



Tabea Blumenschein, *Ohne Titel (Red Queen)*, 1989, Schenkung Ulrike Ottinger
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InterPlay

Tabea Blumenschein
Ulrike Ottinger

15.7. – 31.10.22

Press conference: 14.7.22, 11 am
Opening: 14.7.22, 7 pm

Please send your accreditation for the
press conference by 11.7.22 to:
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Tabea Blumenschein (1952 – 2020) is best known for the roles she played in films by the internationally renowned director Ulrike Ottinger (*1942). In her latter years Blumenschein's artistic creativity found another powerful channel in drawing. In hundreds of stylised fictional portraits resembling characters from comics, the artist combined the things she loved: fashion, folklore, kitsch and pop culture. Insofar as they are not versatile self-portraits, Blumenschein's figures with their colourful tattoos and costumes quote an aesthetic of queer and sub-culture.

The Berlinische Galerie now presents this hitherto little-known work in a selection of around 40 colourful large-format sheets. With an equal number of photographs by Ulrike Ottinger of Blumenschein in various film projects, the event celebrates the artistic partnership and friendship between two key protagonists of the Berlin art scene in the 1970s and 1980s.

This show marks a generous gift of works by Blumenschein in Ottinger's collection to the Berlinische Galerie. They will enrich the museum in its deep and constant interest in the achievements of twentieth-century women artists. Apart from those who helped forge the heyday of modern art, such as Jeanne Mammen (1890–1976) and Lotte Laserstein (1898–1993), retrospectives here regularly showcase living artists based in Berlin today, such as Dorothy Iannone (*1933) and Loredana Nemes (*1972).

Early work

Blumenschein's early drawings date back to the years between 1968 and 1972 when she was studying at the Bodensee Art School in Konstanz (now the Academy of Applied Graphics and Design). On show here for the first time, they are inspired by techniques of Surrealism and Pop Art. The portraits of Ottinger drawn by Blumenschein in her early twenties reveal affection and admiration. Colourfully embellished with heads of angels, birds, flowers and stars, they weave intricate waves and patterns into the sitter's mane of curls. As an art student Blumenschein was still searching. To lend form to her dreams and her love, she experimented with etching and pen-and-ink, with felt pens, coloured inks and gold paper.

Metamorphosis

Ottinger's films created fantastical settings where the actors took on several roles, slipping in and out of genders. In *"Laocoon & Sons"* (1972/73), *"The Enchantment of the Blue Sailors"* (1975) and *"Madame X – An Absolute Ruler"* (1977), Blumenschein demonstrated her skills as a quick-change artist.

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In these first three movies, she embodies Ottinger's characters as they switch gender on a quest for identity. Then, in "Ticket of No Return" (1979), her path through West Berlin leads from the glamorous to the dissolute and into an abyss of self-destruction.

Ottinger's photographs were often – but not always – taken during the shoot. They celebrate her friend's beauty and her expressive power. This considerable corpus of work reflects an interplay between the two artists as they spontaneously explore identities and gender roles, acting out these themes in a glittering array of provocative images.

Feminist self-empowerment

In the course of her collaboration with Ottinger, Blumenschein became a professional clothing designer and a sensitive character actor. As costume designer for the films they made together in the 1970s she mastered the artistic process from original sketch to production and performance.

When her collaboration with Ottinger came to a temporary end after the film "Ticket of No Return" in 1979, Blumenschein found a new framework for her activities in the punk music and avant-garde scene of West Berlin. In 1980 the short-lived German edition of Andy Warhol's magazine "Interview" published an unusual fashion page with four drawings by Blumenschein under the heading: "Fashion is world history without politics". That sentence is a philosophy: fashion is a form of artistic expression that can absorb any culture in the world and apply, interpret or re-signify it for its own creative purposes. What is ugly can be beautiful, what is alien can be familiar and what is good can be evil. That became the guiding principle for Blumenschein's feminist self-empowerment.

