

Art » Marianna Simnett: “You get thrown into a world of monsters and have to claw your way out”

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Interview

Marianna Simnett: “You get thrown into a world of monsters and have to claw your way out”

With her new show *OGRESS* at Société Galerie until November 12, Marianna Simnett talks about painful love, taxidermy and the mania of art-making.



Your new exhibition, *OGRESS*, invokes the myth of Athena and the flute. What drew you to that story?

I was thinking about the idea of possession and being possessed and I started to think about the goddess Athena, who crafted the first flute. In the mythological story, she plays it at a banquet in front of the gods, and they laugh at how her cheeks puff up when playing. Humiliated, she runs off to a forest, sees her own reflection in a stream and realises that the gods were right! Horrified at the sight of her own face, she discards the flute and curses anyone who ever touches it. I like Athena as a cypher for talking about the maker. And as I am an artist, a maker and a flute player these ideas all tumbled together.

With solo shows at the New Museum in New York and the MMK in Frankfurt, can this really be considered your first commercial gallery show?

Yes, and I wanted to be a bit tongue in cheek in my approach. I wanted to acknowledge the fact that I was exhibiting in a space with perfect parquet floors and white walls. One of the works, ‘The Collector’, is a lavish golden crown made of melted animal figures. I think with this show, I’ve finally overcome my fear of making objects.

These sculptures with their blown up cheeks reference Athena’s ugly face when playing. Are they also referencing the vulnerability you feel as an artist in putting your work up for exhibition?

Well I think they’re beautiful, but then I find beauty in the abject. She’s kind of masturbating and doing her own thing and not really giving a shit about the viewer. Actually, in *OGRESS*, I was thinking about speech and language; there are no actual words in the show, and I wanted to see the flute as an extension of the body – but also speech as a type of technology. It raises questions about what we consider a body and what we consider technology.

In your film *The Needle and The Larynx* (2016), a doctor injected Botox directly into your larynx to lower your voice. Such body violation recurs repeatedly throughout your work. Where does that impulse come from?

I think the reason I started to make work was to escape violent surroundings in my home life. And I think that there is a tussle that I have with art that involves a type of recovery. It is about going even further than you could ever imagine. That has become my signature. I suppose it’s also pragmatic. I want to do something that’s never been done before.

In your film *The Bird Game* (2019), children are persuaded by a wicked crow to engage in a series of cruel and increasingly murderous games. What’s the appeal?

That is a dark film, but I am drawn to mischief. It doesn’t need to be violent but I always need some kind of friction or bite. In comparison to my other work, this current show has felt like pure joy. The process hasn’t been as punishing as usual and I feel slightly conflicted about that. But I needn’t always be so masochistic and be the one that sticks daggers in me all the time. There is a spectrum and complexity to living that I want to explore – not just trauma.



Marianna Simnett: *Blue Moon* (still), 2022, Digital video with 12-channel sound

“ You get thrown into a world of monsters and you have to claw your way back out.

In your stop motion animated film *Prayers for Roadkill* (2022), which debuted this year at Castello di Rivoli, Torino, there is a scene where a baby gently being rocked turns into violent shaking. Are you interested in the proximity of care and abuse?

That was a direct reference to shaken baby syndrome. Sometimes toxicity can masquerade as care. And in that project, I was looking specifically at that tension point in care environments where one more shake can turn something innocuous into something radically opposite.

Were those stuffed animals actually roadkill?

Yes! During the pandemic I saw so much roadkill. There was no one around, cars were faster and the animals were getting excited at the empty roads. Some of them had just been hit and looked pristine – beautiful! I’d take them home and then basically learned how to taxidermy myself.

That’s a tremendous level of commitment...

When I am in a project, I delight in a kind of mania. That’s the kind of state I get into. It’s this fizzy, high feeling that I feel is necessary to make the work. It can become obsessive, all-consuming and then, for a limited time, dangerous – but somehow completely necessary.

