

PORTRAIT

64

ALL THAT GLITTERS

KRIS LEMSALU

65

Kris Lemsalu's beguiling works invite viewers into a world both alluring and disarrayed. But behind her seemingly innocent fantasies lies a forest of dark reverie, where it's easy to lose your way. *Bianca Heuser* speaks with the artist about her thoughts on naivety, folklore, and kitsch.



Photo © Andrej Vasilenko, courtesy of CCA

Birth V – Hi and Bye, 2019, Ceramics, metal construction, boat, clothes, keys, locks, sumo costumes, two figures
Installation view, 58th Venice Biennale Estonian pavilion

Aided by furs, ceramics, makeup, sludge, and a host of collaborators, Kris Lemsalu's manifold, fantastical artwork invokes an ethereal world of spirits – magical and mundane. It often revolves around mystical creatures, many of which are characters played by Lemsalu or her collaborators. In her presentation during 2015's Frieze Art Fair, the artist hibernated underneath a bedazzled tortoise shell, turning into an otherworldly creature herself. Surrounded by egg cartons, the installation evoked thoughts of women's historically domestic roles and responsibilities, while her sparkly shell, perhaps a symbol of feminine creativity and desire, offered shelter. . . unless it was actually crushing her.

Neither Lemsalu's ethereal subjects nor the (im)materiality of her work would prompt conservative art market trend forecasters to prescribe her a bright, as in commercially viable, future. Yet, her work seems to have struck a nerve nonetheless,

earning her high-profile exhibitions, including the Estonian Pavilion during 2019's Venice Biennale. Her success seems to rely not only on her art being authentically playful and irreverent, but, somewhat counter intuitively, from the artist embracing attributes that tend to be problematic: ambiguous authorship, and kitschy-crafty aesthetic and material choices usually associated with domestic labour – “not that there is anything wrong with being a housewife!”

Lemsalu gravitates towards these elements, and rather than making overt political statements, her works unabashedly embody very personal fantasies, which might be their most appealing quality. As the female artists who came before her and used their own bodies to make art, or who produced ephemeral or otherwise fleeting works, the authenticity of Lemsalu staying truthful to her experience as she expresses it is what makes the



Photo: Mayz.be/Soft Focus Institute, Tarjana Pieters gallery

Treasure Box Violence, 2016, Ceramics, fur, textile, metal, chairs, dimensions variable

result undeniably powerful and, to some, rather unsettling, too close for comfort.

A flock of performers can make the difference between something being either “esoteric” or “shamanic” — both of which are subject to scrutiny, though only the former resists an authority greater than the self. Lemsalu loves performing with her friends, and some of those called the ensuing work “shamanic”. One might associate the term with something akin to witchcraft first and foremost, but its spiritual relationship to nature is what allows a Shaman to become the glue between perceivable reality and the metaphysical questions of those disposed to their powers.

Respect for nature and a love for animals accordingly shape Lemsalu's work, too. Most of her installations contain animal companions as performing protagonists. In fact, the Estonian artist's colourful compositions often place animals in ominous

settings, conjuring the vague allure and threat of a classic fable, but with an eccentric, sometimes abject twist. In 2018, she collaborated with her husband, Kyp Malone of the band TV On The Radio, on an exhibition at Berlin's KW Institute that celebrated their love using animal stand-ins: a giant swan shaped pedal boat hosted an anthropomorphised rabbit and leopard — avatars for the artist duo — coasting on their tulle river of love, while Malone's pseudo-naïve paintings embed them in a kind of self-creation myth: shedding their animal skins, copulating, and laying rabbit and leopard baby eggs.

But Lemsalu animates more abstract spirits, too: for her opening performance at the Estonian Pavilion during 2019's Venice Biennale, Lemsalu built a winged vulva totem pole around which a caravan of collaborators conjured life-giving spirits. The shamanic ceremony paid homage to the



Time After Time is Our Time, 2019, Ceramics, blanket, metal bed, found objects, 90 x 195 x 70 cm



Photo © Julien Gremaud / Les Urbaines, courtesy of Musée d'Art et d'Histoire

Car2Go, 2016, Car doors, bricks, umbrellas, textile, porcelain, metal, dimensions variable



Photo © Haus Mdrath and Simon Vogel

Angels Gone Missing, 2017, Textile, porcelain, metal, wire, dimensions variable

miracle of three-dimensional being, regardless of their spiritual orientation.

This non-judgemental disposition runs throughout her work as a whole: Lemsalu understands light and darkness as inherent parts of our collective experience. She collages unconscious fears and attractions into immersive sculptural installations, both eerie and alluring. The spirits she conjures are at once fun, mischievous, seducing, and repulsive. Their intentions are never immediately apparent, but whether they are benevolent or malicious forces is the wrong question to begin with for Lemsalu. She is more concerned with blurring the lines between public, private, real, and fantasy life; she sets out to question whether these layers of reality were ever separable in the first place.

Fear is an instinctual response to situations that pose a threat to our personal life and well-being, and hence collective evolution, way back when. Its signifiers, like darkness, reflexively invoke a kind of discomfort. Asked about a favourite fairy tale from her childhood, Lemsalu names *Hedgehog in the Fog* (1975), a Soviet animated movie that follows its titular character into foggy woods. At first, he goes after a beautiful white horse, which, motivated by suspicion, might tell you is a potential trap. Now, with limited vision and decreasing orientation, hedgehog relies on barely discernible creatures with questionable intent to make his way back out.

