An exhibition by Nick Mauss

Invited to stage an exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel, artist Nick Mauss has conceived *Bizarre Silks, Private Imaginings and Narrative Facts, etc.* in which scenographic, conceptual, and curatorial concerns coincide. The act is in keeping with Mauss's longstanding interest in the form of the exhibition as an artistic medium in its own right. *Bizarre Silks*... unfolds as a series of unexpected encounters in which the artist draws out each artwork’s distinct presence while heightening the relationships between them. Here, as in so many of his exhibitions, Mauss deliberately reacts to the conditions of a given space, paying attention to pacing and architecture, as well as creating devices for display, framing, and visual obstruction, which include a folding screen and a series of painted thresholds that reorient the viewer’s approach to what, and how, they are seeing.

How do you maintain a radical subjectivity?

Bea Schlingelhoff’s 2018 Typeface dedicated to and named after Anne-Marie (Im Hof-)Piguet in acknowledgment of the Swiss activist, addresses political consciousness as a means to surface a public memory.

Ray Johnson’s artist’s book *Ray Gives a Party* (ca. 1955) illustrates the pandemonium of costumed guests who attend an imagined party, including intimate and annoying friends, literary and artistic celebrities, and uninvited guests.

“Over centuries, there were Marie de France, Anna Comnena, Hroswitha, Christine de Pisane, Theophano, Eleanor of Aquitaine, Aethelflaed, Elizabeth of England, Elizabeth of Austria, Margaret of Austria, Margaret of Navarre, Margaret of Parma, Margaret of Valois, The Cathartes: Catherine Sforza who wouldn’t comply...” Rosemary Mayer’s litany of female potentates is a feminist evocation of forgotten names and of real lives distorted into myth. She pays homage through the works exhibited here to “all their colors, the texture of their garments, the hazy voluminous shapes they leave now hovering [...] Presence caught in thin veils, films of color on color.” Educated first as a classicist and later as an artist, Mayer was a founding member of A.I.R. Gallery, the first all-female cooperative gallery established in the United States in 1972. Over the course of her life she made works uneasily categorizable as either painting or sculpture, embracing drawing, writing, translation, temporary architectures, and events, all of which departed from the strict imperatives of minimalism and conceptual art. *Galla Placidia* (1973) is named after the ancient Roman empress and shown here in confrontation with the sculptures of Ketty La Rocca.
La Rocca’s freestanding letter “J” (1970) figures the French je (Eng. I) as a shiny, impermeable thing, while her Comma with 3 dots (1970) isolates the punctuation marks from any normative sound or “sense” to which they are meant to give structure.

Georgia Sagri’s oversized Deep Cut, Open Wound, and Fresh Bruise (all 2018) transform the exhibition and the building that houses it into a vulnerable organism in a state of crisis to which the viewer is a witness and tasked with rethinking their conception of care.

Konrad Klapheck’s painting Liberté, amour, art (Eng. Freedom, love, art; 1964) departs from the artist’s monumental fetishized portrayals of industrial objects by depicting the titular words emblazoned on parts of an unspecified plumbing system. What might this say about the artist who has claimed, “by way of painting, I am involuntarily writing my autobiography.” Is it not visible on the surface of a painting, it’s hidden underneath a layer of ice…”?

Private Imaginings and Narrative Facts (1968–70) is the work of Edward Owens—a precocious filmmaker whose career was cut short early on. He made all four of his surviving films when he was not yet twenty. Decades later, Jonas Mekas, in conversation with fellow filmmaker M.M. Serra, recalled Owens as “the first gay African American experimental filmmaker.” Ostensibly a portrait of Owens’ mother, Mildred, the film intercuts tender, lingering shots of a regal Mildred Owens with sudden glimpses of other subjects—an androgynous face, a Black Panther button, the dirty tip of a boot. Never arriving at a narrative, Owens’ miniature swirls fragments of aborted films and “real life” together with “fantasy” into a distillation of a lifetime’s yearnings.

A type of woven textile called “bizarre silks,” born out of the traffic in motifs kindled by the trade in textiles during the 17th and 18th centuries, constitutes a kind of ornamental feedback loop of industrial silk production and early global capitalism. These fabrics transport an erratic synthesis of various styles and origins: memories plucked from rococo, chinoiserie, the baroque, Persian quotations, and Japanese graphics collide to produce irrational flaming grotesques that anticipate, almost hallucinately, art nouveau.

