

Kris Lemsalu

GOLDSMITHS CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

Kris Lemsalu staged our passage from womb to tomb as a drama of bewilderment, full of improbable ecstasies and strange metamorphoses. In three installations, each occupying its own room in the Estonian artist's exhibition "4LIFE," viewers could feel Lemsalu pushing at the squishy, shifting membrane between the fantastic and the quotidian, as they were guided—as if by some sense-deranging shaman on an LSD-induced rebirthing trip—through the milestones of existence and the shared struggle for meaning.

In *HOLY HELL O* (all works 2018), psychedelically colored mannequins plunged like Olympic divers into the bubbling murk of a flesh-pink Jacuzzi. A vaginal pearl glistened at the vessel's edge like some ancient totem of fecundity: a ceramic Venus of Willendorf. Tangled arms draped in white knitted sleeves, hands grasping, circle the tub. They have the manic energy of a mutant midwife beckoning yet another life from the womb. This whole dizzying birth scene emerged from a froth of patchwork quilts. Lemsalu delights in transformative states of flow and confusion. Yet there's an ambivalence at the heart of our beginnings: the body as both alien element and sanctuary. Does the newborn suggest a victory over nature's turbulent forces? Or does this natal tableau hint at darker, more uncanny origins?

Another room housed a mandala of flailing limbs, cartwheeling from a floral pink blanket while ceramic hands clutch bunches of grapes, as if plucked from some once-glimpsed, if long-vanished, state of nirvana. This work, *Sally, Go Round the Roses*, nods to the concept of cyclical time: a centrifugal force field somewhere along the way to enlightenment. A plastic radio, babbling rock songs, hung off a foot. Was it a hymn to collective human experience—billions of us crawling across the planet, seeking connection—or an augury of our final isolation, each of us tuned to our own lonely frequency? This room's sparse white walls were plugged with multicolored climbing-wall grips, a deadpan reminder that the real rock we're trying to scale is earth itself, as it hurtles through eternity toward nowhere at all. This is Lemsalu's

Kris Lemsalu, *HOLY HELL O*, 2018, Jacuzzi tub, ceramics, quilts, mannequins, textiles, dimensions variable.



absurdist memento mori, reflecting back at us our own vain attempts to wrest something from random chaos and achieve autonomy. How do we get hold of reality amid such unrelenting flux?

Biker, Bride, Builder, Businesswoman and Baby presented a scorched-earth scene of extinction, a portal to the void. In a cold room the color of gray ash, flocks of Hitchcockian birds swooped down on abandoned pieces of clothing (among them a wedding dress, a biker's leathers, and a romper sagging eerily in a stroller), as if their wearers had been suddenly vaporized. The bleak space was strewn with rubble, while flashing strobe lights rendered the scene a nihilist snapshot of end-time. Two trees (recalling a Minimalist stage set for *Waiting for Godot*) were the only intimation of life beyond this razed ground zero, their flowers offering fragile, still-blooming hope. Even after nuclear winter, it seemed, there would always be spring.

Through the sheer force of imagination, Lemsalu conjured something fierce and fantastical from the biological wastelands of sex and death. The show felt like T. S. Eliot's "end of the endless / journey to no end" but reconceived after Helen Chadwick and Matthew Barney, resembling an outtake from some lost film by Alejandro Jodorowsky. Lemsalu cast her great spell in favor of life's mad mystery.

—Daniel Culpan