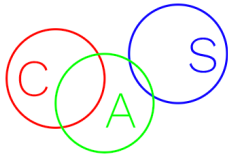


Stephen Friedman Gallery

Contemporary Art Stavanger
The Puppet Master
Anne Therese Tveita
28 October 2020



The Puppet Master

(Translated from Norwegian)

In this text, critic Anne Therese Tveita writes about Jonathan Baldock's exhibition 'Me, Myself and I' at Kunsthall Stavanger.



Image: Installation picture from Jonathan Baldock, 'Me, Myself and I'. Photo: Erik Sæter Jørgensen.

The feeling against the feet - the rough, stinging canvas fabric that covers the floor, literally sucks us into the massive tablecloth that covers the entire Kunsthall Stavanger's great hall. For the distinctly tactile audience, it brings an immediate satisfaction to have to take off their shoes to experience the exhibition 'Me, Myself and I' by Jonathan Baldock. You suddenly become a participating actor on a huge stage, as if this were an immersive play, so-called immersive theater, rather than the traditional experience of an art exhibition. You are in the middle of a scene where puppets of human size realize a fascinating but unknown play, one that is both seductive and macabre at the same time.

Visually, the scene is alluring, especially due to the painstaking and technically accomplished work behind the design and staging of the large puppets. The soft, pastel-colored felt pieces that make up the dolls' skin are neatly pulled together with a needle and thread. Accurate, visible stitches indicate meticulous needlework. Head and torso are large and round, almost childish in shape. Arms and legs consisting of narrow, smooth-polished wooden sticks and carefully designed hinge joints form the skeleton of the dolls. Other bodily components, such as eyes and tongue, are shaped by delicately colored glass.

In the middle of all this beauty and delicacy, there is also something macabre - macabre because when you look closer, it turns out that the dolls also consist of elements from human anatomy. Ears, feet and hands are bronze castings of real body parts and suddenly a vague horror rests over the hitherto harmless dolls. The puffy bellies' swollen bellies are at the same time reminiscent of pregnancy or procreation and greed and decay. Breasts and bulging sex do not give them a specific sex, but rather embrace both the beautiful and the ugly of human forms.

Despite their obvious human features, the characters appear soulless, cold, without empathy - and one discovers that the delicate glass eyes really just stare blankly into the air. The distorted bodies mimic human behavior and anatomy and are devoid of any recognizable emotion. It is especially the doll that lies on its back on the floor, folded out and bent all the way back until the body forms a cube (or is it a stool?) That fills one with discomfort and associations to medieval torture methods. The threads this puppet once hung in have been cut and it forms a frightening scene - both free and forced to live its

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own artificial life. Perhaps one can feel a form of existential anxiety where it lies on the enormous stage, under the relentlessly bright lighting that bathes the exhibition hall.

The various scenes, groupings and individual figures form a tableaux where there seems to be an exploration of similar emotional states - which the artist uses to dissect his own emotional universe. Baldock plays this out at a distance, through a filter of human-like creatures.



Image: Installation picture from Jonathan Baldock, 'Me, Myself and I'.
Photo: Erik Sæter Jørgensen.



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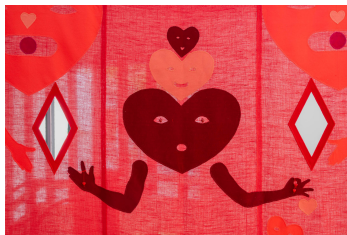


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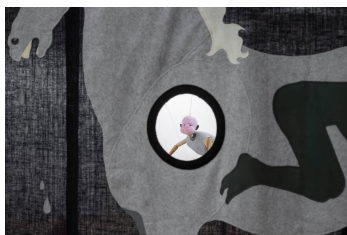


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It is part of human nature and / or psyche to try to bring dead objects to life, give them soul and personality (were not childhood dolls completely alive, perhaps?). Baldock's dolls achieve hints of life through the anatomically correct castings, which are castings of the artist's own body, and also through our built-in need to create a kind of meaning and context - we give these dolls a dimension of real existence.

Staging

The exhibition's mise-en-scène is simple but effective. Large textile works hang from the ceiling and divide the room as if they were stage carpets. They frame and guide the audience through the hall and

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around to the various works. They also support a form of narrative, a narrative that the audience themselves help to create by filling them with their own interpretations.

One of these works that acts as a "stage curtain"; The Horse is a Mirror to Your Soul, breaks the pleasant palette that otherwise dominates the exhibition. Against a black background and in shades of gray, a horse is standing, sick and drooling. Apparently it carries a human and an umbilical cord-like line ties it together with its mirror image. Similar but still different, the animal meets itself and the underlying effect is disturbing. The drooling beast with the human fetus breaks with our notion of the gentle but majestic beast.



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The leading textile work 'Puppet Master' is red and takes up a considerable space where it hangs in the middle of the hall. It shows a puppet master's hands controlling a multitude of long threads with split fingers. If you follow the threads with your eyes, you discover that these fall dead to the floor. The doll that the threads, the master, must manipulate is gone. It has been released and it is not

known where it is or who is now controlling it. Maybe it is precisely this doll that meets us at the entrance to the hall? It stands there upright and lifts its arm in something reminiscent of a "welcome in" greeting. The light pink tongue yawns humorously at us, while the shining eyes stand like shallow puddles and stare blankly into the air.

'Me, Myself and I' is as technically and emotionally well-executed an exhibition as it is a well-directed performance, and one does not leave it emotionally untouched. For the generation growing up with Pompel & Pilt and Eastern European puppet theater on children's television, it may provoke two reactions of an equally strong nature: discomfort - perhaps even fear - over the ugly distorted puppets that cannot be controlled, or even nostalgic joy that it is possible to experience the surrealism of growing up in all its complexity at Stavanger Kunsthall.

Anne Therese Tveita has studied art and cultural studies at the University of Stavanger and at the Norwegian Institute in Rome. She has previously worked as a communicator at Stavanger Art Museum. For the last three years she has worked as an art critic for Stavanger Aftenblad.



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