

VENICE

Say it with— Bolts!

DANIEL BIRNBAUM ON
"THE MILK OF DREAMS"

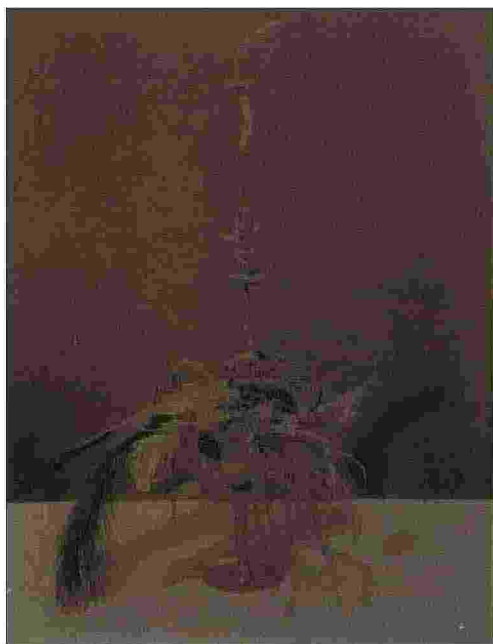
I COUNT NINE robust solo exhibitions by male contemporary artists in palaces scattered across Venice: Georg Baselitz, Anish Kapoor, Anselm Kiefer, Markus Lüpertz, Hermann Nitsch, Pedro Cabrita Reis, Daniel Richter, Ugo Rondinone, and Stanley Whitney. I later realize that there are even more, but nine is the number of "malic moulds" in Marcel Duchamp's Bachelor Machine, the male part of his *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (the Large Glass)*, 1915–23. Wearing uniforms, they represent masculine types, and they make me think of the central exhibition, curated by Cecilia Alemani, as the bride.

Just as in Duchamp's erotic allegory, the bride is "milky." The bachelors, caught in masturbatory monotony, cannot quite reach her. She remains the motor of their desire and has "feeble cylinders." There is no direct contact, but the proximity makes possible electrical connections.

"The Milk of Dreams," Alemani's impressive exposition of mostly women artists from all parts of the world, takes its name not from the Milky Way in the *Large Glass* but from a children's book by Leonora Carrington. The show is nothing less than an attempt to rewrite the more than century-long history of the avant-garde, highlighting key women in early modernism and making visible innumerable experimental practitio-



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Opposite page: Nadja, *C'est moi, c'est encore moi (It's Me, It's Me Again)*, 1926, lipstick and pencil on paper, 3 1/4 x 4 1/4". From "The Witch's Cradle."

Left: Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp*, ca. 1920, gelatin silver print, 8 x 6". Photo: Charles Sheeler. From "Seduction of the Cyborg."

Above: Luyang, *DOKU - Digital Descending*, 2020, three-channel 4K 3D animation, color, sound, 25 minutes. From "The Milk of Dreams." Photo: Roberto Marossi.

ners whom we tend to encounter only as fascinating footnotes to essays on legendary men.

A case in point: Nadja, the eponymous character of André Breton's autobiographical novel, known to most as an elusive Surrealist muse who soon disappeared into mental illness. Breton's dreamy account of their encounter has been read for nearly a century, but what traces did Nadja herself leave, beyond the author's metaphysical projections? From the Bibliothèque Littéraire Jacques-Doucet, in Paris, Alemani has excavated the original illustrated letters Nadja sent Breton, including a self-portrait in ink on a piece of paper tablecloth and a lipstick print on paper. At the Biennale's Central Pavilion, these poetic documents are displayed in a dimly lit, mustard-colored gallery named "The Witch's Cradle," one of five historical capsules that punctuate the displays of contemporary art. It is my favorite space in the show: an elegant cabinet of curiosities featuring better-known but not exactly overexposed pioneers, such as Claude Cahun, Leonor Fini, Meret Oppenheim, and Mary Wigman, and some twenty additional artists, many of whom I had never heard of.

