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Andrew Durbin, "Cosima von Bonin: 'What If It Barks?'," *Frieze*, April 12, 2018.

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Cosima von Bonin: 'What If It Barks?'

At Petzel Gallery, New York, an installation of anthropomorphic sea creatures explores sinister forces of authority and violence

BY ANDREW DURBIN

Who, in Cosima von Bonin's plush and plastic zoo of cutesy fish, sharks, rhinos, orcas, purple lobsters and hippos, will survive to see the end of the century? Each creature's fleshy analogue has found itself and its comrades on some watch list for high extinction: the seas have run dangerously low of our gilled friends; nearly all the world's rhinos have been shot for trophies by some member of the Trump family or their kind; and orca and shark populations have declined precipitously. Only the purple reef lobster (found here in an orange cement mixer, its claws dangling out of the machine's hole) has thrived – but captive, in aquariums across the globe. In the wild, its status remains 'data

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deficient', though worldwide coral collapse suggests its time in saltier seas is nearly up. 'What If It Barks?' Von Bonin asks in the exhibition's title. Given that none of the artist's creatures make nary a dog or seal's cry, we would be forgiven for misreading it as, 'What if it balks?' That is, refuses to go on. Declines to thrive. 'You must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on,' the featureless creature in Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* (1953) famously proclaims to his readers. Is the world over, or about to begin again? Von Bonin likewise oscillates between the sweet and the dire, the endangered and the dangerous, going on or going nowhere. 'Enough romance,' one fabric flag from 2016 hanging from the gallery ceiling declares, and beside it: 'Let's fuck.'



Cosima von Bonin, 'What If It Barks?', 2018, installation view, Petzel, New York. Courtesy: the artist and Petzel, New York

The exhibition is Von Bonin's eighth at Petzel Gallery, and continues the artist's long-running interest in marine life, which culminated two years ago with her travelling exhibition, 'Who's Exploiting Who in the Deep Sea?', featuring its own retinue of false flotsam and jetsam, including stuffed oysters, sharks, colourful lobsters and octopuses;

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stacks of blow-up dolphins; and porcelain shells and starfish. In this new show, Von Bonin brings together a different school of nautical effluvia, including a large band of mackerel, equipped with electric and acoustic guitars and chained to surfboards and stray, chequered articles of clothing. They surround their tin can – labelled 'Authority Purée' – while a low, musical accompaniment plays throughout the gallery. (The entire 2018 installation shares a title with the can's label.)

Their lips hang open in frozen stupidity, as fish tend to look when they lie flat on the icy beds of outdoor fish markets, and their circular arrangement is somehow haunting in its evocation of the wine-dark future of our rubbish-littered seas. Fish aren't meant to be strapped to human stuff, and yet here they are, encircled like a Stonehenge in honour of fish and chips aficionados, with instruments they are unable to play chained to their fins. One might even imagine sculpture like this guarding the entrance to one of musician Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville restaurants, common in airports and obscure Florida beach towns, where many fish meet their doom.

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In von Bonin's anthropocenic fusion of surfer and surfed-upon, a sense of impending dread hangs in the air like a fishhook, ready for us to take its bait, as her sharks seem to have done. Emerging from wooden barrels, open-mouthed in the style of the iconic *Jaws* poster (1975), the artist's sharks – *What If It Barks 8 (Shark Dust Bin Version)* and *What If It Barks 9 (Shark Dust Bin Version II)* (both 2018) – have caught black and white chequered missiles in their mouths. It's a funny, but also somehow implacably sad, meeting of two violent forces that have long occupied our collective imagination: the instinctual killing desire of the fish, and the instinctual killing desire of the fisherman (or drone operator). One from below, one from above. The first, of course, is innocent, and here, even a little cute. The second is worthy of our scorn, despite its plush disguise.

Cosima von Bonin: What if it Barks? runs at Petzel Gallery, New York, until 21 April.

Main image: Cosima von Bonin, 'What If It Barks?', 2018, installation view, Petzel, New York.
Courtesy: the artist and Petzel, New York

ANDREW DURBIN

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