

Kris Lemsalu: 4Life

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Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art, St James's, London SE14 6AD



Title : Kris Lemsalu, Holy Hell O (2018).

Website : <http://goldsmithscca.art/>

Credit : Courtesy the artist. Commissioned by Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art and Tramway, Glasgow. Photo: Mark Blower.

Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art

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Review by Julia Schouten

For her first solo exhibition in London, ‘4LIFE’, multidisciplinary artist Kris Lemsalu transforms the upstairs galleries at Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art into a supernatural realm, occupied with otherworldly, absurdist characters that guide you through stages of birth, life and death.

The first room, ‘HOLY HELL O’, resembles a celestial birthing room, painted a pale pink, with a yonic jacuzzi-come-deity at its centre, which has a ceramic vulva for a head, multiple knitwear-clad arms and is skirted by an intricately sewn pastel quilt. Multi-coloured figures dive from one corner of the room into its tub, bubbling with a murky brown discharge.

The overall saccharine palette and combination of handmade craft techniques with everyday objects leaves a kitsch and unapologetically ‘feminine’ aftertaste. If Judy Chicago made birthing rooms, this would be the apogee. But, unlike ‘The Dinner Party,’ this feels like a droll caricature of femininity and of maternity, particularly as it has been generalised by The History of Art™, through its plentiful nudes, Immaculate Conceptions and Annunciations. Lemsalu’s grotesque fertility statue playfully ridicules its predecessors, evoking a light-hearted natal fable of which the moral reads: (giving) birth is miraculous, but also full of shit.

The narrative continues through to the second room, with its nursery rhyme-like title ‘Sally, Go Round the Roses’. Upon entering you’re greeted by another godlike figure, an extravagant wallflower with multiple ceramic

arms and legs emerging from a pink floral quilt. The fists grip bunches of translucent grapes and pop music emits from a radio, hanging off one of many feet. Climbing holds decoratively scattered across the walls appear to lay the path for the multi-limbed creature, who is ripe with allegory: Goddess of music? Goddess of wine? Goddess of just having a good time?

Whichever you prefer, the arachnid-idol initially appears to represent life's pleasures, yet, on closer inspection, seems trapped within a cyclical trail, predestined to climb the same route over and over, 'Go[ing] Round the Roses' (or the houses), with no obvious destination. Supposedly representative of 'the bit in the middle' between birth and death, this room perhaps pays tribute to the uncertainty of its subject matter, of lived experience and of a constant search for direction.

The final chapter 'Biker, Bride, Builder, Businesswoman and Baby' takes place in a darkened, strobe-lit, Japanese rock garden, with toxic-looking pools of water, wherein everything corporeal has leached away. Yet, cherry blossom is in full bloom, its usually ephemeral beauty immortalised in this strange post-nuclear fallout. Each character is signified through identifiable but uninhabited outfits, floating mid-air with the help of ceramic birds, as if in some sort of Disney dystopia.

Throughout the exhibition, Lemsalu plays with our perception of 'reality' through creating a far-removed fantastical world that is simultaneously recognisable as our own. An immersive installation that is both wilful and decorative, rich with allegory and contemporary vernacular, '4LIFE' is an ode to life (and art) as saturated with mystery, splendour and repulsion.