

AGNES SCHERER

Strawfires

Curated by Eva Birkenstock

13.09.–19.10.2024

Agnes Scherer – *Strawfires*

In her exhibitions and stage productions, Salzburg-based artist Agnes Scherer merges sculpture, painting, drawing, music, and performance to create multilayered object theaters. For *Curated by: Untold Narratives* she revisits the archive of her own artistic practice to expand and recontextualize a piece about Marie Antoinette originally created in 2019. This scenographic installation, composed of painterly and sculptural elements, uses events from the life of the iconic French queen as a pretext to reflect the ongoing revival of (neo)feudal structures. Scherer portrays Marie Antoinette both at the guillotine and in her yearning for a pastoral life.

At the entrance, a basket of eggs and painted wall ornaments refer to the fully functional farm village, the so-called "Hameau de la Reine", recently restored with the support of the House of Dior, which the queen had constructed in the gardens of Versailles in 1783 to playfully explore a rustic lifestyle with her children and selected guests. The paintings depict Marie Antoinette in the role of a dutiful peasant woman. A ribbon of paper runs through the installation like a carpet. Serving as a kind of cosmic gateway, Scherer's folk-art guillotine is repeatedly breached by the queen in order to project herself, miraculously unharmed, into new idylls: as a shepherdess tending lambs or, in a Stone Age idyll, as the tattooed enchantress of a wild cow. In *Strawfires*, the narrative of decapitation is not addressed as an end in itself, but rather as an ongoing process of transformation and a repetitive sequence of defiance and renewal, as represented by the symbolically freighted head-catching baskets of the guillotine. The final piece depicts a basket on the banks of the Tiber containing the abandoned infants Romulus and Remus, who would later be found and raised by a swineherd. They were thus able to claim the throne as adults, bringing to fruition precisely that which was to have been prevented. Marie Antoinette is emblazoned above them in a sun-like royal corona.

In contrast to glorifying perspectives on the French Revolution, *Strawfires* offers an ambiguous portrait of these events. The title refers on the one hand to the recurring overwriting of revolutionary agendas by neo-feudal demands for power, privilege, and profit maximization. And so, just 12 years after the abolition of the monarchy in France, the Napoleonic Empire was proclaimed. On the other hand, the title refers to a romanticized dream of egalitarianism within the broader societal context—a dream to which the pretense of simple lifestyles, detox rituals, or regular retreats to remote 'cabins' for mental and physical cleansing pay little more than lip service. Marie-Antoinette's village project was inspired by her serious engagement with the ideas of Jean Jacques Rousseau and the vision of a natural, egalitarian society.

–Eva Birkenstock