To fully assess Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, a member of New York Dada and, according to some scholars, the inventor of the readymade, requires some radical rethinking. Just like Duchamp, she had a penchant for cross-dressing and would incorporate found objects into her wardrobe. And just like him, she stretched and manipulated the English language to create experimental poetry: "'Say it with'— — — / Bolts." she writes in her posthumously published "A Dozen Cocktails—Please," (1923–27).

"Thunder! Serpentine aircurrents— — — — Hhhhhhhhhphssssssssssss!
The very word penetrates!"

What her work makes abundantly clear is that I should reconsider the Duchampian vocabulary I initially used to characterize the arrangement of the exhibitions in Venice. If anyone is doing some stripping here, it will be the baroness herself. I encounter her works in the flesh for the first time: the readymade *God*, a ca. 1917 piece of plumbing cosigned and documented by Morton Schamberg; Charles Sheeler's original photograph of a sculpture titled *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp*, ca. 1920; and the assemblage *Limbswisk*, 1918–20, which exemplifies her practice of incorporating found objects into her work, thus collapsing the distinction between art and life.

Imagery of the baroness dominates a historical capsule named "Seduction of the Cyborg," a survey of tech fantasies of the ensuing decades—Hershman Leeson's exploration of the life of a cyborg, say, or Lu Yang's shamanistic overload. And yet the exhibition as a whole does not mirror the explosion of virtuality and technological abstraction that we have experienced globally during the pandemic—no holograms, no mixed-reality apps, not a single VR headset. Quite a relief for audiences longing for art and people in the flesh.

Three years ago, I felt that the entire exhibition was close to a tipping point, with every second work employing technologies anticipating total virtual immersion. "The Milk of Dreams," a show with more dead and elder artists than any previous installment of the Biennale, is a subtle museological experiment that in some of its most beautiful moments looks toward the past for glimpses of possible futures.

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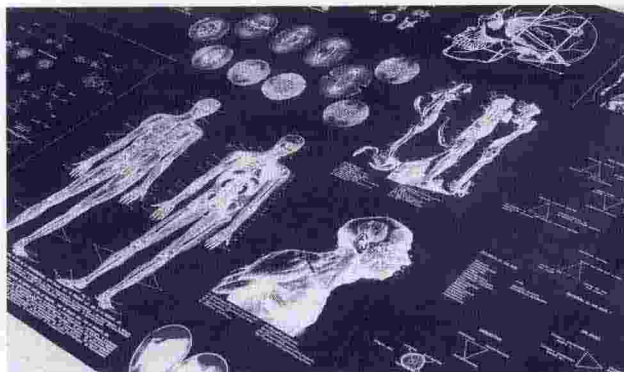
Above: View of "The Milk of Dreams," 2022, Arsenal, Venice. From left: Priitia Zivahera, *Rubelwa Ikemazi* (Captured Owls), 2022; Priitia Zivahera, *Kudonhadewa Ikemazi* (Fallen Owls), 2022. Photo: Roberto Marassi.

Below: Agnes Denes, *Introspection I—Evolution (detail)*, 1968-71, monoprint, 17" 8" x 3' 6 1/2". From "The Milk of Dreams."

Opposite page: Christina Quarles, *(Who Could Say) We're Not Just as We Were*, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 5' 10" x 10' 30". From "The Milk of Dreams."

A fascinating gallery devoted to visual technologies and forms of speculative diagrams features works by Agnes Denes, who renders visible human thought systems in encyclopedically rich prints, and Ulla Wiggen, who in meticulous paintings from the mid-1960s portrays the insides of mechanical devices. The nature of a diagram is to be abstract yet representational. It is a way of coding information pictorially that is not dependent on naturalism—though realistic elements are readily incorporated into its symbolic vocabulary. Wiggen's recent paintings of the irises of eyes may appear to escape technological obsessions and insist on the possibility of a direct and unsullied gaze. If the machinic paintings presented a technical world with an engineer's precision, and without ambience, tone, or special point of view, Wiggen's recent works could be their soulful opposites.

