

JASON HERR, ROBERT GOBER, VIKTOR MATTSSON, SHONA MCANDREW, ROSE NESTLER, JUSTIN LIAM O'BRIEN, CHRIS OH, ANOUSHA PAYNE, IJU SUSIRAJA AND TESFAYE URGESSA.

## *Snakes In The Grass*

June 23 — September 7, 2023

*Things are not always what they seem; the first appearance deceives many; the intelligence of a few perceives what has been carefully hidden.* — Phaedrus

Presenting itself as a morally thought-provoking exhibition, the artworks in *Snakes In The Grass* carefully explore the social and religious values that inform our reading and understanding of taboos, transgressions and deceit. Actively seeking the blurred line between vice and virtue, the artists in *Snakes In The Grass* not only challenge the viewer's perception of values (whether they may be personal or collective) but also eagerly provoke conversations and reflections around the fluidity of cultural and societal norms and their evolution over time. Works by 16th, 17th and 18th century Masters (Friedrich Sustris, Frans Francken the Younger, and engravings after Peter Paul Rubens, David Teniers II and Anthony Van Dyck) are placed in dialogue with works by contemporary artists **Jason Herr, Robert Gober, Viktor Mattsson, Shona McAndrew, Rose Nestler, Justin Liam O'Brien, Chris Oh, Anousha Payne, Iju Susiraja** and **Tesfaye Urgessa**. In this rapidly evolving world, perceptions of right and wrong, acceptable and taboo, are subject to constant transformation. Many of the participating contemporary artists have created works that riff on specific works by old masters and find themselves in a direct discourse with works from centuries past.

The exhibition's evocative title *Snakes In The Grass*, a phrase first coined by Roman poet Virgil in 37 B.C. in his *Eclogues* as *latet anguis in herba*, suggests the presence of hidden dangers or deceptive elements. When Virgil first used the idiom, he used the metaphor of a snake in the grass to describe a treacherous character who betrays the protagonist in his epic masterpiece. Over time, the idiom became widely used to define either a deceptive person or a concealed danger. Equally so, in the Christian tradition, Satan (in the guise of a serpent) instigated the fall of man by tricking Eve into breaking God's command, thus making the serpent a symbol of temptation, the devil and deceit. Just like the antagonist in Virgil's *Eclogues* and the serpent in the Adam and Eve story, the exhibited artworks play with notions of illusion and deceit, unveiling upon closer look hidden motives and layers of meaning.

The works on view by Robert Gober, Justin Liam O'Brien, Jason Herr and Chris Oh, each in their own way play with deception and manipulation of truth. Questioning the viewer's understanding of reality and their ability to distinguish truth from deception. The works by Gober, O'Brien, Herr and Oh investigate how manipulation of facts might affect our moral judgments and actions, and explore the psychology behind perception and the vulnerability of our senses.

American artist **Robert Gober** has been celebrated for his hand-crafted sculptures which replicate everyday objects with eerie precision and uncanny detailing. In *Untitled, 1992-2023*, the artist extends his trompe l'oeil methods into printmaking by fabricating several editions of photolithographs that seem like ordinary newspaper pages. A photograph that initially appears to be a bridal advertisement is in fact an image of the artist himself dressed up in a wig and a wedding dress. Gober has placed this manipulated photograph next to a story about the Vatican condoning discrimination against homosexuals. Through manipulating reality and presenting it as truth, Gober evokes a discussion around marriage as an institution and a rite of passage, denied to homosexuals in the U.S. at the time. Equally, **Justin Liam O'Brien's** work *Living Together* presents a distorted reading of reality. The painting, depicting a picture of Justin's husband reading at the dining table whilst a figure is stripping in the bathroom door behind him, is set up from a single-point perspective, resulting in the proportions being seemingly off and thus exuding a claustrophobic and disorienting effect. As part of a lineage of Queer artists, O'Brien explores the subjects of identity, isolation, sadness and humor, set in a changing world. Similarly, **Jason Herr's** ambiguous works, treading a fine line between free-flowing outsider art and precise craftsmanship, create subtle narratives that evoke both a sense of anxiety and absurdity. Often staging contorted characters in uncanny situations (sometimes disguising as self-portraits), the artist examines the isolation and loneliness of our contemporary world.

