

Molitor

Anna Jermolaewa

You can count on me

Opening:

6 February 2026, 6—9 pm

Exhibition:

7 February — 18 April 2026

A hand picks up and drops a floppy-legged stuffed animal sheep. Repeatedly tumbling back into the picture frame with a seemingly bemused expression, the toy bleats “you can count on me” on impact. Anna Jermolaewa made this perplexing and hypnotic video some twenty years ago – the hand is the artist’s, the toy her daughter’s – and was moved to show it for the first time in this exhibition, to which it lends its nominally reassuring title. “You can count on me,” insists the little sheep in a mechanical lilt; and the artist offers up the refrain to her viewer to make of it what they will. The video prompts myriad associations – with childhood, conformity, animals, Mike Kelley, violence, gesture – and encapsulates an ambivalent tone that courses through the show. A jostling between hope, despair, or perhaps that secret third thing that is the lived experience of geopolitics today.

Born in Leningrad, Jermolaewa fled the Soviet Union in 1989, and was granted political asylum in Austria, where she has spent nearly four decades developing a conceptual body of work in which forms of resistance against authoritarianism have often been a central theme. Building upon her own experience as a political refugee, Jermolaewa culls from research into how right-wing regimes function – and most crucially – the idiosyncratic ways in which they are undermined. *You can count on me* comprises new and recent work from a number of ongoing series that engage these dynamics, which grow only increasingly pertinent in a contemporary world order rife with oppression and resilience.

A neon glows on the ground floor with more insistent repetition – *Please Continue. The experiment requires that you can continue* – an excerpt from a controversial experiment devised by American social psychologist Stanley Milgram in 1961 after following the Adolf Eichmann trial, which found that a high proportion of subjects would fully obey instructions to harm others. *Please continue (after Stanley Milgram)* (2026) is the third in a triptych of works engaging conformity experiments, as previous works looked at the impact of peer pressure on opinion in scenarios designed by Polish-American psychologist Solomon Eliot Asch and Soviet psychologist Valeria Mukhina, in which participants often ignored clearly obvious facts to go along with the majority. The neon gives you pause, an invitation to sit a moment with this disturbing human tendency towards conformity. The evolution of the triptych highlights the progression of fascist tactics, as the Nazi echoes in Milgram’s scenario developed from the earlier experiments’ denial of clear realities. Just don’t believe your eyes, croons Bruce Springsteen in his recent protest song “Streets of Minneapolis.”

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On the gallery mezzanine, Jermolaewa presents two works from her Smart Gifts series – a cheeky sequence of readymades and reproductions that point to geopolitical power machinations. A stuffed panda alludes to China’s panda diplomacy – a practice of loaning and gifting pandas to other countries to foster goodwill – as Jermolaewa’s plush work winkingly puts such soft power on display. Berlin is home to four giant pandas, who Angela Merkel and Xi Jinping welcomed to Berlin’s Zoo with much pomp and circumstance in 2017. Jermolaewa looks back to Cold War history in her installation, *The Thing (from the Smart Gifts Series)* (2026), which replicates a wooden carving of the seal of the United States, with its eagle and motto *E pluribus unum*, a seemingly banal gift presented to the American Ambassador by a delegation of children from the Young Pioneer Organization, which moved him to install it in his office in 1960s Moscow. Only 7 years later did the Americans discover that the eye of the eagle concealed a spying device designed by Russian inventor Leon Theremin – a key technological precedent of surveillance mechanisms weaponized by right-wing regimes today.

Conversely, Jermolaewa also draws attention to moving and often subtly surreal instances of popular subversion of state control, as in *Ribs* (2024). In the Soviet Union, possession of record albums, especially of Western music, was banned and punishable with imprisonment. Soviet bootleggers worked around the ban by copying albums onto used X-ray films that hospitals had discarded. Nicknamed “ribs”, these X-ray film records were traded on the black market until the advent of the cassette tape. Exhibited in Jermolaewa’s 2024 Austrian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale and again here, *Ribs* displays a selection of these Soviet recordings in a doctor’s X-ray film viewer. Like *Panda-Diplomatie (from the Smart Gifts Series)* and *The Thing (from the Smart Gifts Series)*, *Ribs* becomes an alternative mode of engaging with history, in which artifacts and anomalies become metaphors for a perennial contest between control and freedom.

The very multiplicity of Jermolaewa’s exhibition – its material and formal range – and her practice more broadly, stands in direct contrast to the illusion of singularity constitutive of authoritarian ideology. In a similar vein, the enduring presence of animals in her practice also works counter to such emphasis on hierarchy and homogeneity. By paying attention to animals, Jermolaewa highlights modes of perception and experience beyond the scope of humanity’s distinguishing reasoning skills. In the group of watercolors *LAST SEEN SINCE 1970* (2025-ongoing), Jermolaewa catalogues animals that are believed to have become extinct over the course of her lifetime. Where Jermolaewa has worked with forms of self-portraiture throughout her career, here, the artist is present through the absence of the 34 animals believed to have become extinct since 1970. As previous works like *Chernobyl Safari* (2014/21) have dealt with human destruction of animal habitats, this vibrant and motley crew of animals is, on the one hand, a moving document of irrevocable loss. But in an artistic project concerned with the politics of visibility, and committed to even the seemingly outlandish possibility of hope, Jermolaewa stresses in painted captions that the pass stubfoot toad was last seen in 1986, the slender-billed curlew was last seen in 1995, the baiji fresh-water dolphin last seen in 2001. Insistent repetition again, and this time perhaps to suggest that human perception also has its limitations, that there are inevitable and expansive realms beyond it. A definition of faith: believing in what you can’t see.

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