But that would be a simplification. Irises have been interpreted as diagrams, too. Practitioners of iridology match their observations to charts that divide the iris into zones that correspond to specific parts of the human body. Iridologists see the eyes as windows into the body's state of health. In medical "picture atlases," the human iris is



presented as a kind of technical manual for scrutinizing the internal organs. And today's scanning technologies turn our eyes into surveillance tools. Remember that the virtual world now is sutured to our nervous systems.

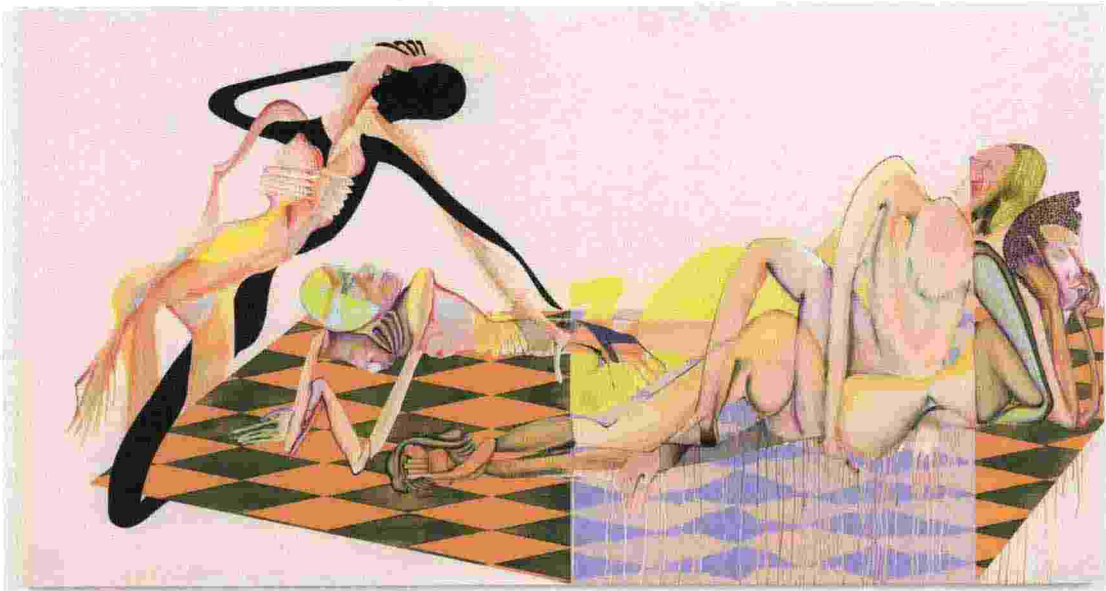
"The Milk of Dreams," says Alemanni, focuses on three themes: "the representation of bodies and their metamorphoses; the relationship between individuals and technologies; and the connection between bodies and the Earth." They all seem rooted in strategies found in Surrealism. Another Surrealist theme is the obsession with the eye, ecstatic or blinded. And indeed, Simone Leigh's magnificent *Brick House*, 2019, which greets visitors at the entrance of the Arsenale, is partly notable for her lack of eyes.

As in all exhibitions of this size, there are works relating to key themes that I would rather forget. In fact, I have already forgotten them. What one remembers are, I think, singular moments of visual precision and intensity: for instance, the large luminous paintings by Zimbabwean artist Portia Zvavahera, combining patterns reminiscent of textile design with ghostlike

creatures. There are plenty of figurative paintings that translate the energies of historical Surrealism into contemporary vocabularies in startling ways—Jana Euler's grotesque bodily convulsions, Christina Quarles's smears and drips on top of naked flesh. As for the connection between bodies and the Earth, I remember Zheng Bo's video of Nordic men engaged in copulative intercourse not with one another but with nature itself. And of course, I will always recall exiting the exhibition via Precious Okoyomon's overwhelming *To See the Earth Before the End of the World*, 2022, with its expanding invasion of kudzu vines, a seemingly unstoppable form of life, and a group of large mysterious creatures silently watching your every step. Perhaps these are the guardians of the Earth—the last ones to leave before it's all over. □

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