

The struggles of the marginalized (neue-deutschland.de)

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Mariela Scafati: Movilización (mobilization), 2020, 65 paintings, installation view, KW Institute for Contemporary Art (KW Institute for Contemporary Art)

Photo: Courtesy Mariela Scafati; Floating Island Gallery, Buenos Aires; PSM, Berlin / Photo: Silke Briel

The motto of the eleventh Berlin Biennale – “The crack begins inside” – comes from the essay “On Motherhood and Violence” by the Egyptian-born poet and literary scholar Iman Mersal. She takes a poem by the Polish poet Anna Świrszczyńska (1909-1984) as a point of departure in order to reflect on her own experience of birth and motherhood against the background of traditional ideas of maternal self-sacrifice. Even if the verse attributed to Mersal in the curator’s statement that a woman does not want to be the »egg« »that the newborn baby breaks on the way to life« actually comes from Świrszczyńska, at least the tenor of the combative self-assertion about Mersal carried into the Biennale. The feminist motto that the personal is always also political is applied to other crises and upheavals – social as well as economic and political – in the exhibition context of the Biennale and is mostly fed from the lived experiences of the participating artists.

The four thematically subdivided exhibition chapters, which are shown simultaneously in four locations in Berlin, are dedicated to the struggles of the excluded for visibility and focus on different forms of solidarity, vulnerability and resistance. The KW Institute for Contemporary Art asks in the chapter “The Anti-Church” whether we can “free our collective body from patriarchal violence and the danger it poses.” To begin with, ten life-size figures of Christ, arranged in a circle, lie on the ground in front of a tall picture altar by Pedro Moraleida Bernardes. Fully covered with black and white anti-LGBTQI flyers, Youn-jun Tak uses “Chained” to refer to the annual Pride Parade in his South Korean homeland, where Christians distribute these flyers to advertise conversion therapies. The bold and contrasting painted Bible scenes by Bernardes consist of a colorful group of saints and humiliated people who carry out violent, mutilating and sexually disturbing acts. The large-format pencil drawings by Florencia Rodriguez Giles, hanging freely

throughout the room, conjure up an alternative utopia without male heroes with their seemingly surreal, female hybrid creatures, their muscular bodies and bare faces.

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In the other exhibition rooms, installations, video works, sculptures and drawings refer to the destruction of a memorial for the Romnja, the persecution of the Kurds in Turkey or the history of the adoption of BI-PoC children (indigenous and non-white people). Above all, it shows the strength of women and their resistance to the violence that surrounds them every day.

The exhibition chapter “The Inverted Museum” in the Gropius-Bau sets an ethnographic and (post-) colonial focus. Sandra Gamarra Heshiki takes a critical look at the exhibition practices of ethnological museums and Aline Baiana’s installation “The Southern Cross”, the constellation that once guided Christian seafarers on their conquests in the southern hemisphere, leads right into the history of colonial violence in the Amazon. The colonization of Brazil, including massive mining, has had a devastating impact on the indigenous population. In contrast, the discrimination against Afro-Americans in North America by Deanna Bowen’s »Anti-Creek-Negro-Petition« will be discussed in a panel discussion and collages on Völkerschauen in Europe and Karl May devotional objects will be placed alongside. Many of the additional textile works on display are reminiscent of the activities of weaving, embroidery and knitting that are ascribed to the female gender, and on the other hand depict the effects of aggression and war violence with a male connotation. The monumental tapestry by Pacita Abad illustrates the brutality and cruelty of the regime of Ferdinand Marcos On the Philippines. Delicately embroidered fabric carpets by Cian Dayrit depict the state terror in Manila, and so do the arpilleras, small delicate tapestries on which women document human rights violations in Chile after the military coup. At the end of the tour in the Gropius-Bau, an alternative museum project is presented: the “Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende (MSSA)”, named after the socialist president Augusto Pinochet and the CIA have on their conscience. Exhibits from the Brazilian Museu de Arte Osório Cesar and the Museu de Imagens do Innoçiente prove that the art of the mentally ill can be presented as such and not just as a therapeutic success. Here the “inverted” museum is being tried out as a museum from below.

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The chapter “Showcase for dissident bodies” is opened to visitors in the daadgalerie and opens up a view of the urban space and rebellious bodies that move within it. In graphic works and performances, psychological and political crises are linked. Francisco Copello’s collages once again demonstrate the ambiguity of gender and take up the politics of fashion. A dance performance by Dana Michel and Tracy Maurice uses clothing to show the “effort and effortlessness of being a person”, and “cards of self-preservation” by Andrés Fernández attached to the wall serve to locate and reassure oneself. Resistance to consumption can be very seasonal and sometimes funny: recordings of the Santa Claus Army, which occupied a factory and a department store in Denmark at Christmas time in 1969 and sang anti-capitalist Christmas carols, represent interventionism in urban areas. The work on ecofeminism of the FCNN (Feminist Collective With No Name) is also looking for an alternative beyond the canons of capitalism, whiteness and colonial cultural heritage. They investigate the misrepresentation of BiPoCs and queers in the art industry and the mainstream media, denounce public and institutional racism and try to provide consolation with works such as “Hydrocapsules.love”.

“The living archive” in the ExRotaprint cultural center is ultimately intended as a temporary space to point back to the process of cultural exchange, dialogue and encounter, because since September 2019 the 11th Berlin Biennale has been developing from there. Divided into three parts and with the abbreviation »exp« for »exposition« (exhibition), the exp. 1 »The skeleton of the world«, the exp. 2 Virginia de Medeiros and projects of the feminist health research group and on the exp. 3 Sinthujan Varatharajah and Osías Yanov exhibited their work under the motto »Touching Archives«. The restrictions caused by the Covid-19 crisis were taken up artistically at an early stage, for example by Bettina Hutschek, who with the »Lama stories from quarantine« encouraged children in summer 2020 to use color in their drawings. From April 2020, Carlos Motta recorded in subjective short videos how New York City has changed during the Covid 19 crisis. The floor installation »Mobilisierung« by Mariela Scafati in the entrance area of the KW uses abstract, flat, monochrome wooden figures to deal with police violence and silence during the pandemic.



Despite the ongoing Covid 19 pandemic, the fourth part is now being presented as the epilogue and main act of the 11th Berlin Biennale. In a world marked by turmoil and upheaval, however, it remains to be seen whether art will be able to hold its own against the crisis in the long term and not “become an egg that the newborn breaks on the way to life”.

11th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, until November 1st, 2020. Various venues, see berlinbiennale.de

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