

STEPHEN FRIEDMAN GALLERY

ARTNEWS

Headless Statues and Fur-Trimmed Gauntlets: Mamma Andersson's New Woodcuts Tell Time

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BY *Elizabeth Fullerton* POSTED 05/25/17 1:17 PM

Through May 27, Stephen Friedman Gallery in London



Mamma Andersson, *Cave*, 2016, hand-printed color woodcut on rice paper, 22½ x 24½ inches.

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This new series of woodcut prints on Japanese paper by the Swedish artist Mamma Andersson marks a departure from the artist's paintings of domestic interiors and figures in dreamy landscapes for which she is well known. Andersson was inspired to make these woodcuts when a 1950s printing press came up for sale on the small island of Gotland where she has her studio. The size of a dinner table and weighing half a ton, the press apparently "gave the studio a new heart."

Spread across the gallery's two venues on opposite sides of the road in Mayfair, the exhibition features 88 small prints and three large-scale oil paintings. Each print focuses on a single subject, repeated in series, such as a dress, a stag, a hare, and a cave. The apparent simplicity of these images, floating on richly colored monochromatic or patterned grounds lends a certain whimsy to the whole. Are they interconnected snippets of a broader narrative or stories in their own right?

Andersson gives few clues, although one can draw visual connections between series of images juxtaposed against one another; a black braid cascading down the back of a proud doll in a traditional costume finds an echo in a black cat's tail stretching upward. The pairing suggests a children's story, although one can't quite pin down the details. Elsewhere, a checker-board arrangement of images contrasts a solid upright female torso with feathery drawings of a fir tree presumably bent by the wind.

The passage of time looms large as a theme. Along one wall, images of a hare and a stag are interspersed with prints of a pair of fur-trimmed gauntlets; a striding headless figure in frock coat and court shoes; and another headless figure, nude but for stockings, shoes, and a cape. Viewed together, they might conjure aristocratic hunting parties and other ghosts of a bygone era.

In fact, the headless figures turn out to be classical statues playfully attired in anachronistic dress and derived from newspaper clippings reporting the discovery of Roman sculptures in an Italian grotto in 1957. Enchanting images of a cave offer another loose reference to this historical event.



Mamma Andersson, *Doll*, 2016, hand-printed color woodcut on rice paper, 24 7/8 x 19 3/4 inches.

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Although they are part of an edition, each print is unique in terms of color and texture. In some the ink is thickly applied; in others, it's so thin as to look almost like a photograph. The cave prints, in particular, come in an array of gorgeous pinks, oranges, and ochres, like a flower unfolding and catching the light of sunrise, midday, and dusk. This effect of marking out time through hues is similarly apparent in a series of prints of a woman in a head scarf hunched over in a field.

These are the only portraits of a human figure among the prints in a show where traces of activity are suggested rather than explicit. The sense of spectral presence is heightened by a series of ten prints on different grounds featuring a white dress with a rosette and sash; its tilted position, creases, and bulges suggest it has an occupant. In a couple of the images, legs can be vaguely discerned protruding from the dress.



Installation view of Mamma Andersson's 2017 solo show, at Stephen Friedman Gallery, London.
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A fascinating inclusion is the display of six woodblocks with their multiple layers of color and delicate drawings, laying bare the meticulous process involved in creating these prints by hand.

The three large paintings (all 2017) engage in a conversation with the prints. *Space Loneliness*, for instance, depicts a cave's rocky interior in gloriously textured oils, while the poetically titled *The Weakening Eye of Day* portrays a stag looking out of the canvas inscrutably against a backdrop of mountains and zoo-style bars. The final painting, *Saturday*, shows a glossy black piano against a bright yellow wall. Areas of unpainted canvas convey the reflections of the piano, the keys, and the intricate patterning of a white lace cloth draped over the top of the piano. The eye is drawn to three framed photographs perched on top of the piano of people in action. These everyday scenes offer a glimpse into familiar lives, yet, as with the other images, they elude precise identification.

Andersson invites us to escape the harsh realities of the present and allow our fantasies free reign in her color-soaked, gentle world of grottoes, forest animals, and statues in fancy dress. There is something childlike, guileless, and undefinably enticing in her vision.