

When I meet British artist Marianna Simnett to speak about her practice, she first has a few things to get off her chest. The night before, she received a Turkish coffee reading that elicited the image of her descending a mountain. In front of her was a garden – the present – that seemed barren but was actually fertile. In the distance was the future, represented by the Cologne Cathedral, which had a waterfall cascading into it. She remains shaken by these images but even more by her visit, also the night before, to the new Paul McCarthy show at Max Hetzler in Berlin, where the American artist showed a film of himself covered in ketchup and mayonnaise “as usual.” She reports that “McCarthy play-fucks a young actress, Lilith Stangenberg, with his pot-bellied, 80-year-old body” while dressed up as Adolf Hitler. She says she can’t stop thinking about it.

I found this preamble initially bewildering. And yet, her preoccupation with these scenes makes sense in the context of her work. Like McCarthy, Simnett addresses themes of sex, violence, and death in absurd and grim ways. For *Prayers for Roadkill* (2022), the Berlin-based artist collected recently dead animals from English country roads, then made comical stop animation films wherein the animals died over and over and over. “It was a bit like Looney Tunes,” she says, “only much darker.” And then there’s *Ogress* (2022), a sexualized sculpture of an androgynous blue being pursing its lips as several dozen mouths emerge from its knees, shoulders, back, thighs, and everywhere else. It’s a disturbing piece, and when I ask her why sex and death are so present in her work, she says it’s because “they’re so primal, so extreme.” She reports being a thrill-seeker, someone who needs “to know where the limit is – to then push a little further.”

Simnett first pushed things beyond the limit in the audio and light installation *Faint with Light* (2016), for which she forced herself to faint again and again. Ultimately, a medic made her stop because she had induced a seizure and her

# THE AI VIROLOGIST: MARIANNA SIMNETT

“I’m drenching myself in something I can’t escape.”

Text: Shane Anderson Photo: Alma Leandra



blood pressure was dangerously low. Simnett was not visible in the work – which was praised in *The New Yorker* for being “both erotic and terrifying.” Instead, her breath was monitored by a blinding wall of LED lights that rose and fell in tandem with her collapse and revival. Simnett believes her oeuvre can link back to this work, even though what follows it is “baroque, colorful, exuberant, and mythological,” unlike *Faint with Light*. That’s because the minimalist installation is not about the intellect. “I’m trying to fight against the tide of rationality,” she reports before calling herself a synthesizer. It’s an apt term in that Simnett often synthesizes various domains. The three-channel video installation *The Severed Tail* (2022), which was shown at the 59th Venice Biennale, investigated agricultural practices, body politics, the anthropomorphic fetish pup play, and trauma as it followed a piglet into a fetishistic underworld after its tail is cut off by a farmer. And her most recent work – the operatic *Gorgon*, which premiered at Berlin’s HAU theater in September – connected recent developments in AI with Greek mythology and flutes.

Simnett says these works are the mountain she is descending in the Turkish coffee reading. When I ask about the vegetable garden in the present, she reports that she’s currently diving further into an unfamiliar, perhaps seemingly barren, world for art-making – namely, soccer. But what, then, is the apocalyptic vision of the waterfall in the cathedral? “I don’t know,” she says, “but I do get these fantasies where I’m drenching myself in something I can’t escape. It’s my own form of mayonnaise.”