In **Chris Oh's** work *Tell* an interpretation of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *The Magpie on the Gallows*, 1568, is hand-painted on the front side of 40 playing cards, providing a revealing look into a (poker) player's intentions and the value of the cards they hold. The work alludes to the games and complexity of themes that playing cards evoke, such as chance, strategy, cunning, illusion, and the supernatural.

Deception also extends beyond mere appearances, diving into the realm of identity and exploring ways in which individuals and groups adopt sets of values collectively. The works by Anousha Payne, Viktor Mattsson and Tesfaye Urgessa dive into ethical issues and reflect on moral dilemmas by inviting viewers to participate in morally challenging conversations.

**Anousha Payne's** *Dogmother*, which takes inspiration from an Indian folktale, explores themes of morality, honesty and loyalty. Folktales are often passed down from generation to generation through word of mouth allowing for personal adaptations and flourishes to change the stories over time. Like a work of magical realism, Payne's paintings offer an exploration of the boundaries between reality and myth. The three works by **Viktor Mattsson** draw inspiration from an engraving of *A Drunken Silenus* by Jonas Suyderhoef (based on a work by Peter Paul Rubens) which is also exhibited. The subject of the drunken Silenus was a particularly popular subject among Flemish painters from the 17th century; it allowed them to show off their painterly skills and at the same time the drunken Silenus symbolized indecency and loss of self-control in an entertaining way. In his practice, Mattsson uses metaphorical characters such as devils, cowboys, clowns (or in this case Silenus) to create narratives that contemplate a struggle between good and bad. **Tesfaye Urgessa** on the other hand uses classical figurations of writhing bodies to create scenes charged with distorted psychological tension which evoke conversations about immigration, social injustice and the politics of identity.

Many of the artworks in *Snakes In The Grass* also delve into the complex interplay between individual beliefs, societal expectations, and the forces that shape our collective understanding of morality throughout history. Human behaviour is thought to be regulated by norms and values which inform our definitions of taboos and transgressions, but what informs these norms and values and how do they relate to power dynamics, identity and social justice?

In the exhibition, a 1630's work on woodpanel by Frans Francken the Younger features the uncommonly used iconography of the Deliverance of Saint Peter. The event sees the apostle Peter, the symbolic leader of a new religious movement (and soon-to-be first pope) miraculously being freed from prison by an angel after having been imprisoned by the current ruler of Judea (King Herod). Whilst Frans Francken's work looks at shifting power dynamics in politics and religion (through the lens of a biblical story), Friedrich Sustris' *Jupiter and Semele* and Pieter Van Sompel's *Jupiter and Antiope* (after Anthony Van Dyck) both display an iconography that is charged with a shift in gender dynamics. Even though scenes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* were a common iconographical theme for artists throughout centuries, our current reading of those stories has changed drastically towards a thorough questioning of the author's dubious morale and maintaining of unjust hierarchies.

Just as *The Smoking Man*, after a work by 17th century artist David Teniers, can be seen as a moral warning relating to the use of alcohol and tobacco, the provocative works of Finnish artist **Iiu Susiraja** test the limits of propriety, indulgence and good behaviour in a contemporary setting. Treading the line between uneasiness and comfort, humor and determination, her powerful works take aim at a plethora of contemporary body image issues, obsessions and taboos including beauty standards, body dysmorphia, self-loathing and sex.

The works by **Rose Nestler** and **Shona McAndrew** each draw from historical references to bring an intimate portrayal of womanhood while simultaneously subverting gender stereotypes and reclaiming patriarchal institutions as feminine spaces. McAndrew's works, which formally evoke earlier works by Georges de la Tour and Johannes Vermeer, unveil fleeting, intimate moments of vulnerability in the daily life of her sitters, one of whom being the artist herself. Rose Nestler's work on the other hand mines societal expectations and relationships to well-known objects combining humour, shame and pride. Through reinterpreting loaded garments and objects into oversized soft sculptures, Nestler aims to create a fluidity or neutrality of gender, probing both feelings of sensuality and discomfort.

The artworks in *Snakes In The Grass* aim to expose the multifaceted and multilayered nature of deceit and encourage a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding ethics, values and virtues. It provokes the viewer to consider the impact of societal rules on our lives, both through a historical reading as well as a reflection of our contemporary reality.

*Snakes In The Grass* will run from June 23 to September 7, 2023. Opening hours are Wednesday — Saturday from 13:00 to 18:00 hrs.