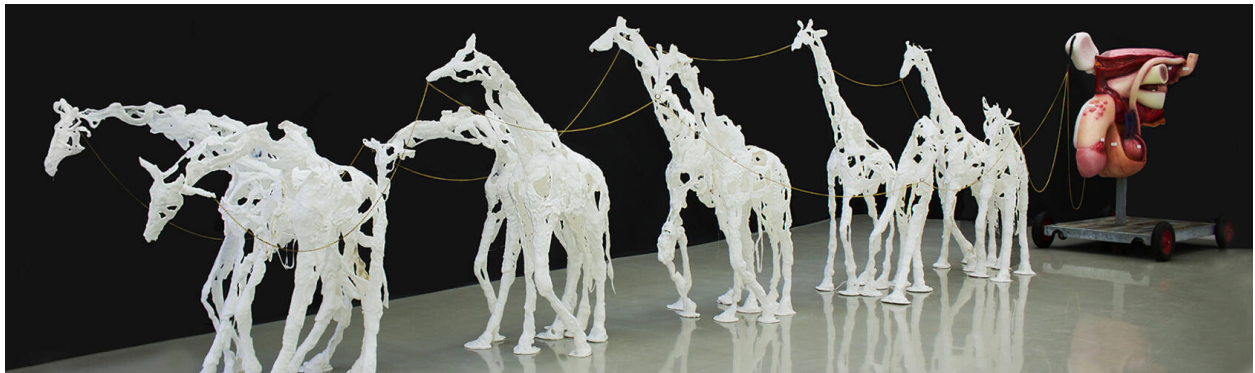


FRIEZE

‘The Milk of Dreams’ Tests a Theory of the Posthuman

At the Arsenale, monumental works question the place of the human in nature, and the nature of the human

BY ANDREW DURBIN IN CRITIC'S GUIDES , EXHIBITION REVIEWS | 20 APR 22



Raphaela Vogel, *Können und Müssen (Ability and Necessity)*, 2022, polyurethane elastomer, steel, brass, anatomical model and cart, 2.2 × 1.4 × 10.3 m. Courtesy: the artist and MEYER*KAINER, Vienna

‘The Milk of Dreams’ at the Arsenale opens with Simone Leigh’s huge bronze bust of a woman’s head and torso, *Brick House* (2019) – a work that, shown alongside enigmatic figurative paintings by the Cuban printmaker Belkis Ayón, announces this exhibition’s emphasis on painting and sculpture, as well as its thematic love of the mythic, the monumental and the mysterious. ‘The Milk of Dreams’ – boasting more than 200 artists from 58 countries, the majority of whom are female or gender non-conforming – derives its title from a short story by Leonora Carrington, whose surreal paintings of dreamy interiors and ecstatic landscapes are also included here and serve as a sort of precis. In her curatorial statement, artistic director Cecilia Alemani claims that ‘many artists are imagining a posthuman condition that challenges the modern Western vision of the human being – especially the presumed universal ideal of the white, male “Man of Reason” – as fixed centre of the universe and measure of all things’. Thankfully, many of the works slip out from the confines of the show’s somewhat academic remit, offering a nuanced perspective that, at times, transfixed me.

Combining the animal and the human, Ali Cherri's *Titans* (2022) – three figurative sculptures made of mud and based on Assyrian Lamassu and other ancient gods – is a particularly strong evocation of the biennial's theme of the earthy surreal. They appear adjacent to Cherri's three-channel film *Of Men and Gods and Mud* (2022), which lyrically considers our lives in relation to water, mud and stars. At one point, a voiceover in the film announces: 'If the gods made us in their own image, then the gods, too, must have been made of mud.' The image of interspecies life fashioned by *Titans* suggests that our own bodies are more entangled with the natural world than they might seem. Wall text relates the work to Donna Haraway's notion of slime from *When Species Meet* (2007), which she defines as a substance that 'lubricate[s] passages for living beings and their parts'. While the artist has quoted this text before in relation to his work *Where do Birds go to Hide* (2018), I was not entirely convinced of its inclusion here as a description of *Titans*. Mud is durable yet vulnerable; slime is often alive, creeping, a goo of microscopic life when it is offered a humid corner of the planet. But to an extent, the ideas that govern 'The Milk of Dreams' seem to lead the selection, organization and explanation of many of the artists – to mixed results. Often, the works are more generous and arresting than the language used to box them in.

