

Stephen Friedman Gallery

STIRworld

Jonathan Baldock talks about folk art motifs, paganism and handcraft

Shraddha Nair

3 December 2021

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Image: A full view of I'm Still Learning at La Casa Encendida. Courtesy of Jonathan Baldock and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

'I'm Still Learning' at La Casa Encendida weaves together elements of the universe, with undercurrents of questions around identity, sexuality and craft.

Jonathan Baldock is an artist, currently based in the United Kingdom, whose work traverses the bounds of media by navigating sculpture, installation and performance with ease. He works with textile and ceramic, using his spatial understanding to bring them in tandem with ideas he wants to convey regarding trauma, stress, sensuality, morality and spirituality. Baldock's work was on view at La Casa Encendida in Madrid at a solo exhibition titled I'm Still Learning. Baldock speaks to us about his ongoing projects and the context from which his works emerge.



Image: The Caretakers by Baldock. Courtesy of Jonathan Baldock and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

Baldock tells us about his formative years and his introduction to handcraft. "It has always been important for me to speak from what I know in my work. I did not come from an artistic background, and we did not really go to art museums or galleries – certainly not contemporary art galleries anyway. However, I still witnessed a lot of creativity in my family. When I was very small, my mum would leave me with my grandmother whilst she went to work, and this was where I was taught some of the 'craft staples' that I continue to employ in my work to this day such as sewing, embroidery, knitting and crochet. For me handicrafts and folk art allow for a deep connection to the maker which has historically been working people, I think this separates it from the language of the traditional high arts which has always focused on the lives of the wealthy. To see an object where you can imagine how it might be made and what it might feel like to touch or wear gives it a very particular kind of power, providing an insight into how ordinary people lived and worked. I should also say that my practice stemmed from what I could afford and with limited funds to make art – craft processes and skills I could teach myself and were affordable which gave me total autonomy and freedom from relying on fabricators and expensive equipment," he says. Like many artists, Baldock's relationship with material and aesthetics was moulded by his early cultural experiences. Baldock displays vulnerability in his work, as well as in his discussion around his work. This allows him to incorporate into his sculpture a sense of playfulness, beauty and even mild aggression. The combination of these elements maintains a lightness in his work which smoothens out a turbulent conversation.



Image: Anthropomorphised clay stools at I'm Still Learning by Baldock. Courtesy of Jonathan Baldock and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

Baldock also engages deeply with western forms of folk art, which he tells us about in detail saying, "My focus has always been on European folk art, but one of the things I love about folk arts more generally is that there are many commonalities sharing a language that is essentially human."

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Puppetry, masks and a basic human desire to embellish and decorate remain a constant despite the individual expressions of unique regional communities and traditions. Folk art speaks to me about what it is to be human - skills and stories often passed down from one generation to the next that have incredibly ancient origins. European folk art often looks to nature and connects with ancient pagan civilisations that are pre-Christian”.



Image: Baldock’s work at Threadbare. Courtesy of Jonathan Baldock and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

Baldock continues to explain how these narratives shape the macrocosm of our contemporary relationship with nature. He shares, “As a queer person this opens potential for alternative histories and societies that existed outside the dominant status quo whereby I am embraced – all humans are embraced. I have grown up in a world where all principal religions have essentially rejected who I am, so why shouldn’t I look to other potential worlds. I should also say that as much as I am inspired by existing symbols in my work, I hope to create my own set of iconography and symbols. In folk art the borderline between decoration and symbol is particularly vague and that is something I love to play with.”

In I’m Still Learning the artist looks at early forms of classification rooted in ancient cultures and presents them in the form of four elemental beings. For instance, air was represented by the larger-than-life sized fan suspended from the gallery ceiling, as if flying. Earth was present in the clay stools which were anthropomorphised with faces for seats. Similarly, Baldock seems to incorporate mother nature herself, or Gaia, in the two standing puppets on the edge of the display. Towards the centre, a glass marionette represents water.



Image: A portrait of the artist. Morag Robertson, Courtesy of Jonathan Baldock and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

Baldock’s work is on view until December 19, 2021, at a solo show titled Warm Inside at Accelerator at Stockholm University.