

# ARTFORUM

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

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STATUS, GLOSSY HEIUS OI GAIK DIOWIUS AMU GUECUS OUI HAI-EG-SECU-PIRATOS  
 hung on the walls. In one such painting—*Finnegans Lane*, 1990, an imposing work of eight by twelve feet—a layer of emerald, a green of an otherworldly density, was flanked by strips of raw steel that looked like cross sections of an agate. On the floor sat *Untitled*, 1996, a cluster of stones marked with blue paint, and *Crooked Strait*, 1995, a narrow path of irregular pieces of slate shot through with a thin line of white oil pastel. This style, somewhere between Minimalism and Land art, is that most associated with the artist, whose practice spans an impressive six decades. Wagner shares with the latter movement a concern with how materials are affected by time and the environment, yet her art has a different vulnerability to it: a humility that is surprising, given the apparent roughness and scale of the works. The effect is one of solemnity, a rare kind of dignity.



Merrill Wagner,  
*Untitled (#14 June)*,  
 1997, oil on linen,  
 24 x 30".

And here is where the small paintings up on the mezzanine made their incongruous yet entirely apt entry. These impressionistic pictures of flowers and trees were all produced *en plein air* between 1997 and 2001. Were they not so interestingly ugly, I might say that they were kitsch, but Wagner's way of working the paint—seemingly not only with a brush but at times also with some harder tool, like a knife or spatula—results in a successfully blatant sense of corporeality. These are meadows and forests only when you're squinting or at a distance. Up close, they make for a confrontation with the instability of perception itself—with the way in which, at every moment, flickering constellations of light, color, and movement are morphing out of what we think we just saw. On a practical level, they share with the steel and stone works a direct affiliation with nature, only here nature is understood on very different terms: as something intimate, delicate, and fleeting. The blossoms in *Untitled (#14 June)*, 1997, are flowers as you'd find them in your garden—they could be gone tomorrow, cut or flattened by the rain. *Untitled (#19 November)*, 1998, depicts the kind of forest where you might walk your dog one morning and find poetic transience in a sunbeam on autumn leaves.

And so the two ends of the temporal spectrum for which Wagner has developed such different yet equally acute languages do not exactly meet. Rather, like two eyes straining to remain focused, their disparity requires constant effort to reconcile. Accept the challenge, and you will be rewarded.

—Kristian Vistrup Madsen

## MUNICH

### Yalda Afsah KUNSTVEREIN MÜNCHEN

Slow, succinct, and hypnotic, Yalda Afsah's fragments of cinematic language gradually settle into place. *Vidourle*, 2019, for example, started off with shots of young men wading around in a murky river. Nervously, their eyes shift as they look now at each other, now at something out of the frame. At first, their movements seem isolated and erratic; then, synchronized en masse, the youths become a human swarm. Only in the film *Tourneur*, 2018, installed nearby, did we finally see what the bewildered boys are waiting for. Five minutes in, we find our fugacious antagonist rushing across the screen, almost too quickly to be seen: Both films record bullfighting events in the South of France, but the bull is mostly missing. By the time he finally takes the stage, in *Tourneur*, he's less threatening than tired. In the absence of any evident danger, the films highlight the boys' choreography of hesitation and reaction—an awkward mix of insecurity and self-assertion so essential to the performance of adolescent masculinity.

The ostensibly ethnographic films in "Every Word Was Once an Animal," Afsah's first institutional solo exhibition, played a persistent game with expectation and attention. *Centaur*, 2020, follows the mundane routines of a dandyish horse trainer in southern Denmark. As the animals' movements speed up, the video all but imperceptibly slips into slow motion. Meanwhile, the rhythmic footfalls that accompany most of the film begin slipping in and out of sync. Afsah rarely uses actual field audio, and in this work it is integrated with bassy soundscapes created after the fact with the help of a Foley artist, shifting between disciplined verisimilitude and outright artifice. Like her visuals, Afsah's gentle alienation effects insist that the way we perceive the world is only ever partial.



Yalda Afsah, *Centaur*,  
 2020, HD video, color,  
 sound, 13 minutes.



When looking at Afsah's animals, we're inevitably made to look at ourselves—not just at how humans shape the world around them, but also at how they are shaped in turn. This train of thought came across most clearly in *SSRC*, 2022, a portrait of roller-pigeon enthusiasts in South Los Angeles. Compared to the animals in the earlier films, these creatures are relatively free. Their breeders, however, are highly constrained: One of them casually mentions having hardly any time to himself after spending five hours a day with his birds. For the breeders, raising pigeons isn't just a way to pass time, but a source of community and identity. In a social fabric often torn by violence and police repression, the birds teach their trainers a patience and a tenderness that might otherwise be hard to come by.