Along with Blixa Bargeld, Frieder Butzmann, Dagmar Dimitroff, Wolfgang Müller, Nikolaus Utermöhlen and others, she was one of the "Geniale Dilletanten" whose manifesto was published in 1982, together with her drawings, under the legendary Merve imprint.

When Müller and Utermöhlen founded their band "Die Tödliche Doris" in 1980, Blumenschein joined them as a costume designer and performer. In 1984 she appeared in their show in New York. She made films of her own in the super-8 format. In May 1985 the German TV channel ZDF screened her 60-minute film "Zagarbata", made two years earlier, which began with footage of a live concert by the "Böhse Onkelz", regarded back then as Nazi skinheads, and went on to feature Claudia Skoda,

Marc Brandenburg and Wolfgang Müller. Blumenschein's obsession with what it meant to be German was especially apparent in the early 1990s. From now on, in various manifestations, it was part and parcel of her visual idiom, always accompanied by antithetical motifs: women, sailors, bearded ladies, and indigenous peoples from a wide range of cultures, such as Mexico, Hawaii, the Pacific or Africa.

Love of detail

Between 1988 and 1990 Tabea Blumenschein perfected the motif of female beauties with a wealth of attributes. It was a particularly fascinating chapter in her experiments with identity: the pirate queen with a skimpy bodice, tattooed arms and a cigarette drooping from the corner of her mouth surrounded by symbols from comics and popular culture; or the empress ringed by turbaned skulls with big black poisonous spiders on a fiery red robe.

A distinctive feature of all these motifs is that the figures are heavily contoured and simplified yet highly varied in their ornamentation. Such detailed working demands time and patience from the artist. The love of detail is love of the motif.

Blumenschein's queer icons began to diversify: the beautiful woman gave way in about 1990 to the young "Marine" with the same eyes, puckered lips and beauty spot. Her pictures of "Lovely Sailors" play on a figure that became a gay symbol of hypersexuality and masculinity.

In the mid-1990s, the theme of "Germany" began to enter her works. She explored the meaning of home, all the more poignant after two periods living in a hostel for homeless women and then in shared accommodation in the Adlershof district of Berlin.

Late work

In 1999 Blumenschein managed to rent a flat in a high-rise estate on Allee der Kosmonauten in Marzahn. Encouraged by the fortunate if gradual restoration of her long-interrupted contact with Ottinger, the artist tackled new themes, partly inspired by Ottinger's cinematic excursions to China, Mongolia, the Taiga and Crimea. She took an interest in the explorer James Cook, jotted down little stories on paper to go with her drawings of palm trees, Hawaiian girls and pirates, gluing on photographic self-portraits. A drawing dedicated to the popular Wild West icon Calamity Jane testifies to her lasting fascination with strong women who assert themselves in a man's world.

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In the final years of her artistic production, Blumenschein enriched her universe of contradictory gender and role images with new motifs, including “bearded ladies” in splendidly ornamental garments. Shrouded in androgynous myth, these figures came from a long tradition in popular culture: at 19th-century fairgrounds they were exhibited in so-called freak shows. From Ottinger’s films “Laocoon & Sons” and “The Enchantment of the Blue Sailors”, Blumenschein had her own experience of metamorphosing into a young man with a Menjou moustache.

But the bearded ladies theme is not simply about switching roles. Its appeal lies rather in merging the two genders and all the beautiful connotations associated with each, creating a hermaphrodite – in appearance if not organically. Blumenschein’s bearded ladies in their tight-fitting dresses and ballerina tutus are proud to display their lovely breasts, while their silken beards are long, plaited and adorned with ribbons.

This text is based on the essay “Detail Is All. On Tabea Blumenschein’s Art” by Annelie Lütgens in the book “ZusammenSpiel” published by Hatje Cantz.

The exhibition upholds the traditions of Das Verborgene Museum and has been funded by the Capital Cultural Fund (HKF).

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