

Thomas Gebremedhin, "Q&A With Cosima von Bonin," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 23, 2018.

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Q&A With Cosima von Bonin

With a show of new work opening at Petzel Gallery in New York, the artist discusses her creative process and inspirations



What If It Barks / Shark Trash Bin Version 2, 2018, Plastic, fabric, wood, cardboard PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PETZEL, NEW YORK

By Thomas Gebremedhin

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ALTHOUGH HER WORK spans a range of mediums, Cologne, Germany–based conceptual artist Cosima von Bonin, 55, is perhaps best known for her tongue-in-cheek sculptures that reference objects and images drawn from popular culture. Past pieces include oversize stuffed animals, scooters, and clams on skateboards. Understandably, these pieces have earned her comparisons to Jeff Koons and Claes Oldenburg; and similar to these artists' work, von Bonin's bright, whimsical sculptures are deceptive in their simplicity, deftly tackling challenging themes including appropriation, identity, and the environment.

Petzel

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What if it Barks?, her new show at New York's Petzel Gallery, opens on February 23 and sees von Bonin revisiting a marine motif, which she explored at her solo exhibition at SculptureCenter in New York in 2016. Works include robed mackerel, made of plastic, fabric and wood, shark heads peeking over the top of wooden barrels, and a colossal can of cat food suspended from the gallery's ceiling. *WSJ.* spoke with von Bonin via email from Cologne ahead of her show.

Cosima von Bonin Revisits a Marine Motif in New Show

'What if it Barks?' opens on February 23 at New York's Petzel Gallery



What if it Barks / Shark Trash Bin Version 1, 2018, Plastic, fabric, wood, cardboard COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PETZEL, NEW YORK

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WSJ: Can you tell me about your life as a young artist? How extensively were you experimenting with art prior to that?

Cosima von Bonin: I came to Cologne at 25 and started working in a bar, the Königswasser. On my third day I met [the artist] Martin Kippenberger; later I met Michael Krebber, Martin's assistant at the time. Both the MKs "forced" me to learn about art. I had no prior experience up until that point. At Walther König's bookshop, I read

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through everything, from A to Z and back again. With still more pressure from the MKs, I signed up as a guest student at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Hamburg. I was there for only two semesters in a beginners' class. I did not "produce" art of any kind. But I secretly tape-recorded the lectures. At the end of the two semesters I typed up the recorded transcripts and printed a photocopied "book" of what I had experienced there. So that became my "art."

WSJ: What kind of art were your cohorts drawn to?

CVB: It was a beginners' class, so the interests of the other students were quite broad. Some liked painting, drawing, etc. But I actually learned about art at the bar. Everyone came there—I met Jutta Koether there, Diedrich Diederichsen, Friedrich Petzel, the people from the music magazine *Spex*, everyone. But I was poor and had to hitchhike between Hamburg and Cologne every week.

WSJ: Who were some of the artists who influenced you early on?

CVB: André Cadere, Marcel Broodthaers, Cady Noland, and Mike Kelley.



From the book, "Woman Alive: How To Decorate Without Going Broke," 1974. PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PETZEL, NEW YORK

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WSJ: What is the genesis of your works? For instance, how do you decide what to represent through sculpture? Are you drawn toward an object or do you begin first with an idea and search for an image to respond to the idea?

CVB: Everything. All of it. I either hear an idea (often from Dirk von Lowtzow of the German band Tocotronic) or read about something and use that idea and fuse it with my ideas. I steal ideas and objects wherever I find them. That's my fun. Making sense of something senseless. I am reminded of a quote of Mike Kelley's, who said of his work, "It's not a kind of sense, it's a kind of sense-making, like we'll take this, we'll take this, this leads me to this, this leads me to this and then I have to figure some kind of structure for that and that's the art of it..." I'm quite good at deciding or knowing what is good and what is garbage.

WSJ: Do you set aside some time each day to work? Do you keep a strict schedule?

CVB: No. Absolutely not. I only go to the studio when I have to. The people I work with have been with me for such a long time that they know me. They understand what I want and what I am driving at. I can trust the professionals in the studio and all the technicians I work with. Julia Koep, a qualified seamstress, has been with me for years, as has Attila Saygel. Seth Kelly [exhibitions director and partner at Petzel] has worked with me on so many shows. I trust them all!

WSJ: What does a productive day look like for you?

CVB: I like to do most of my thinking and planning while sitting in bed, through email and by phone: sending photographs, drawings, and construction plans back and forth. I come up with ideas and call people, Jules [Koep] or whomever, and get things done. Also, any productive day of mine involves walking my dog, Eddie.

WSJ: How much of a work do you figure out in advance? What does your process look like?

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CVB: My bed is my office. Sitting in my bed somehow makes my brain work better than in the studio, so I am constantly thinking, striving for ideas. If I decide on something, then it's decided; there is not much deviation. It is rare that I make a change once I have decided on something. But if it's too perfect, that can be a problem. I like for there to be mistakes. For this show, I needed robed fish. I "dressed" one fish and Jules robed the others. I punked them up by adding chains, guitars, and surfboards. The bass guitar is actually taken from a scene in the Prince film *Purple Rain*. I stole the idea for the robed mackerels from the so-called decorator crabs. They are hilarious. Give them a pearl necklace or some Christmas pom-poms or anything else of that kind, and they decorate themselves with it. Accessories are life for those crustaceans.

WSJ: Aside from other visual art and artists, what influences your work?



Cosima von Bonin PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PETZEL, NEW YORK

CVB: Pop culture. Garbage. The technicians in museums and galleries; they are always amazing. To install the shows with them is the best part of doing an exhibition. I love hardware stores and marine shops of any kind.

WSJ: Can you define what a good work of art should do?

CVB: It sounds kitsch, but a good work of art should touch you. It should mesmerize somehow. Either it means nothing to you or it puts a big smile on your face. I'm OK with both. I am not interested in explaining my art, but more interested in how it provokes the people who view it.

WSJ: Can you remember the first time that you were truly moved by a work of art?

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CVB: Yes. I was in Bruxelles and I saw a small *Barre de Bois Rond* (a round bar of wood) by André Cadere lying in the window of Marie-Puck Broodthaers's gallery. I was mesmerized by it. I passed this gallery window just by chance and saw this little stick in the window. I would have bought it, but of course could not afford it.

WSJ: Do you ever find yourself thinking about how your audience will react to your work? Are they ever in the back of your mind?

CVB: I did, as a young artist. But then, after my first show, I loved it when people made no comment about the art. Said nothing about it whatsoever. Those people became my friends.

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