

Petzel

Annie Godfrey Larmon, "Cosima von Bonin," *Artforum*, Summer 2018.

ARTFORUM



Cosima von Bonin, *HERMIT CRAB*, 2018, steel cement mixer, fabric, rubber, 52 x 50 x 38".

Cosima von Bonin

PETZEL GALLERY | WEST 18TH STREET

In the paintings gallery at Kunsthau Zürich, there is a wonderfully odd work from 1892 by the Swiss symbolist Arnold Böcklin titled *Saint Anthony Preaching to the Fish*. It depicts the Franciscan friar addressing a beached, slack-jawed shark, grumpy groupers, and confounded barracudas; a couple of crabs raise their claws in praise. A poem by the seventeenth-century Augustinian priest Abraham a Sancta Clara tells the story of the friar, who found his church empty and went to the river to preach to more willing subjects. The poem was set to music by Gustav Mahler in 1893, and in 1979 Glenn Gould delivered a nasal rendition of the composition to a herd of elephants at the

Petzel

Annie Godfrey Larmon, "Cosima von Bonin," *Artforum*, Summer 2018.

Toronto Zoo, a performance captured by John McGreevy in his film *Glenn Gould's Toronto*. The elephants were unimpressed, as Abraham's lyrics predicted: "The crabs still walk backwards / The stockfish stay rotund / The carps still gorge themselves / The sermon is forgotten."

A similar scene served as the centerpiece installation of Cosima von Bonin's sixth solo show at Petzel—typically balmy, maritime—titled, "What if It Barks?" Ten sculptures of sea creatures were convened in a circle, seemingly at the behest of a giant, gleaming can of cat food labeled authority pureé (this is also the title of the sculpture and the installation, both 2018). Suspended from the ceiling, the six-foot-wide aluminum can contained a smoke machine that intermittently poured clouds into the gallery; if this authoritative recyclable was preaching anything, it was blowing smoke. Two plush orca whales slouched over school furniture; plastic shark heads, each with a gingham missile in its jaw, reared from two wooden buckets; and six plastic mackerels on pedestals wore guitars, surfboards, chains, purses, and gingham aprons. The mackerel's stunned smiles recall poor Big Mouth Billy Bass, the ubiquitous animatronic singing fish with a limited repertoire. Hiding inscrutably under one orca was a stuffed rhino made in the 1960s by the legendary toy designer Renate Müller. The sculptures riff on von Bonin's signature grab bag of themes—sloth, leisure, branding, the market, deferred authorship, role-playing, discipline, and comfort—but bring more dire topics to the table, too. These accessorized mackerels call to mind images of turtle shells that have grown around a plastic six-pack ring, or of bird stomachs opened to reveal a piñata's worth of synthetic detritus. Of course, we've seen these images of ecological disaster, but, as the ever-accumulating islands of trash in the Pacific make evident, we file them away. Like Saint Anthony of Padua's briny congregants, we hear the sermon, but we forget it.

We can pull a moral pulse from von Bonin's gimmicks and diversions, but it's an ambivalent one—her sculptures, while dressed for a party, also reference the cost of unchecked consumption, reckless pollution, and state violence. Indeed, she often sneaks a political volt among works that are bluntly impassive. At the entrance to the exhibition hung two sporty orange-and-black flags from 2016. One read ENOUGH ROMANCE; the other, LET'S FUCK. Nearby, the work *Au Pairs*, 2018, featured piles of pillowy cotton bombs and muscular crab

Petzel

Annie Godfrey Larmon, “Cosima von Bonin,” *Artforum*, Summer 2018.

claws spilling over what appeared to be a pink diaper-changing table. Von Bonin gives us weapons as pacifiers, missiles as mother’s milk, as if to say, What more can be expected from us? If the artist has, as Isabelle Graw described in 2008, traded in the collective, ephemeral ethos of her work from the ’90s Cologne heyday of accumulative object-based production as a way to “outperform” the market’s demands, it seems she did so without a trace of guilt. Or perhaps not: Like the ocean, a longtime subject of von Bonin’s work, her project is nothing if not elusive. Take *HERMIT CRAB*, 2018, in which two purple plush lobster claws dangle lifelessly from an orange cement mixer. It’s baleful stuff, but it’s cute, too. If the irony gives you a sinking feeling, reach for one of the buoys in the corner.

—Annie Godfrey Larmon

<https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201806/cosima-von-bonin-75571>