

Emma Verhulst:
I sell soap.

WIELS AFFILIATE

Paris, late 1880s: a young woman drowns in the Seine. Taken by her beauty and her enigmatic smile in death, the pathologist at the morgue feels compelled to immortalize her face in wax. Many a copy follow and the woman known as *L'Inconnue de la Seine* becomes not only a fashionable, albeit morbid fixture on the walls of Parisian salons, but also the face of *Rescue Annie* – a CPR doll created to teach emergency workers and the general public about resuscitation.*

Emma Verhulst's journey starts here. Taking a painterly dive into the ending of *L'Inconnue de la Seine*, we find ourselves looking at Emma's beginning: *Annie*. A painting of the famous face covered with a print thereof. Traces of glue, which could very well be wax or water, cover parts of her features while her half-opened mouth suggests a position in waiting. She who decided to drown herself in the Seine becomes the erotic ideal of her era.† Lifeless, silenced, young and abiding. Eternally stuck in a fairytale story line – with a constant resuscitation attempt of the same plot.

On the other end of the spectrum, there is the figure of *Oearghh* – the painting shows a young man pulsating with life, flexing his muscles by clenching his fists. It is radiant, full of desire, quickly painted with longing brush strokes in just the right light to reflect his beaming body. Different genders, different measures. Here, nothing's more erotic than being alive. Between the two – Eros and Thanatos, the drive for life and death – we enter a mysterious sphere of the voice of seduction, of the repressed and the unconscious id, 'the measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings'.‡

In the work we do, it is all about holding the tension between the two, the undeniable force of repeating patterns, topics and materials – while feeling the erotic of being alive – a melting together of materialness, action and consciousness. In between *Annie* and *Oearghh*, the dead and the alive, differently-sized cubes pave the walls. Their names are female: *Jasmin*, *Olive*, *Aloe*, *Vera*, *Patchouly*, *Vervene* and their pastel pasty colors relate to a time long past. If we could smell them, only their sweetness would parallel their foulness. Their yellowed color palette suggests a rancidness while the smell of decay runs along them, literally embodying their complicated history.§ They come from the body and return to it. We start and end life with soaps pathing the way: daily rituals of (self-)care to prepare for life, death and love. An eternal loop, a closed circuit, a self-perpetuating system.

Verhulst is back to her old tricks – deconstructing stories while reconstructing them on the canvas. Her eager brushstrokes are quick and impatient – they always carry urgency. Loose canvases and paper on the floors float around her – they might be collaged onto the paintings in a second, third or fourth step. It is a constant framing and re-framing, trying to focus, zooming in and out, looking for the perfect fit/section/detail. Her paintings have the potential to be good – and bad at the same time. Knowingly or not, Emma Verhulst builds on the legacy of *Bad Painting* and that of her hometown's heroes. They definitely have big egos, and contain both life and death, the bitter and the sweet, the alter and the ego. Emma Verhulst sells soap: an ambiguous promise of shedding skins, of cleansing and renewal.

– written by Michaela Schweighofer

* Its creator thought that male trainees might be reluctant to kiss a man's face.

† A whole generation of German women modelled their face on her looks.

‡ Lorde, Audre: *The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* In: *Sister Outsider* (Crossing Press: Berkeley 1984) p.88

§ The origins of soaps made from human corpses can be traced back to Paris in the 1780s, when the former Holy Innocents' Cemetery was closed and the decomposing bodies were exhumed. Due to the lack of oxygen, they had reduced to deposits of fat which was subsequently collected and turned into candles and soaps.

Emma Verhulst

is a visual artist from Belgium who lives and works in Antwerp. She studied at Sint Lucas Antwerp and has exhibited work at MHKA, Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, PLUS-ONE Gallery, PONTI and SECONDRoom. She will be a resident at Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris this summer. So far, she has participated in the residency programmes of Frans Masereel Centrum and WIELS, through which she met Michaela.

Michaela Schweighofer

is a visual artist and writer from Austria who lives and works in Brussels and Vienna.

Opening: 12.06.2024
18:00-21:00

Opening Times: 13.06.2024-29.06.2024
Thursday-Saturday, 14:00-18:00

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