

Marlene McCarty

Into the Weeds

24.1. – 21.6.2020

The garden at the entrance to the Kunsthau Baselland seems at first familiar and inviting. Tender little plants will continue to stretch up through the soil over the next few weeks. Despite the time of year, some of them will even grow to display the beauty of their blooms. And, the accompanying large-format – sometimes wall-sized – drawings by the artist **Marlene McCarty** also seem, at first glance, to reflect the fascination and beauty of humans and nature. But it wouldn't be a McCarty exhibition without differing levels and depths of meaning unfolding beyond this.

For decades the artist, who lives in New York but has close ties to Basel, has used humble yet direct materials such as graphite pencils or ballpoint pens to probe controversial social issues. In her vast series and cycles of drawings, which have grown constantly since the 1980s, the artist's gaze – and therefore that of the viewer – through topics of the contemporary, but also social abysses seems to penetrate everything. Layer after layer is meticulously revealed, uncovered, as if with a scalpel, passing through textiles, surfaces, naked skin, from the superficial to the profound. Journeying through the various levels, human knowledge is shown to be animalistically unpredictable and dangerous, while the animal itself is revealed to be deeply human. The exhibition at the Kunsthau is thus framed by a narrative that has been a preoccupation of Marlene McCarty's work since the mid-1990s: the story of a teenager living in America, Marlene Olive, who – as a tragic act of rebellion – killed her mother and became an accomplice in the killing of her beloved father, not unlike a Greek tragedy, this crime story mirrors for McCarty the arduous and not always successful passage from socially constructed limitations to emancipation.

McCarty's topics could hardly be more urgent today, ranging from social and sexual inequality, to discussions of gender and trans-biology. In her recent work, McCarty has focused on nature in greater detail. To this end, a large plant kingdom has been constructed in the Kunsthau with the help of the Merian Gardens team. On the one hand, this garden takes up floral motifs of her current drawings, but on the other, it more firmly represents how the artist works. In her works she does not merely describe, document, or narrate, but instead facilitates an immediacy and a directness through the act of drawing – which creates a reality in itself. The garden does not invite the visitor to linger, but rather brings plants together in a unique way – similar to a research project. Plants which, as McCarty has found in her research, have historically been tools for women's emancipation as well as emissaries of a (secret) female knowledge; for example, some plant seeds were used against unwanted pregnancies, or even – due to extreme toxic effects – as a last resort for self-defense.

(Details of all plants in the landscaped garden can be found in the separate booklet in the exhibition).

But Marlene McCarty is not an artist who merely looks back on history. Once again, she manages to explicitly link current discussions concerning the distribution of power and knowledge in today's society including it's use of violence against the disempowered with the acquisition, cultivation, and growth of awareness concerning nature. Marlene McCarty not only renders visible the unadorned and grotesque

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nature of a contemporary society whose cultivated state can generally be called into question. Above all, she demonstrates that the acquisition of knowledge, the cultivation of it through detailed awareness and diverse processes of understanding concerning circumstances other than one's own — can give one meaning and a sense of location, which in turn can generate sustainable action. (IG)

Marlene McCarty (born 1957, Lexington, KY; USA/CH) studied at the Allgemeine Kunstgewerbeschule in Basel from 1978 to 1983. After moving to New York in 1983, she worked as the interim director of MoMA's graphic design department and later with Tibor Kalman at the well-known design firm M&Co, among other things. In 1998, she founded Bureau with Donald Moffett, a transdisciplinary design studio that produced art, film titles, and political and commercial works.

She was an early member of the AIDS activist collective Gran Fury, which gained international recognition through their appearance at the 1990 Venice Biennale and other interventions. Since the 1980s, McCarty has consistently worked with a variety of mediums, though drawing with everyday materials such as graphite or a ballpoint pen is central to her work.

She has been awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship, the Pollack-Krasner Foundation Grant, an honorary doctorate from the Massachusetts College of Art, and is also a professor at NYU Steinhardt. Her works can be found in major public and private collections worldwide such as the MoMa, New York; MoCa, Los Angeles; CAMH, Houston; and the Brooklyn Museum. In recent years, major exhibitions of her work have been shown at the New Museum; MoCA; ICA London; Secession, Vienna; Reina Sofía, Madrid; Kunsthalle St. Gallen; ZKM Karlsruhe; the Museum Ludwig, Cologne; and the Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin. She is represented by the gallery Sikkema Jenkins and Co. in New York.

The exhibition at the Kunsthaus Baselland is the most comprehensive presentation of McCarty's work in Switzerland to date, as well as the Kunsthaus Baselland's first collaboration with the Merian Gardens, an institution of the Christoph Merian Foundation. The central interplay between humans and nature, which can become a cultural commodity through knowledge, understanding, and design, is also the central unifying element of the collaboration with the Merian Gardens.

The artist wishes to acknowledge indebtedness to her maternal gardeners, living and deceased, who have given her the knowledge and also the enthusiasm for the subject: Phyllis James McCarty, Mary Gardener James, Gladys Peyton McCarty and Leni Jakob-Burkhalter.

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