

Izabella Volovnik | Three Scratch Marks and a Love Letter

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“Not naming things by their names. Things have barbed edges, lush vegetation.”

—Alejandra Pizarnik [1]

Izabella Volovnik creates a labyrinthine world that extends between imaginary domestic spaces and local landscapes while appropriating images from art history and her own immediate environment. She adds tributes to subcultures, such as heavy-metal music, online iconography, as well as post-internet culture (in dialogue with Internet’s aesthetics and sub-cultures) and aesthetic tropes from horror films. Her works engage with representations of femininity entwined with those of the animal kingdom in various cultures and languages; explore demonization and dehumanization as covert empowerment or alternative positions of power; and pose questions about hierarchy, power relations, sexuality, and violent desires—in society, culture, and the soul.

Out of oil paintings, charcoal drawings, and sculptures emerge a variety of figures of young women and girls, bears, horses, leopards, dogs and bitches, as well as monsters, demons and objects, some functional, some sharp and dangerous. Most of the characters and identities exist or are imprisoned in everyday domestic spaces and local landscapes, seductive and menacing, symbolizing the caring, the magical, the whimsical, and the legendary, as well as the abject and obscene. They relentlessly change form and roles, shifting from one image to another in multiple guises, their innocence or inherent menace varying from one situation to the next. The combination of this panoply of characters, creatures, and familiar objects and the aggressive, sexual, and violent elements holds contradictory and conflicting layers of existence that break down the distinction between humanity and monstrosity.

At the heart of the exhibition space stands a sculptural object inspired by a war table that the Prussian army adopted in the nineteenth century for training and research purposes. Many months before the shattering Saturday of October 7, 2023, Volovnik created a three-dimensional territory, the surface of a variable landscape that can be controlled and viewed from a bird’s eye view. With its little figurines, some of which also feature in her oil paintings and charcoal drawings, it presents an elaborate cultural battlefield.

Three scratch marks, created by the claws of a female animal or a bestial woman, recur in her works and leave their mark on the walls, deep in the flesh of the female figure, blurring the boundary between one

body and another and between space and its content to the point that the room itself appears to have become a body. The associations between the female body and that of the monstrous animal allow the figures and identities—human and non-human alike—to find comfort in the animalist state. Volovnik adopts sexual attributes and symbols, a variety of cultural and social taboos traditionally seen as tools of oppression, and turns them into symbols of lust—not necessarily from a critical stance, but from an openness to a subversion of thought, language, and every aspect of identity.

The exhibition is a love letter to animals; animals of all kinds, including the two-legged human variety.

[1] Alejandra Pizarnik, "Continuity," trans. Yvette Siegert, available at https://www.documenta14.de/en/south/465_fourteen_poems (retrieved Dec. 8, 2023).