On leaving the small, dark room screening Cherri's film, Igshaan Adams's enormous tapestry of painted wood, plastic, bone, beads and more – *Bonteheuvel / Epping* (2021) – greets you. The work is inspired by the 'desire lines', or unplanned paths, created by the foot-traffic among communities Apartheid South Africa wished to keep apart. It is a gorgeous counterpoint to Cherri's sculpture while drawing from a similar poetics of shaped earth. There are numerous physically imposing works in the show and, unlike in many past biennials, here they are given room to breathe. Delicate, subtle installations by Emma Talbot – *Where Do We Come From? Who Are We? Where Are We Going?* (2021) – and Kapwani Kiwanga – *Terrarium* (2022) – are not stuffed into corners, as might be expected in a show with such large painting and sculpture; they occupy significant parts of the Arsenale, provocatively interrupting the flow of largely wall-based works.

A sequence of Jamian Juliano-Villani's paintings appears toward the end of the Arsenale, a curious – albeit welcome – inclusion in an otherwise fairly staid show. They are funny, weird, crass. A goat in Ugg boots stands in a pink, chequered room appended with advertisements for beer and bars in *Let's Kill Nicole* (2019). A blurred

traffic light reads 'shut up' in *Shut Up, the Painting* (2018). They are perhaps the most graphically dynamic paintings in the show, which tends otherwise toward the austere, sombre and subtle. But I loved the moments of levity Juliano-Villani afforded. Louise Bonnet's *Pisser Triptych* (2021–22) is another instance of comic brilliance, though yet again you are failed by the wall text's mouthful of artspeak. Three nude female figures – huge, shapely, redolent of futurist sculpture – urinate great golden streams of piss: one flows behind a figure's back, another sprays from a vagina like a spotlight, and yet another arcs upward in conical shape. It's a fucking weird painting, which is why I liked it so much. Yet, without a touch of irony or humour, we are told 'the work references humans' cycles of consumption and excretion – taking up and transforming raw materials, only to ceaselessly spit out waste on the other side'. There must be precious few instances outside biology or anthropology where pissing has been so studiously described. And the dripping, leaking, body-horror sculpture of Mire Lee – *Endless House: Holes and Drips* (2022) – is almost a send-up of the seriousness of the terminology deployed throughout the show. A work described as suggesting 'the tension of states of aliveness' is more of a Cronenbergian torture chamber of squirming, rib-cage-like body parts, all of them oozing and leaking on an elevated platform. Paul Thek would have marvelled. I found it a bit hilarious, actually.

I raise the issue of the wall text so often because it suggests a central problem with an otherwise free-flowing, surprising installation: the ideas that ostensibly inform 'The Milk of Dreams' – posthumanism, cybernetics, etc. – lag the work included in the show. In a room titled 'The Seduction of the Cyborg', for instance, we are told what a cyborg is ('a human that has become integrated with an artificial technology'), with a requisite citation from Haraway, and that this idea of a technological or prosthetic mediation has been of interest to artists throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Certainly. But the actual work included – by Regina Cassolo Bracchi, Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, Rebecca Horn, Kiki Kogelnik and Louise Nevelson, to name a few – rarely seems so compelled by the terms used to bring it together. Instead, we glimpse the playful erotics of puppetry and surrogacy, from the Weimar-era costumes of Lavinia Schulz and Walter Holdt to Anu Pöder's mannequins. Lost in the slick,

academic notion of the cyborg (at least as it is presented here) is the coarse and expressive humanity of these works, the obvious handiwork that constructed the hats and prosthetics and costumes, the folkloric influences of what might be identified as a Dionysian element of modernism.

But it isn't all about the human and post-human, of course. Many of the artists here situate nature and the animal at the centre of their work. From Gabriel Chaile's creaturely evocation of family members to Jessie Homer French's maimed landscapes (*Burning*, 2020) to Precious Okoyomon's weedy garden (*To See the Earth Before the End of the World*, 2022), the non-human, or the not-quite-human, threads throughout 'The Milk of Dreams'. Sometimes, these moments are appropriately inexplicable and surreal, as in Raphaela Vogel's diagrammatic sculpture of a cock being led by a troop of giraffes (*Ability and Necessity*, 2022) – a truly weird piece that lives up to the spectre of Carrington hovering over the Biennale. I was also moved by a small, subtle, two-channel film installation by the Norwegian artist Liv Bugge. Shot on 16mm, *Play* (2019) shows huskies romping in the snow. They nibble and paw one another, roll over, cuddle. It is a scene at once common (go to the lawns of the Giardini, if you don't have a puppy of your own) and completely mesmerizing. Animals at play with one another, unbothered by 'the human' or 'the posthuman' or 'the cyborg' at the door.