



Alexandra Bircken. *Fair Game*
19 September 2021 – 15 May 2022
Kesselhaus

A central theme in Alexandra Bircken's oeuvre is the shell. She examines skin, clothing, containers, and architecture in relation to their interior: organs, bones, and invisible functions. The artist creates sculptures and assemblages from diverse materials in which she explores the relationships between space, body, and shell, exposing the interior and examining our notions of corporeality, machines, and human beings.

Alexandra Bircken's site-specific installation *Fair Game* (2021) in the Kesselhaus at the KINDL opens up diverse reference spaces ranging from hunting scenarios to battle paintings, and from political violence to laboratories and clubs, activating a wide variety of associations in visitors. It can be read as a commentary on the times in which we are living, or in the words of Friederike Mayröcker, as one of those ships that return from an uncertain future of things to come. The work questions the power of the Enlightenment and returns from utopias to the material, to the tools and techniques used to process it, and to the body.

Instead of creating finished series of works, Bircken gradually expands her oeuvre. In *Fair Game* she uses elements from earlier works such as *Deflated Figures* (2014) and *New Model Army* (2016) and augments them with components designed for the enormous exhibition space, such as the 20-meter-long bone ladder that spans the space in a grid pattern. The artist also combines readymade objects, such as the black beer kegs from the local Rollberg brewery, with specially made, hand-blown glass vessels, stuffed animals, synthetic hair, real hair, ostrich eggs, and rags, and thus continues her exploration of different materials, production methods, and their symbolism.

The human figures distributed across the room are reduced to empty shells made of black latex, some of which cannot be assigned to a sex. In some cases they are individualised with embroideries in the form of applied body parts such as eyes, organs, muscles, or a spine. The ladders as escape routes project outward what the empty shells of the figures lack inside: bones that form the basic structure of the body, mortal remains of living things. The whole situation is inspired, among other things, by Samuel Beckett's short story *The Lost Ones* (*Le Dépeupleur*, 1969).

On some of the figures lying limp on the floor, ostrich eggs mark the position of the uterus. The charged symbol of the egg as the germ of new life is turned into a Molotov cocktail due to a fuse hanging out of it. The barrels standing around, which were recently emptied at hedonistic parties, become potential barrel bombs.

The glass vessels at various points in the installation indicate processes of transformation, transferred to the artificial space of a modern laboratory. Figures in blue and pink, stuffed animals, and other non-human objects interact in various ways with the test tube-like elements. Where the glass vessels are wrapped in textile weaves, they have the appearance of glass cocoons.

With *Fair Game*, Alexandra Bircken has chosen an ambiguous title and continues her interest in the protective functions of shells. The central figure is a hybrid of protective clothing and armour. *The Tourist* is equipped with rope, tights, knee pads, motorcycle gear, and parts of American football shoulder pads, and is crowned with antlers made of exhaust parts. The archaic, futuristic figure, which could also be a modern Electra from Heiner Müller's *Hamletmachine*, is armed with a sabre and carries a linen bag in her right hand. The phallic weapon itself is almost hidden by the sleeve, while the casually carried bag points to a phase of human history when foraging was a way of life. It was the

foragers and not the hunters who provided most of the food and thus ensured survival. And perhaps the earliest human invention, but certainly one of the most important, was bags made of skins, shells.

In the accompanying 94-minute soundtrack by Thomas Brinkmann entitled *Ultraschall*, a heartbeat forms the continuous element against which fragments of conversation, melodies, and other sounds are arranged. It is the sound that you might continue to hear in your mind when the lights go on in the club after the last dance.

Curated by Kathrin Becker

As part of Berlin Art Week 2021

Alexandra Bircken (*1967 in Cologne, lives in Berlin and Munich) has been a professor of sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich since 2018.

Selected solo exhibitions: Museum Brandhorst, Munich (2021 – 2022); Fridericianum, Kassel (since 2020); Secession, Vienna (2019); Studio Voltaire, London (2018 and 2011); Le Crédac, Ivry-sur-Seine (2017); Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach (2017); Künstlerhaus, K21 Ständehaus, Düsseldorf (2016); Kunstverein Hannover (2016); Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam (2014); The Hepworth Wakefield (2014); Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2008).

Selected group exhibitions: Museum Folkwang, Essen (2019); KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin (2019); 58th Venice Biennale (2019); Whitechapel Gallery, London (2018); The Israel Museum, Jerusalem (2016); Glasgow International (2016); Des Moines Art Center, Iowa (2015); Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio (2015); Deutsches Hygiene-Museum, Dresden (2014 – 2015); Institute for Contemporary Art, Boston (2014 – 2015); National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Harare and Bulawayo (2014).