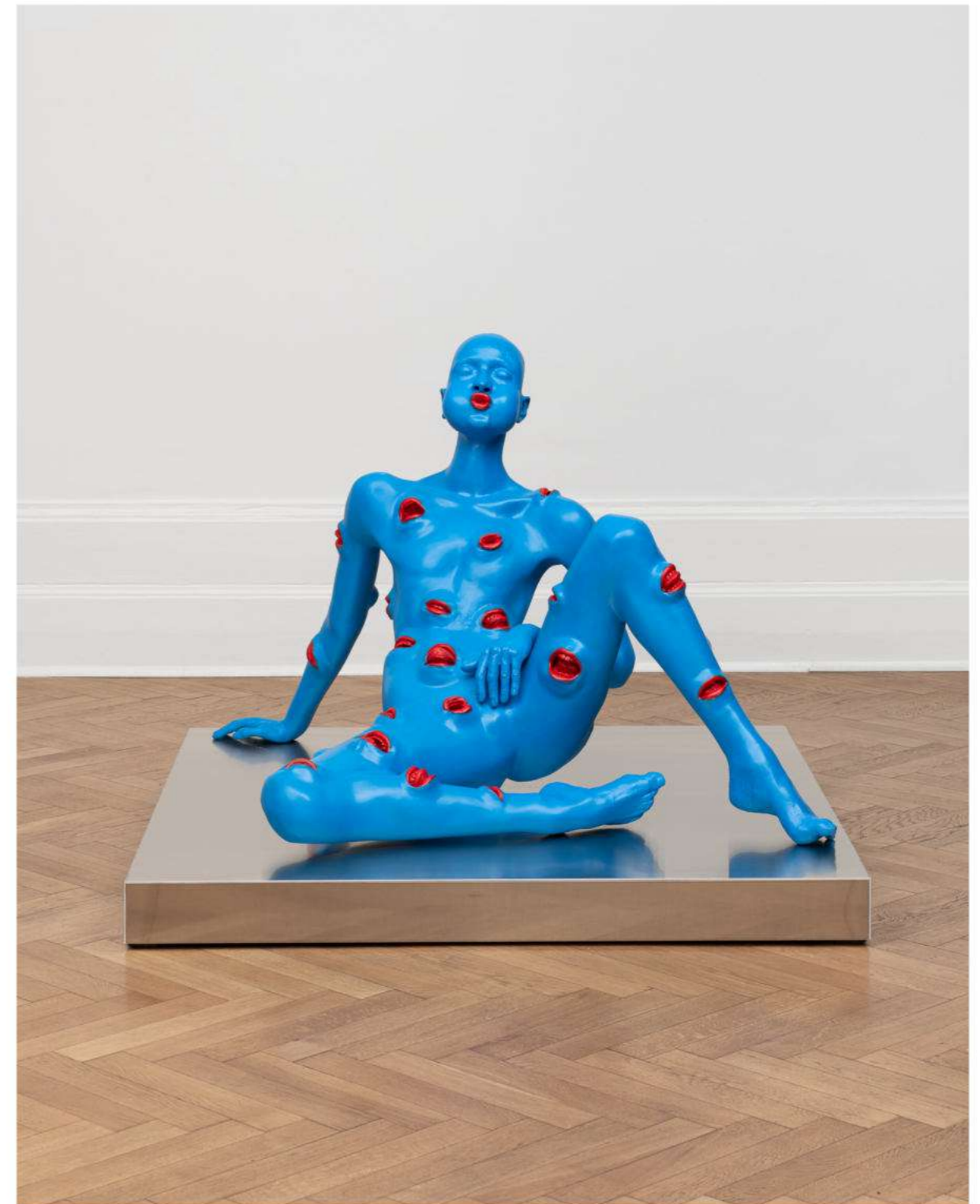


Photo: Trevor Good

Transformation – especially of gender – is an important theme running through your work. For you the body is not static, but can be altered and changed.

“ *She’s kind of masturbating and doing her own thing and not really giving a shit about the viewer.* ”

I’ve always had a problem with preordained expectations. If you grow into a world of expectation, you never get to choose for yourself. It’s not that I’m not a woman. But I feel weird. I am a weirdo! And I always will be in response to this sort of classical, expected version of what I should be. As a teenager, I was known as the girl that transforms, becomes a different person. At the same time, I was also being looked at by men and being objectified, having quite horrific sexual experiences with older, violent men. My upbringing was one of tough love. Then you get thrown into a world of monsters and you have to claw your way back out. Now, no one can get to me. I am too scary. Maybe I’m too intimidating!

This has been an intense few years for you, moving to Berlin, getting a gallery and exhibiting your work at the Venice Biennale and Art Unlimited at Art Basel. What would you like to do next?

I’ve just seen Louise Bourgeois’ [The Woven Child](#) at Gropius Bau and I want to match that output. I sometimes wish I could have more distance from my work. But there’s something guttural within me that creates this irrational, insatiable drive. It’s both a curse and a blessing.

- **OGRESS** *Through Oct 22* Société Galerie, Charlottenburg

BIO:

Marianna Simnett was born in London in 1986. She studied at Nottingham Trent University and completed her Master of Arts at the Slade School of Art in 2013. In 2014, she won the Jerwood / FVU Award and was shortlisted for the Jarman Award in 2017. After successful solo exhibitions in landmark museums from Zürich to New York and London, she is currently exhibiting her three-channel video installation *The Severed Tail* at the Venice Biennale.