

Josefin Arnell: CRYBABY 9 February – 28 April 2024

I'm interested in horror and fantasy as a conduit or a crossover. When I talk about horror I'm also thinking about comedy – I don't separate them.

– Josefin Arnell

The work of Josefin Arnell (b. 1984, Sweden) defines a loaded visual language combining anger, desire, disgust and pleasure. Her films and works create space for complex realities, socially marginalized characters and absurd fictionalization. In her working methods, Arnell commits to collaborating with real life and the slackening of control that it can entail. Using call and response methods, and sometimes working with people without acting experience – who might not always follow scripts, or rehearse – reality seeps through in Arnell films, contributing to a darkly humorous sense of the uncanny that speaks of the existing interplay between individuals.

Josefin Arnell's work has largely not been shown in Sweden. With the exhibition *CRYBABY*, Index presents a body of work that has been growing over a number of years, developing through the assumption of real life as a stage and the possibility for cinematic experimentation. The exhibition offers a selection of films – new and existing works – that visitors encounter within a close proximity and time span. Jumping between genres, Josefin Arnell finds ways to question the relationship with the viewer, while embracing provocation, moral questions, and through filmic characters whose backgrounds transgress the norm. In her films, Josefin Arnell depicts relations of power and control, vividly interweaving the real with the unreal and sharpening the edges of both.

The horse and the stable are recurring motifs in Arnell's practice. In *Wild Filly Story* (2020), the setting of the stable, and the sensory associations of that place, have an autobiographical resonance for Arnell. As a teenager she would frequent a local stable as a place of escape, an alternate reality. Mucking out the horses, clearing up their shit, was Arnell's voluntary task in exchange for riding the horses. The community she found there included female figures learning to care for and control these large and powerful creatures. The stable is presented as an arena for power games, exploring the tensions within a micro-community, also symbolizing those that exist on a broader societal and cultural scale, and the power asymmetries which create them.

In *Beast and Feast* (2023) the viewer meets the character Annina, a single mother and police officer who finds herself called to attend a bloody and absurd murder case. Convinced that finding the perfect police horse is the answer to her problems – the desire for validation from her colleagues – the protagonist's quest is a struggle amid shifting positions of institutional and interpersonal power, and a backdrop of violence, brutality and comic gore.

For several films, Josefin Arnell cast people she met in the locations that became the films' settings: a therapeutic pony ranch in *Wild Filly Story* (2020); and in her most recent film, *Buurthuis 2* (2023), the community center across the street from where Arnell lives.

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In *Buurthuis 2* (2023), the classic characters of zombies and vampires appear, operating as vehicles or conduits for speaking indirectly about deeper wounds. The film takes place in and around the community center Buurthuis de Witte Boei, in Wittenburg, Amsterdam, and features the visitors and workers of the center. This project began with Arnell getting to know her neighbors, and over time sharing the idea of making a film together. The process engaged with real experiences of those who used the community center, including a gun shooting in 2018, which strongly informed the community's conception of what horror was. Through conversations and workshops at the community center, Arnell initiated a process where the other horror in the neighborhood could be voiced: the pressures of gentrification on the area. It is no coincidence that the vampire of *Buurthuis 2* is also a real estate agent. Arnell plays with the facets of the horror genre, and the comic within it. With *Buurthuis 2*, Arnell opens for a discussion around gentrification using different languages than we are used to or might expect. With fiction, traditional and modern fantasy characters and a tone rooted in storytelling, she creates a new realm in between fantasy, reality and politics.

Watching Arnell's filmworks can give the sense that the making of them is transformative for all involved. The relationships that develop in front of and behind the camera also make the work; based on the juxtaposition of intentions and desires, on letting things unfold with the people invited in, and for whom Arnell, as director, provides boundaries that can be molded collectively. The effects of this have a bearing not only on the viewers, but with all those who have collaborated on and implicated in the work. In this way, Arnell's works function not only as a window into a shared fiction and collaborative experiment, but also indirectly as an narrative device for sucking the poison from a societal wound.

In certain works, Arnell uses filmic decisions to emphasize closeness with the subject matter: the presence of the camera, the inclusion of randomness and a clean montage create a short distance between the filming eye (with the camera) and the gaze of the viewer. The shake of a handheld camera reveals the human touch and palpable relation between director and subject. In the case of *Den blomstertid nu kommer*, (*Now the time of blossoming arrives*) (2019), this relationship is between Arnell and her mother, who she films singing while shooting beer cans with an air rifle in a context that speaks of deep Swedish winter. This film is one visible part of an existing series made over a long time span, which form a string of sketches portraying both a recurring mothership character, and alcohol addiction. The presence of the camera as a tool between actor and director, mother and daughter, allows for the invention of new, non-autobiographical characters, facilitating other possible narratives to real life.

Mixing reality – sometimes casting non-actors, shooting without rehearsing or closely following the scripts – with a visceral and obviously fake gore that is somehow bloodier than the hyperslick special effects of contemporary blockbusters, Josefin Arnell creates a camp comic horror, where laughter rings with an uneasy echo, and leaves behind a lingering introspection and curiosity about what is collectively witnessed and created, on both sides of Arnell's camera.

The installation of the exhibition *CRYBABY* at Index physically manifests multiple viewing positions. the spectator, subject, co-witness. Playing with a bodily presence, a spatial realization of the leitmotif of the stable, which becomes both a scenography and a locus for

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narratives that mesh fiction and memory. Entering into the horse pens at a scale of 1:1 invites the viewer to situate themselves in the “wrong” place.

Based in Amsterdam, **Josefin Arnell** participated in the residency program at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten. In 2018 she won the Theodora Niemeijer Prijs for emerging female artists in the Netherlands. In 2023 she was nominated for the Prix de Rome, one of the oldest and most prestigious art awards in the Netherlands, and exhibited at Stedelijk Museum in connection with the award. Her work has been presented at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA), and at institutions including Wiels (Brussels), UKS (Oslo), Van Abbe Museum (Eindhoven), Kunsthalle Münster (Münster), Palais de Tokyo (Paris), and at Athens Biennial, Moscow Biennial and festivals in Buenos Aires, Berlin, Amsterdam among other locations. She holds an MA in Dirty Art from Sandberg Instituut (Amsterdam).

Works

Buurthuis2, 2023

Video, color, sound

17 min 13 sec

Gag Reflex / I wanna puke in heaven, 2016

Video, color, sound

10 min 42 sec

Den blomstertid nu kommer; (Now the time of blossoming arrives), 2019

Video, color, sound

2 min 48 sec

Beast and Feast, 2023

Video, color, sound

25 min 10 sec

LUCKY / Let's Run, 2018

Video, color, sound

10 min 57 sec

Nikita, 2020

Video, color, sound

9 min 5 sec

Blood Sisters, 2020

(The film was made in collaboration with Helen Anna Flanagan)

Video, color, sound

9 min 12 sec

Wild Filly Story, 2020

Video, color, sound

22 min 54 sec

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