Hannah Höch’s postwar gouache Ich bin ein armes Tier (Eng. I am a poor animal, 1959) at first looks like a child’s grammatical exercise. Conjugating a condition of being through every grammatical person, she transforms a feeling of utter abandonment into a statement of condemnation.

A 1986 work from Gretchen Bender’s series TV Text and Image (1986–1993) superimposes the statement “PEOPLE WITH AIDS” over a local TV channel broadcast.

The harshness of the “message” fused to the surface of the TV “message” exaggerates a perverse dissonance between two irreconcilable (but simultaneous) planes of fact.

Similarly, Megan Francis Sullivan’s paintings from the series The Bathers (Inverted!) (2015–2017) render Paul Cézanne’s bathers at a confounding distance, flipping their color scheme, as if one were seeing them in negative. Inciting optical and conceptual reversals that are hard to hold in equilibrium, Sullivan’s doubled afterimages gain an additional charge here in proximity to Cézanne’s Cinq baigneuses (Eng. Five Bathers, 1885/1887) on view at the Kunstmuseum Basel, just down the street.

During his “decadent” phase of the 1980s, sculptor Robert Morris produced Restless Sleepers/Atomic Shroud (1981), a set of bed linens printed with text and images of atom bomb explosions and skeletons. A text can be found on each pillowcase that describes the detonation of several nuclear bombs distributed over the globe “to achieve erasure.”

Ken Okiishi’s Untitled video from 2016 records a historically specific point of view: An unknown 21st century car’s approach into New York City as seen through the windshield. The banality of this episode quickly flips into surreality, resembling something photographer Eugène Atget (1857–1927) would have captured if he had had a smartphone, a car, and lived in New York City.

Two untitled scrapbooks (1964–70, 1979) collaboratively made by William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin are shown here as film, emphasizing their duration, tactility, and sequential illogic.

Victor Hugo Rojas (1942–93), a stylist of subversive luxury retail window displays and fashion designer Halston’s lover, was also a performance artist, captured here by artist Anton Perich in 1978 for his public access television show Anton Perich Presents. Hugo’s performances were marked by ritual sacrifice—here Andy Warhol’s portrait of Hugo that is destroyed among heaps of plastic sheeting, gamboling kittens, clouds of baby powder, and attendants nodding to disco music. Hugo’s performance shares a space with additional works by Mayer, “reenactments” of her no longer extant Ghosts (1981). Mayer’s art aspires to a meeting she termed “Object-as-Visitation.” Casting artwork and viewer in a symbolic confrontation, Mayer elicits a kind of stunned wonder through works that appear at once alien and ravishing.

The “miraculous encounter” finds an analog in “radical juxtaposition” throughout the exhibition, as it shuttles between text, texture, textility, transfiguration, and the fleshy reality of the body seen across works of decisively different epochs and genres. Constructing a temporary logic of proximities between specific artworks, gestures, and artifacts, Bizarre Silks… does not generate a
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Nick Mauss additionally acknowledges:
Owens’s films have been preserved thanks to The Film-Maker’s Cooperative in New York City and the commitment of the cooperative’s director M.M. Serra.
Mayer’s work is presented here thanks to the devotion of Marie Warsh and Max Warsh. The “reenactments” of Mayer’s *Ghosts* were made specifically for this exhibition in collaboration with Mayer’s estate and artist Amanda Friedman, following careful study of materials, and the artist’s notes about her works.
Bender’s work is here presented on a pair of monitors, following Bender’s one-time installation for a 1988 exhibition. I am grateful to Kenta Murakami, co-curator of the 2019 Bender retrospective at Red Bull Arts New York, for bringing this presentation to my attention.
A visit to the archives of the Fondazione Antonio Ratti in 2019, where Maddalena Terragni’s exhibition of bizarre silks was presented, inspired their inclusion in this exhibition.

GUIDED TOURS THROUGH THE EXHIBITION
Every Sunday at 3 pm guided tour, in German
Curator’s tour with artist Nick Mauss, in German
9.2.2020, Sunday, 3 pm
Guided tour, in English
12.3.2020, Thursday, 6:30 pm

EDUCATION / PUBLIC PROGRAMS
*Kunstagent*innen
19.3.2020, Thursday, 6:30 pm
A special, interactive tour of Nick Mauss’s exhibition, developed by students of the Bäumlihof grammar school, in German

Felix Bernstein and Gabe Rubin
*The Mimeology Songbook, 2020*
25.4.2020, Saturday, 3 pm
Performance with musical and text-based elements, in English

In the Kunsthalle Basel library you will find a selection of publications related to Nick Mauss and the other participating artists.

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