

ARTFORUM

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MONSTER MASH

by Sabrina Tarasoff



Curator Brendan Dugan and artist Henni Alftan at Karma's booth at FIAC.

LET'S BEGIN WHERE MY FAIR WEEK ENDED, feeling left for dead lying on a bed, under an eldritch green glow emanating from some mysterious source (art?) at the Normandy Hôtel: a Haussmannian relic under partial renovation in the first arrondissement, where Finnish collective The Community was hosting their inaugural salon. Evocative of something between a haunted house, a Kubrick film set, and, less excitingly, an art fair, the salon's setting promised to channel the wicked fun of art's unruliness, theatricality, and imaginative displacements. As I moved through the hotel's narrow corridors, glancing into rooms decorated with the aftermath of performances and presentations, the combination of long hours spent warding off dealers incanting platitudes about "otherness" and "alienation," a very late night spent dancing ourselves into an early grave at David Lynch's Silencio club, and sense of totalizing visual excess began to take its toll. Seeing dim rooms start to stretch under the influence of fatigue's hallucinogenic vision, I sought out some equally weary comrades and sat down to resurrect the dark and weird thoughts of the past week.

I had dragged myself on day one to a delightfully unlivable *hôtel particulier* on Rue Alfred de Vigny for the opening of the fifth Paris Internationale, which positions itself as a vernal alternative to the *comme il faut* eminence of FIAC. The organizers, in an effort to make the art scene "look alive" by placing it within this bourgeois haunt, have given the fair an architecture better suited to late romantic drift. In the words of codirector Clément Delépine, "We stole so much from the Situationists that we may have even gone too far." Watching out for moments of Too Much Dérive, I wandered around the fair trying to embrace flights of fancy, psychic disorientation, uncertainty, and chance, mostly winding up in strange conversations about everything except the art on display. Things that came up: horror movies, spook houses, immersive vs. dioramic experiences, decapitation-as-accessory in the house of Gucci (a sponsor

of the fair), pop culture's revived engagement with myth, death's theatrical come-back in art. On the walls, mermaids, beasts, and allegoric scenes appeared again and again as simplified images of fantasy, willfully drifting into traps of metaphor. Certain de-skilled painting trends seem to return each year in slightly altered guise, leaving me with no comment other than the *Pet Sematary* movie slogan: *Sometimes, dead is better*. But frissons of wonder bubbled up in rare moments when fantasy owned up to its artifice—as in the gothic charms of Harry Gould Harvey IV's drawings from the New York gallery Bureau, the cartoonish avian monster by Catherine Biocca from Greengrassi in London, or the little shop of horrors set up in a hot tub-appointed bathroom on behalf of Chris Korda's Church of Euthanasia, courtesy of the tenth arrondissement artist-run space Goswell Road.

Nearly thirty years after the Church first convened with the dastardly slogan "Save the Planet—Kill Yourself," fans are still free to make their final arrangements to support the cause. Suicide is not officially required, though coverts must take a strict vow of non-procreation. (For those on the fence about having kids, "church merch" was made for sale instead.) In the confines of this mock suicide setup, I inquired about the red gels glued to the windows, glowing in grim contrast to the spotlighted spectacle of the rest of the fair. According to Goswell's codirector Anthony Stephinsson, the building was last used as a set for an upcoming vampire flick, and, up until a couple weeks prior, the entire interior had been covered in lush blood-red décor. "We thought they were cool so we kept them up." My eyes wandered as I momentarily imagined what could have been the "Paris Internationale: *Dracula*" edition, had the organizers not insisted on de-vamping the venue. Anthony smiled before shifting my attention back to the Church of Euthanasia: "The message has never been more relevant. After being treated as crazy for years, vilified, called a cult, it's only now when they are no longer making actions that people turn around and think: *of course*."

In the dismal daylight of FIAC's Grand Palais venue, death and other familiar faces seemed to follow me around. I spent an hour hiding out in a pop absurdist maze of screens made by Alex Da Corte for Sadie Coles HQ, psyched to feel far away from the reality of fair life. A fly mobile made by John Russell for the Pigalle gallery High Art sparked a debate about why spooky stuff feels so relevant to the zeitgeist. I talked domestic psychodrama with Henni Alftan, who was showing her day-dreamy painting of thigh-high stockings with New York's Karma gallery. I went back to Gavin Brown's booth to see the Cy Gavin's paintings, like, six times, trying to figure out just what witchcraft makes them so mesmerizing. A very serious conversation was had between Gianni Manhattan's Laura Windhager, artist James Samuel Lewis, and myself about heading straight from the fair to Disneyland Paris; only for artist Charlotte Houette to tell me a ghost story much later in the night about the park being built on one of the largest Carolingian cemeteries in France. (Also, shout-out to the hell-raising kid running around with a trident.)

Stuck on Disney spook stories, I grabbed a coffee that afternoon with a fellow writer who was traveling to Los Angeles once the fairs were over. The impressions left by Korda's suicide cult, the macabre finding its way into conversations, and a shared love for fairy tales ferried our conversation from the banal horror of art fairs to the chills and thrills of Disneyland's Haunted Mansion in Anaheim, California, where visitors are moved through ghost dioramas in an Antebellum manor house. "The whole thing opens in a painting gallery," my companion said, "where the stretch of imagination is made literal as the frames appear to elongate to reveal alternative

images. The mistake is making it all about metaphor, when actually it's about what affect artifice is capable of carrying." How might art, we wondered, deliver similar pangs of experience, equally disquieting metamorphoses? What mechanisms make that work? What luck that thirty minutes later, I would find some answers underneath the vaulted ceilings of the Petit Palais, where Matt Copson's laser projection of a skull rotated above my own. With the charm of animatrons forever doomed to their recursive displays, Copson's Holbeinesque memento mori loops in a constant, spooky/psychedelic reworking of its own existential drama. Though a walk-through was led by FIAC's special projects curator Rebecca Lamarche-Vadel, Disneyland's ghost host provided an alternate tour in my head: "*Welcome, foolish mortals, to the Haunted Mansion...*"