

Signe Johannessen

*Trophy*

*I think now of that buck, how you stared into its black glass eyes and saw your reflection, your whole body, warped in that lifeless mirror. How it was not the grotesque mounting of a decapitated animal that shook you – but the taxidermy embodied a death that won't finish, a death that keeps dying as we walk past it to relieve ourselves.*

Ocean Vuong

The hunt, status, eroticism, desire, and power. The word trophy contains multiple associations and derives from the Greek *tro'paion*: a memorial to where the enemy was routed. Trophies were carried forth in victory marches and appeared as motifs in craft work during antiquity. During the Renaissance, baroque, and neoclassical periods, trophies decorated military buildings and monuments, while hunting trophies also adorned castles as status symbols. During the latter half of the 1900s, *trophy wife* came to be used as a sarcastic description of a married woman who did not work outside the home, but who was supported by her husband, or a young woman who married an older, wealthier, man. This misogynistic expression asserts patriarchal norms by disparaging the woman and designating her the prey.

Hovering, lined up, organized in glass vitrines and in piles, hundreds of sculptural objects are presented in the installation, as if pulled from an archaeological dig or mass grave. Layer by layer, thighbones, pelvises, hair, and horns are fused into soil. Clusters of objects make up traces of rituals that have infused each piece with energy. Installations of bone, horn, and hair reinforce the absence of skin and blood. A silent landscape of bodily remains opens up. Johannessen's work does not contain simple dichotomies of desire. The sculptural body of work raises questions about the taxonomy, collection, and exhibition of objects – and about suffering, fetishization, and pleasure in relation to such actions.

Signe Johannessen's monumental exhibition consists of movements between interventions and experiments, between species and eras, and between personal experiences and social norms. Through repeated, nearly manic, acts of editing and dissection, Johannessen approaches a brutal but systematic settling of accounts with, and examination of, desire. A ritual caretaking space unfolds in parallel, manifest through intimate gestures in the form of braided locks of hair and messages communicated by sooty fingers' movements across a range of surfaces. The fundamental geometric shapes – the circle, cross, and line – recur time and again, as if a deconstructed alphabet.

In the video work *Mr. Deer*, we are confronted by a jealous and agitated voice that outwits its prey, a buck, through gentle manipulation alternating with rhythmic magic spells. By playing with seduction, submission, and superiority, the relationship between desire and the death drive is addressed. The camera follows the voyeur's gaze and demand in a nearly pornographic fashion. The earth is meat and sex and the buck is drawn down into the mud. Its stiff horns and muscular body burrow themselves deeper and deeper into the bottomless swamp.

In *Rupture*, we initially get to follow Johannessen, who has invited her mother into the forest in order to communicate with a buck in heat who is searching for a partner. The context is Johannessen's childhood and the herd-like structure she was raised in as one of numerous children in a large collective in northern Norway, led by a patriarchal father figure. Further

on, we encounter the ruins of a collapsed society on a now-abandoned island in the Indian Ocean. The island Netaji Subash Chandra Bose Dweep is a former British outpost. The British utilized the island as an administrative hub for surrounding penal colonies during the 1800s. The island featured grand villas, tennis courts, and open-air dance pavilions. Since Indian independence in 1947, the island has basically been abandoned and nature and wildlife are in the process of reclaiming it. In the early 1900s, British officers transported deer to the island in order to provide for their own recreational hunting. There, the deer had no natural enemies, and their population increased exponentially. Of the collapsed colonial society now exists only ruins of buildings built by prison labor, surrounded by heavy root work. Visits to the island are strictly regulated: filming is prohibited and all visitors must leave the island by dusk. Johannesen's work alludes to the notion that true structural change requires destruction and chaos before new relations and patterns can develop.

In the video work *Puppy Play*, interpersonal and interspecies relationships are further tested in a clearing in the forest. In the film's initial sequence, we encounter a group of children in the woods, dressed in fur. They tumble around and lick each other, growl, yelp, and crawl with sticks in their mouths. In the second sequence, the perspective is displaced and as viewers we are now further away, as if sneaking up or spying on the flock from behind branches. The children make their way to a clearing where a wolf-like creature rests. There, they settle down, seemingly for the night. The piece prompts a sense of ambivalence and toggles between sweet romance and a scene of terror, as if it follows on the heels of a catastrophe where the children have been forced to fend for themselves. *Puppy Play* prompts questions concerning belonging, disaster, and trust with regard to biology and propagation. The voyeur's potentially threatening gaze is addressed in relation to the power imbalance between children and adults, as well as between humans and animals.

When I view Johannesen's work in the exhibition I think of extraction, to literally pull something out in order to discover the seed, or to distill. Hers is an enormous endeavour that demands a systematic approach and failure, retakes, and rewrites. An exploration of brutality also demands tenderness. Whispers turn into shouts.

Text: Julia Björnberg, curator of the exhibition