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ArtReview



Sidsel Meineche Hansen

Sacred Objects Vulnerable Bodies Good NFTs?



In March 1912 suffragettes staged a window-smashing campaign across London's West End, aiming to demonstrate that the government placed a higher value on property than on the lives of women. Among their targets was the popular department store Swan & Edgar, as shown in an archival black-and-white photograph documenting the aftermath of the attack, with black-coated men – and a smattering of women – milling around the scene. That image forms part of Marge Monko's *Show Windows* series (2014–21), on view in a two-artist exhibition titled *The Great Pretender* at Kai Art Centre in Tallinn. It introduces a sequence of c-prints of contemporary store windows – in this case, high-end shoe displays – bookended by another historical shot, this one of a shop destroyed by Soviet cannon fire in 1919, during the Estonian War of Independence.

The archival images included in *Show Windows* illuminate the ambiguous nature of seemingly apolitical commercial sites. Located on the threshold between private and public space, their glass barriers are the staging grounds for energetic outbursts of criminal activity, political protest and natural disaster – inanimate bystanders that act, in some instances, like bad reflections. In one archive photo, a woman reaches into a broken

Mixed Signals

Desires refracted through window displays and vernacular art catch Stephanie Bailey's eye in Tallinn

Marge Monko, *Sheer Indulgence* (still), 2021, 16mm film transferred to digital, 8 min. Courtesy the artist

store-window in Washington, DC, amid the civil unrest that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr in 1968. Caught by the camera's incriminating lens, the figure is suspended in a thicket of conjecture – is this a protest, the seizing of an opportunity or a mixture of both? The picture introduces four more *Show Windows* c-prints: a bland homeware presentation and three maximalist displays whose overload reflects an enmeshment of objects and projections. From a congested beauty-shop taxonomy to a row of niche toilet brushes – some in the shape of cats, one like a turtle – arranged below a 1980s-style neoclassical black-and-white image of a chiselled man holding a shower head over his naked body.

The Great Pretender's other artist is London-based Gabriele Beveridge, who contributes sculptures consisting of chromed mannequin legs over which handblown pink glass orbs seem to melt, elevating the shop dummy into something totemic; and *Fountain* (2021), which, despite the reference in its title, borrows its central form from another Marcel Duchamp readymade, *Bottle Rack* (1914). The metal frame hangs from the ceiling like a chandelier, with breasty pink glass orbs slumping from each tip, as if to mirror the refractions of desire that are concentrated in Monko's commercial frames. Here, the breast

is objectified like any other industrialised mass-produced item, whether a designer shoe or basic household appliance.

The shop window and its medley of consumer items signals an entanglement of wants and ways of living. It makes visible societal stratifications that feed latent urges, and aspirations that lurk beneath the material veneers of necessity. Perhaps that's why storefronts so often bear the brunt of unrest. To break the display is to rupture the facade of the status quo, which says a lot about the global designer stores that rushed to board their New York City storefronts ahead of the BLM protests in the summer of 2020. But perhaps not so much about shopkeepers on the other end of the scale, for whom precarity is far more present than it is for brands whose inflated prices speak to marketing budgets more than function. It's a knock-on effect, really. A sliding scale of dominoes, whereby a system predicated on desiring capital locks people into its thrust for more, such that those on one end of the scale can be taken as equal to those on the other, purely based on their function to buy and sell.

That spectrum between high and low, outside and in, one point and another, opens up in *Otherness, Desire, the Vernacular*, curated by Denis Maksimov at Temnikova & Kasela, the commercial gallery next door to Kai Art Centre. In this pairing, folk-inspired artworks by Jaanus Samma, including a bench installed with wooden tavern mugs, face six digital c-prints from Carlos



Motta's archetypal 'others' represent an enigmatic mystery, as is befitting of source material to which only the initiated had access. These forms exude the same kind of alien presence as Beveridge's chrome legs in the gallery next door, whose limbic iconography is heightened by Monko's short video *Sheer Indulgence* (2021), in which a closed frame of dancers wearing different coloured stockings move in a templelike white room to the timeless and ritualistic sound of beating claves.

Samma's textile works, on the other hand, move from the speculative realm of legends and icons to grounded traditions passed on from person

to person. *Personal Mythology* (2021) takes the form of a traditional Estonian rug, commonly used to commemorate a wedding, handwoven by Ingrid Helena Pajo according to Samma's design. On red ground, motifs repeat across the weave: a folk-art rendition of a jockstrap, a pair of topless men sawing wood and a church whose phallic tower spurts a white snake's tongue. Each symbol draws from the artist's work – most recently, jockstraps and briefs embroidered with patterns based on nineteenth-century coifs (*tanu*) traditionally worn by married women found at the Estonian National Museum. In these homages to village people, Samma queers folk traditions to confront traditional viewpoints in a common language – at once a challenge and a wink that seeks to bend rather than break.

Apprehension and wonder feed equally into Motta's fantastical creatures, whose monochromatic digital renderings evoke ancient-futurist projections of a timeless hybridity, which in turn match Samma's earthbound material remixes, where conservatism and fluidity come together as an incongruous fusion of handmade form. In these expressions of materialist culture and its various spectacles, the conditions of necessity and excess emerge across temporalities and landscapes, opening up a continuum that likewise charges Monko's photographic sequences and Beveridge's mannequin-turned-totemic-forms next door. As with Monko's shop windows, the objects in these Tallinn galleries appear like indifferent yet potent thresholds; embodiments of that libidinal space from which a desiring culture – and in turn, its actions – erupts, as if poised for climax.

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Motta's *The Psalms* series (2018), in which a digitally rendered single black figure emerges from a black plane. Each form is based on bodies found in medieval and Renaissance manuscripts. One of them, *Monstrum triceps capite vulpis, draconis, & aquilaue* (2018), is taken directly from the 1642 book *Monstrorum Historia*, by Ulisse Aldrovandi, and depicts a human torso with dragon legs and the heads of an eagle, hound and dragon.

from top Jaanus Samma, *Personal Mythology*, 2021, wool rug, woven by Ingrid Helena Pajo, photo Roman-Sten; Carlos Motta, *Vir Marinus Episcopi Specie*, from the series *The Psalms*, 2018, 3D print, acrylic photopolymer. Both courtesy the artists and Temnikova & Kasela, Tallinn