

NUMBER 1 MAIN ROAD

Lauryn Youden
Even A Worm Will Turn

Opening: 27.06.25
On view: 28.06.25 - 27.08.25

Number 1 Main Road
Ossastraße 21a, 12045 Berlin
Opening Hours: Sat/Sun, 14-18 h or by appointment

Even A Worm Will Turn, Lauryn Youden's solo exhibition at Number 1 Main Road, Berlin navigates the sterile surfaces of the medical-industrial complex and modernist architecture, exposing the latent violence they inflict on chronically ill and disabled lives. The show centers around a series of ornate wall sculptures reminiscent of oversized prize ribbons, made from trampolines—the same kind once prescribed to Youden as a “misguided” cure for chronic pain. Emblematic of bodily capitalist regimes, these trampolines inherit Le Corbusier's vision of the home as a machine for living: a paradigm that reduces domestic space to a site of regulation and exclusion, where sick and disabled bodies are unwelcome. Even the mundane is complicit; its supposed neutrality conceals architectures of control and erasure. Youden renders the trampolines inoperable: their legs truncated, stripped of function, with surfaces adorned by bows, fabric patches, and intimate detritus. They become portals into queer Crip time, shaped by the irregular rhythms of disability and chronic illness, rejecting linear progress for something softer, stranger, and more alive (undead).

Prize ponies haunt the work as emblems of value and exploitation, revealing systems that rank and commodify vulnerable bodies. Fragility, styled through cute aesthetics, becomes a sly resistance—unsettling the ableist gaze and reclaiming suffering as defiant survival. In line with Youden's practice of altar-building, these sculptures amass symbolic items and personal possessions, many of which have proven themselves as tools of survival and resistance. The non-hierarchical arrangement of these objects – prescription medications, Hello Kitty Fever Cooling Gel Patches, glass dildos and tarot cards – calls the classification of “traditional” and “alternative” forms of medications and remedies into question. Stainless Steel Neurological Sensory Muscle Testing Tools, objects at the intersection of clinical examination and intimate play, are imbued with a certain kinky charge beside vintage femme-on-femme BDSM illustrations. Juxtaposing the German notice “Never Forget!” with a depiction of a submissive receiving pain, Youden cheekily posits BDSM as a therapeutic ritual best practiced regularly—where pain becomes a site for regained agency over a chronically ill body.

Though they have been constructed with great compositional care, there is an undeniable obscenity to Youden's giant badges of honor decorated with comical amounts of neat bows and adorable motifs. As overdimensional participation trophies, they point towards the pressure placed on the chronically ill and disabled to perform conformity, mask their symptoms and compete for resources, access and participation within an ableist society. In her writings on cuteness, Sianne Ngai describes the aesthetic category as a docile form of beauty, commonly associated with stereotypical ideas about femininity. Cute objects are vulnerable, their childlike features designed to trigger an instinctual desire to care for them. Their squishy, malleable and enduring bodies, however, also hint at the cruel tendencies of mastery and control that their passivity might invite. Firmly situated within the realm of consumption, cuteness is a quality often projected onto and expected of disabled and chronically ill individuals. As Beatrice Adler-Bolton and Artie Vierkant lay out in their book *Health Communism*, capitalism defines health as the capacity to work. Those who deviate from this standard are classified as “unproductive,” and are thus often expected to commodify themselves in other ways; to render themselves more palatable, play into their own infantilization and feign innocence and helplessness, all feeble smiles and big, pleading eyes.

If cuteness implies passivity, it also holds the potential for subversion. Like a fuchsia kubotan dangling from a keychain embellished with charms, it allows for defense through deception. Consequently, Youden's approach to cuteness is, as Susan Sontag puts it in *Notes on Camp*, one of "deep sympathy modified by revulsion" – she lovingly dissects it, probing its borders and examining its transgressive potentials. One of the sources she draws from is Japanese pop culture, where kawaii has long served as a space to depict deviant forms of joy and resistance. The late-90s anime *Revolutionary Girl Utena*, prominently featured in the stills contrast-stitched onto Youden's sculptures, is but one of many examples. Inspired by the queer-coded characters of shōjo culture – from the women playing male leads in the legendary all-female Takarazuka Revue theatre troupe to Oscar, the boy heroine of *Rose of Versailles* – the titular protagonist Utena takes on the role of a prince in order to fight for the liberation of her love interest Anthy. The project eventually came to a close with a feature-length film that culminates in Utena and Anthy, the Rose Bride, fleeing their hierarchical boarding school to escape the roles they've been ascribed. In a climactic escape scene, Utena unforeseeably transforms into a baby pink sports car, allowing Anthy to ride her into safety. The credits roll just as the couple makes their successful getaway to an undefined destination ambiguously labelled as the "End of the World", omitting what lies beyond the constrictive realm they are leaving behind.

As if to challenge Utena's suspended magical spacetime, the room is filled with the ticking of a horse girl wall clock. The relentless metronome calls to mind Alison Kafer's notion of "Crip Time", an alternate mode of temporality which, "rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, (...) bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds." Adding to the soundscape is a haunting rendition of *The End of the World* emanating faintly from the tower, a part of the exhibition space with limited accessibility. The ballad makes a pivotal appearance in *Girl, Interrupted*, a 1999 film with a cool girl-studded cast that often finds itself awkwardly stuck between addressing and replicating clichés about female mental illness: Brittany Murphy's character commits suicide, her lifeless body dangling from the ceiling as her record player loops Skeeter Davis's lamenting voice over and over again. Up in the tower, the song, reworked for the exhibition by Reece Cox, is accompanied by a site-specific installation.

Picking up on previous works that examine the disappearance of grief and death from quotidian life, Youden has created a psychogeography of self-killing as a deliberate choice. Presented alongside a black rope adorned with pink ribbons hanging from above sits an old wooden stool with a weathered copy of *Joy of the Worm*, in which Drew Daniel examines modern literary approaches to suicide as self-killing that go beyond a "generic mode of tragedy." The author notes that positive and even comedic affects at the prospect of death might "help to ease one's passage out of life; (...) or might function therapeutically to critique the urge to die, encouraging readers and audiences to reconsider the force of passion." In a similar vein, Youden utilizes an endearing form of camp to reclaim the subject matter from the oppressive shame imposed on it by religious and medical moralism. Here, too, taboo is challenged with the help of cuteness, bows and all.

— Donna Schons

Lauryn Youden is a Canadian interdisciplinary artist that works in sculpture, performance and installation. Her practice derives from her research in and navigation through the medical industrial complex, 'alternative' healing practices and traditional medicine for the treatment of her chronic illnesses and disabilities. By publicly presenting her personal experiences and re-evaluations of history through a Crip Queer lens, her work illuminates and advocates for repressed, marginalized and forgotten forms of radical care and Crip knowledge. Her work has been recently shown at CAN Centre d'art Neuchâtel (CH), Migros Museum, Zurich (CH), Tanzquartier Wein (AT), Pogo Bar -KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin (DE) and Backrooms - Kunsthalle Zurich (CH). They are currently a participant in BPA// Berlin program for artists.