The exhibition's title points to the historic hold animals have had on the human imagination, from cave paintings to cartoons. "If the first metaphor was animal," John Berger writes, "it was because the essential relation between man and animal was metaphoric." Whether this need for metaphor arises from the "narrow abyss of non-comprehension" Berger described or from a more "significant otherness," as Donna Haraway would have it, Afsah's films show how humans' fraught relationship with animals serves at least as a lens through which we may look at ourselves. Speechless but hardly silent, these films eschew the documentary desire to explain, dissecting instead the sensory minutiae of endlessly rehearsed rituals. Even though her films are finely attuned to the way our relations to nonhumans are intersected by the all-too-human axes of race, class, and gender, the experiences they construct are never reducible to simple taglines. Afsah takes us back to a much stranger, more primal scene of art, one in which our senses bring us closer to the intelligence of a world always just beyond the grasp of human understanding.

—Stanton Taylor

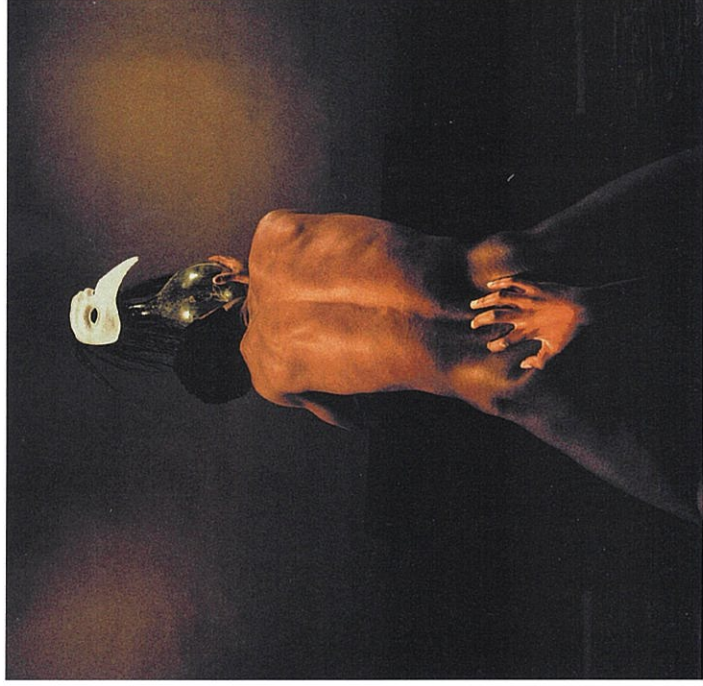
HØVIKODDEN, NORWAY

## "Every Moment Counts: Feelings of AIDS"

HENIE ONSTAD KUNSTSENTER

How to tell the story of how art has been touched by a global epidemic? "Every Moment Counts: Feelings of AIDS" takes on the immense task of charting the impact of a disease that has lasted four decades and claimed more than thirty-six million lives worldwide. The show's title—itsself borrowed from a group of works by Rotimi Fani-Kayode (1955–1989), who has received belated acclaim for staged photographs that combine Black bodies with objects that reference intersectional identity, desire, and spirituality—calls forth the urgency with which many artists in the exhibition made work while facing a deadly illness. Youthful artistic culminations coincided with imminent death, making the show feel haunted by mature bodies of work that never were.

Pinned to the fiftieth anniversary of the decriminalization of homo-



Rotimi Fani-Kayode,  
*Every Moment Counts*  
(*Ecstatic Antibodies*),  
1989, C-print,  
24 × 20 1/4". From  
"Every Moment Counts:  
Feelings of AIDS."

in favor of affective affinities between artists and works that might not have crossed paths in real life, their methodology suggesting queer theory's practice of sparking encounters across temporal and disciplinary separations. This curatorial approach is further charged by many works addressing touch: sexual contact, caresses, and parts of the body in abstracted reflections. *Untitled*, 1982, by Brazilian artist Hudnilson Jr., is a powerful wall-size collage made up of enlarged Xeroxes of hair, skin, and other ambiguous surfaces that telegraph both bodily proximity and technological remove.

By downplaying chronology and geographical specificity, the curators have to some extent given up an authorial position that allows for argument, historical revisionism (such as the foregrounding of the role of people of color and women in movements where white men have previously been framed as the protagonists), and the addressing of systemic disparities that continue to characterize the AIDS epidemic. Access to health care remains concentrated in affluent populations and in the Global North. But this critique is forcefully embedded in many individual works. Photographs by Liliana Maresca feature the artist's naked body sprawled against the backdrop of blown-up portraits of heads of state. Sunil Gupta's diptychs juxtapose photographs of men in amorous embrace with Indian mythological imagery and quotes by an Indian public-health official known for ignorant statements underestimating the threat of AIDS. *Lettre contre le sida* (Fight Against AIDS), 1992, a painting by Sim Simaro, who is based in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, shows the artist's body in a similar pose to the