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Words ***Chris Waywell***

Stills from 'Winner'

THERE'S A FOOTBALL stadium full of babies, and roaming around the ground are characters who look like something from *A Clockwork Orange* or *The Wicker Man*, led by a giant swan, who underneath his costume has a bright-pink suedehead and jackboots. The group moves, with jerky bird-like movements, towards the house of Misery the Referee, who has her hands full dealing with some extreme fouling by players in all-white strips. The ref's house is built of red and yellow cards (of course) with an interior stage-set like a Paul McCarthy-directed episode of *The Banana Splits*. This is Marianna Simnett's film installation 'Winner', and it was commissioned to mark Germany hosting the 2024 Euros.

As football films go, 'Winner' is probably closer to a carboot VHS of *Escape to Victory* than *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* (that's a compliment, by the way). It pulls in a host of references both football and non: two singing hotdog ladies who are pure David Lynch, Graham Greene's 1954 short story 'The Destructors', *Alice in Wonderland* and US punk icon Lydia Lunch. It's balletic and brutal, shot through with recognisable football tropes mashed into fresh and occasionally awful, or vividly beautiful, shapes. Across five screens, it feels like a Renaissance altarpiece and/or *Crimewatch*.

Simnett's work is always intense, and animalistic. Pieces like 'The Udder', 'Blue Roses' and 'The Bird Game' feature dairy cows, cockroaches and crows, her works repeatedly include surgery, needles and bodily transformations. They are sometimes violent and often couched in a baroque lushness reminiscent of filmmakers like Peter Greenaway or Derek Jarman. They're ambitious and unflinching, compelling and odd. But they don't make her an obvious choice for a piece about football...

Why have you made this film installation about football?
'The directors of [contemporary art museum] Hamburger Bahnhof said: Germany's hosting the Euros next year and we want to commission you to take on the giant topic of football. They'd read interviews where I talk about athleticism, training, drive, blood, sweat and tears, and I guess they thought, in a roundabout way, that my attitude towards making art related to the spirit of football. I understood, even if I wasn't an avid supporter. I said yes and then dived into the world of football for a year.'

What was your impression of the football world? It comes across as quite ugly in the film: violent and chaotic.
'My position was of growing up as an outsider to a male-dominated sport that was almost impossible to identify with and trying to understand why I hated it so much. Counter to the violence, I was actually drawn to the extreme solidarity, the crowds, the devotion beyond measure. The ultras were a big starting point, who in my version are played by babies. And then taking myself to games and getting immersed: the slipperiness between love and hate, the passion and the emotional tenor around the game.'

I'm interested in how the film makes an analogy between the gang or the team – a collection of people functioning as one body – and animals. You've used animals a lot in your work before.
'I often work with live animals or even roadkill. In this case, I was interested in taking the characteristics of cockerels and working their behaviour into the choreography, clothing and insignia. I came across a gang called the Baby Squad, founded in Leicester in the 1980s. They were a group of brutal hooligans. In everything I read around these gangs, the dress code is one of the most important symbols of being cast in or out. Fashion and football are bedfellows. I made up my own gang called the Cock Squad, which is a bit of a laugh at the parading of masculinity. We worked with the choreographer Ben Duke and studied cockfighting and chickens' jerky head movements. So the whole film is a dance: the Cock Squad move together as this unified chicken body, and they all have hanging wattles. That's their emblem.'

And the wattles also look like ballbags.
'It's really perfect that they have such a strong resemblance. For the show, I have made a podium cast out of real testicles. There's a mix of chicken wattles and ballbags.'

What is it about birds that you find interesting?
'The pecking order: hierarchical structures, teams and group formations. Birds and humans both have a lot of bravado and perform for each other. I've watched way too much cockfighting online and it's nuts how they go at each other.'

There's also an overlap between underground scenes like cockfighting and hooliganism.
'It's about the irrational taking charge. It's the same with me leaning into destruction and Graham Greene's story "The Destructors".'

That's a very bleak story: a beautiful London house,

which has survived the Blitz, is systematically destroyed by the children who are the future the war was supposedly protecting.
'What interests me [in the story] is the doggedness of the kids in their destruction. It's not just brutal: there is care and precision within the violence. It's about how you carry something out to the last degree.'

You see that obsessive attention to detail in casual culture as well. Can you talk about the costumes in the film? There's a kind of mediaeval pageantry with the mascots.
'There's something sinister and cute about them. We made up these mascot characters that break into the referee's house: the Squashed Tomato and the Bumblebee and the leader is the Swan. Misery the Referee is the main protagonist, wearing custom latex designed by Charlotte Buchal, modelled after a 1920s referee shirt in a disgusting pissy colour that makes her sweat profusely and makes her deeply uncomfortable. She's this hated figure that I wanted to foreground: the figure that stays in the middle who doesn't get to pick a side, or be a winner or loser.'

In the piece, she's the one who suffers the most. Her house is trashed and she's imprisoned.
'Everyone hates the referee. I listened to loads of interviews with referees – like Pierluigi Collina and Anthony Taylor – and they love being hated. They're proper subs!'

Why did you make that character an older woman?
'All the interviews online were with men. Then I went to the DFB Academy in Frankfurt. It was like the Roald Dahl School for referees. These amazing young girls were training, watching videos with a whiteboard, doing drill tests, doing athletic tests. You really associate these figures with men, but this trip flipped my prejudgement and I thought: my referee is going to be female.'

