

Magdalena Frauenberg

Opening Sep 5th, 6 – 9 pm
Sep 5th – Oct 2nd, 2025
Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf

It is interesting that the greek word for appearance – *phaînesthai* – shares its root with *phantasia* as it is connected both to the imagination and to light. Ordinarily understood as that which is visible, through its etymology appearance becomes conflated with what we have only imagined exists, while light is no longer only a source of revelation, but also of illusion. We find here an contradiction between appearance and materiality, between image and object, picture and sculpture. If image is light, sculpture is weight. Sculpture is bound to the real.

Magdalena Frauenberg's new series of bronze figures depicts a fantasy of liberating sculpture from this heaviness, to make it fly. A sturdy figure – muscular thighs, rounded shoulders, neither male nor female – is picked up by a kind of human insect in an attempt to carry it off. The pair are held up from the ground by a rod, the bit of structural engineering that makes the magic possible, magic that depends on our ignoring the structure. It is sculpture approaching appearance and meeting its limit in the weight of material.

It has been said that cinema is to the twentieth century what the cathedral was to the twelfth: the crowning achievement of civilisation. But taken as more than an analogy, this statement goes some way to collapse the opposition between appearance and materiality. It says: the twentieth century was the realm of the imaginary, of appearance; the century when the image triumphed over the real. But it also says that, as a religious structure, the cathedral is a great conjuring act – it sets the stage for illusion. Cinema is cathedral because cathedral is light.

Georges Didi-Huberman has noted that absence is as central to Christian iconography as presence. Our faith is spurred on not by the cathedral itself, but how it frames the divine rays that shoot through its pointed arches. Or, as Didi-Huberman writes about the appearance of Christ's face on the shroud of Turin:

"Almost nothing was visible, that is to say: already something other than *nothing* was visible in that *almost*. One actually saw, then, something else, simply in the looking forward to it or desiring of it."¹

Frauenberg's sculpture is an expression of *desire* for flight – desire manifested precisely in the failure of illusion. Given sufficient material architecture, it becomes possible to see simply by *wanting to*. Desire and reality, appearance and object, here paradoxically interlocked.

Two new films light these sculptures, as ephemeral as the holy spirit. One shows a procession ascending a hill. They are wearing shells on their backs, part of a pagan Tyrolian ritual performed annually to make the winter demon go away, to disperse a certain heaviness that has taken hold of the landscape and of the soul. The ritual is still practiced to this day. The film is part ethnographic document, part carnivalesque hallucination.

A ritual is embodied repetition. Like the cathedral it is a structure that has the power to produce a type of reality; not fiction, not fantasy, but manifestation. Repetition in the form of mechanical reproduction, on the other hand, can provide testimony, but not reality. In fact, like all forms of testimony, the truth-value of lens-based reproductions of the real is fraught – more often than not, what they offer is illusion. Still, there is in this illusion a stubborn remainder of the real. That small,

¹ Georges Didi-Huberman (trans. Thomas Repensek), 'The Index of the Absent Wound (Monograph on a Stain)' in *October*, Vol. 29 (Summer, 1984), pp. 63-81, p. 63.

strange overlap, which is the theme of this exhibition, and where appearance is, nonetheless, thing. We can call this place the surreal.

Another of the films shows the window display of a shop, where a watch is hoisted up and down by a string, seeming to defy gravity. Like the shroud of Turin, the almost-success of the illusion is an expression of our desire for it. The shop window is to the religion of capitalism what the shrine is to Christianity: it makes objects come alive. A watch hanging from a fishing line: it doesn't matter what we see, or don't see. What matters is what we want to see: It flies!

An accompanying photograph shows a man sleeping. Sleep: another kind of suspension of reality. The dream world: another form of desire projection. When sleep appears in cinema is it often to put the real into question. Did it really happen, or was it all just a dream? The image of a sleeping face is enough to derail our trust in what we see. We get caught up in that question: was it real or not? The challenge posed by modernist cinema – take *Persona* or *Marienbad* – is to hold two competing truths at once. It was a dream. And it was real.

And there, Frauenberg's sculpture, bathed in that light, anchored to the present time-space by its heaviness: it flies and it doesn't. It appears and it is – those two modes now entangled, but not resolved.

Text by Kristian Vistrup Madsen