of the exhibition, *In the Forest*, 2017, shows burned trees under which young undergrowth is spreading. Little Red Riding Hood has become a flaxen-haired girl. She is on the run and looks back. Next to her stands the evil wolf, who is no longer evil at all. They are a couple. They are cronies. It is incredible what this new world makes possible.

The forest may have been set on fire by the, *Feuerteufel* (Engl.: pyromaniac), 1980, who hides at the end of the exhibition and obviously takes pleasure in his devastating deeds.

The exhibition ends with a new, large-scale work, *Courage*, 2023, which is also Reuter Christiansen's credo, that recurs in her career, as do the red poppies. Here it can be understood as a call to overcome the balancing act on the blade and the powerlessness of the oppressive situation, by simply courageously walking straight ahead, continuing, not to fall.

Ursula Reuter Christiansen was born in Trier, Germany, in 1943. She lives and works on Møn, Denmark.

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