And there's a whole stadium of babies collectively voiced by Lydia Lunch?
'Lydia has a voice that sounds like a baby already. But also, she's 65. And she sounds like a witch from the depths of hell. She's got this ferocious gravel to her voice. I knew very early on that Lydia would make an amazing ultra.'

There's a lot of violence on the pitch as well.
'Masculinity and injury were two big topics. I did loads of research into iconic fouls and we choreographed them. Zidane's headbutt [at the 2006 World Cup], Müller vs Tagliafico [in a 2018 Champions League game], Cantona kicking the spectator [at Selhurst Park in 1995], Schumacher and Battiston [at the 1982 World Cup]. All the stuff that really taps into people's cultural memory of football. Even if you don't know football, you have seen those images, you know what happened with Beckham's kick [at the 1998 World Cup]. Those moments ring around in everyone's brains forever more.'

They're often the bits of games that the media focus on. The photo of David Busst having his leg broken at Old Trafford traumatised me as a kid.
'Ewald Lienen is another one. I interviewed him in person. He's a former footballer who got a 25cm wound on his thigh [in a Bundesliga game in 1981]. The bone was poking through, it was like his leg had a zipper. We made an exact prosthetic replica and incorporated it into the dance.'

Staying with pain, the structure of the work across five screens feels a bit like an altarpiece, and in the film you have these Christ-like figures – particularly the guy who has the shirt over his head with his arms spread wide – but also this peasantry who are doing these horrible things and living in muck.
'I love mediaeval references, because I think I'm quite self-flagellating. It relates to my own perverse masochism, of going to next-level pains to complete something which is totally maddening and self-destructive.'

Are you deliberately invoking art history?
'There is often a merging of epochs with my work, a connective tissue between the ancient and the modern. Football is deep, it goes back to 2,500 years ago in China. I think this connectivity with our ancestors is probably why I always refer back to myth and animals.'

But specifically in 'Winner'?
'I guess there are two things: one is the mediaeval purification ritual of tears, in which they try to absolve their sins by beating themselves up, which could relate to the act of cleansing through destruction. But in the house they are also revelling in pleasure: it's Bacchanalian, the way they're dancing, covered in ketchup and mayo. I was looking at Paul McCarthy a lot. I went to LA last year to see his 'WS: White Snow' installation, where he filmed all of the Snow White films, and I started a new love affair with his work. I just think he's excellent. He doesn't give a fuck and he owns up to his flaws by presenting himself as a brute.'

What's his influence on 'Winner'?
'The way his performances are paintings. I think of "Winner" as a painting, the way subjects and objects dissolve into one another, the use of blood, beer, ketchup, mayo, sweat, fluids and liquids drawing lines through space. He's also irreverently dark yet playful. I show violence and destruction but it's all set within an *Alice in Wonderland*, *Wizard of Oz* language of red and yellow cards.'

Football is often presented as a fairytale: simple people can become magically transformed through the 'beautiful' game. But then, there are people pissing in your front garden and abusing strangers on the street.
'It's true. Like the beauty of the game: if you actually look at the game, it's stunning. Like ballet. Watching Messi as a kid is really fun, because he's exactly the same. But then you get into the politics and the corruption and it becomes uglier and uglier. Even Ewald's wound: he said it was planned by the opponent's coach. There's definitely an evil side to the supposed accidents.'

All in the name of a 'game'.
'That's also an impetus for me of: Where are we heading? Why are we living this way? What are we missing in the process? A lot of the world is in absolute chaos and ruin, and we're just running over each other without stopping.'

'I WAS DRAWN TO THE EXTREME SOLIDARITY'

I'm intrigued by the Lynchian singing-lady hotdog stand.
'Her song goes: "*I put a winning ticket in your pocket / A one-way ticket to the next life. You can win, you can sin / You can do anything in the next life*". She represents the camaraderie before and after the game and at half-time. I like to stick the knife in, then pull it out and give everyone a comfort blanket. It's a respite from the madness, a moment to breathe. It needs space and air as well as energy. Then the other influence was the Lady in the Radiator from *Eraserhead*. I'm really attracted to minor characters who take the stage within a major storyline, like the hotdog seller. She's basically God. She is warm and soothing and sad at the same time. She's a very special, beautiful, character that I hold dear. The last thing I would want is for it to be...'

...mocking?
'Yeah. I mean, I know there's gross, squirty, ejaculatory stuff in there, and there's a fuck-ton of ketchup and mayo and beer and hotdogs. But that is the language of the game everywhere.'

As a Berlin-based artist, what do you think is the difference between football in Germany and in the UK?
'I've lived in England way longer than I have in Germany. So I'm used to being barged out of the way by the boys. I feel like there's more aggro [in England]. But having said that, going to some of the national games here, it's very, very fraught, and there's a lot of police. I would also say that, in Germany, the chanting, the singing, that absolute love and adoration, is stronger than I've ever seen. The local games are incredible: there are old ladies with their dogs and they just sing at the top of their lungs. It's heartwarming.'

What does 'winning' mean to you?
'Ultimately, winning means loving. They are synonymous. They can both get ugly and toxic and nasty, but in the end winning is about devotion, desire and passion. Winning is also about accepting your struggles along the way. It's definitely not only about the goal.'
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