Like Lemsalu, the hedgehog is not afraid of the unknown. Where others might panic, the hedgehog follows his curiosity into uncharted territory. Lemsalu exposes the inextricability of the abject and the adorable, dangerous and at-risk, sweet and the sour, light and darkness. As her ornate and colourful sculptures show, she's not afraid of kitsch either.

In the end, of course hedgehog makes it to his destination, which, surprisingly enough, is a bear's home. Bear cub is hedgehog's terrifying teatime companion, or at least he'd be to most other teacup-sized prickly protagonists. "Don't be scared" is an unusual moral for a fable, but one Lemsalu has undoubtedly taken to heart.

Bianca Heuser: Your work is often described as fantastical in an escapist way, but you do incorporate a lot of objects into your sculptures and installations that speak to the reality of contemporary life. On the spectrum of fantasist to realist, where do you see your art?

Kris Lemsalu: I don't want to think of a linear spectrum between fantasist and realist. There is no certainty of a common ground when we talk about reality. So many events happen on all levels of consciousness simultaneously. Reality is something filtered individually. We call it reality when someone dies or when it comes to paying bills for not being relocated, while we perceive the happiest moments as a dream. Maybe we have to accept that dreaming and fantasising are equivalent to reality.

BH Your work borrows aesthetically, symbolically, and choreographically, from fairytale, myth, and folklore, but also aims to undermine the values those same tales are rooted in. As you infiltrate them, they, too, infiltrate your art: what does this built-in tension do for you as an artist?

KL I am fond of naivety as opposed to cynicism, and sometimes of the spiritual dedication of artisans that created aesthetics, symbols, or rites, which were valued enough to be preserved and passed on. I do not deal with values that could be culturally implicated, otherwise I could not allow myself to speak English or any other language for its abysmal historical and cultural implications. Like in language, it is the use of a word and not the word itself that determines its meaning. I am carefully choosing the elements that form part of my works. The built-in tension is a simple reciprocity of harmonies; it is part of every juxtaposition to compose with the means of this reciprocity.

BH If you didn't become an artist, what would you be doing now?

KL Swimming like a fish or flying like a bird.

BH Animals make frequent and meaningful appearances in your work. What is your relationship with nature, and how does it impact your art?

KL Animals themselves have a very complete personality. We have everything in common with animals, except our human hubris. They do not need to rectify their history. In my art I approach animals mostly as what they represent allegorically, aesthetically, and mythologically. It would be hard for me to imagine that nature is something we have left behind.

BH What is kitsch for you?

KL Exaggeration in attempting to express beauty. Kitsch hits a lowest common denominator. One feels a mix of sympathy and empathy for



Photo: Roman März

Cool Girls Without Hands, 2016, Skateboards, wood, fur, porcelain, plastic, textile (detail), dimensions variable



Kris Lemsalu in collaboration with Martin Guttman, 2020

Unity and individuality can become each other's problems if one confuses them.



Photo: Haus Mährath and Simon Vogel

Birth V – Hi and Bye, performance, 2019, 58th Venice Biennale, Estonian pavilion

the creator and the object. The failure in achieving formal beauty can be very surprising and hilarious when it is compensated by efforts or creative energy running wild. It works with its attractiveness and its failure. That is an interesting field of tension.

BH From *Whole Alone 2* (2015) to *Birth V* (2019): what does “unity” mean to you, and how does it relate to individuality?

KL Unity starts with oneself and everyone has to take care of their own individuality. Unity is very desirable, but obviously our common desire for it can be easily abused for all kinds of preposterous causes. Unity and individuality can become each other's problems if one confuses them.

BH The fleeting nature of performance, the crafty connotations surrounding the materials you

use, and the “unsellable” label that gets slapped onto collaborative and non-physical work: how do these choices reflect your position on and to the art market?

KL Let's remember that art is very manifold and does not originate in the market. There are many other values in art and some of them are, conditionally, only temporal. No one puts pressure on me to produce “sellable” art and producing “unsellable” art is not a rebellion against the market, at least not in my case. I like to think of my performances as rituals referring to art rather than to the body. The body is focused more on presence than on experience. Performing and installing, or assembling, are closely related. Presence is the parameter.

BIANCA HEUSER is a writer based in Berlin.



Photo © Kati Göttried. Courtesy of the artist; Meyer Kainer

We Three Luxury Estates I, 2020, Porcelain, ceramic, fabric, wood, metal, 140 x 90 x 85 cm

KRIS LEMSALU was born in 1985 in Tallinn, Estonia, where she lives and works.

Recent solo exhibitions have taken place at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin (with Kyp Malone, 2019-2020); the Estonian Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale (2019); Secession, Vienna (2018); Goldsmiths CCA London (2018); Performa 17 Biennial, New York (with Kyp Malone, 2017); and Temnikova & Kasela, Tallinn (2014). Among other group shows she has participated in “Señora!”, Galerie Meyer Kainer, Vienna (2020); “Metamorphosis. Art in Europe Now”, Fondation Cartier, Paris (2019); “Further Thoughts on Earthly Materials”, GAK Gesellschaft für Aktuelle Kunst, Bremen (2018); and “Winter is Coming (Homage to the Future)”, Galerie Georg Kargl, Vienna (2016).