

Originally commissioned for the exhibition *Plague* by Puppies Puppies (Jade Kuriki Olivo)
Halle für Kunst Lüneburg, 2019

Plague

The gallery is a gravesite, with soft earth underfoot and bodies draped in muddied sheets. A beak-masked medieval doctor presides over this chilling scene, with boarded up windows and taxidermied rats. Dread settles.

Puppies Puppies (Jade Kuriki Olivo) describes this exhibition as an oracle or prophecy, visions of the past and possible future. It conjures the plague as a kind of vast, chaotic gloom. A force beyond comprehension or control that radically reorders everything, just over the edge of some tipping point or fault line. Dark energies for dark ages.

Puppies tells me she's been thinking about *The Triumph of Death*, c. 1562, by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. It's such a wicked, hedonistic scene. Skeletons ravaging the earth, galloping in, gleeful, unhinged. In the genre of *danse macabre*, death is portrayed as this great equalizer, coming for us all. In death we may all be equal but how and when we die, expect to die or are expected to die is the ultimate scale of inequality. That gives this fear of things that kill indiscriminately a certain edge. It's said that in medieval times the omnipresence of death gave people this thirst for life, verging on hysteria. *Carpe diem*.

In Puppies' other works the costumes sometimes felt like thin screens, or maybe two-way mirrors. The person inside is shielded but that only seems to make them more vulnerable—prone, isolated, not really seen. A costume for a plague doctor manifests this vulnerability in a particular way, a safeguard for something it is so utterly, absurdly defenceless against. Death finds its way in and through—physically, psychologically. What mask does the doctor wear when she comes home to her family at night?

Puppies tells me about the rats that were in the walls of her apartment. I imagine this muffled scratching and scurrying like the low hum of anxiety. Creeping in the background, sometimes hard to locate, then suddenly right next to you. Exploding rat populations in major cities like Los Angeles, New York and Chicago are more than a pest control problem, they are a symptom of larger shifts and stresses: zealous construction, piles of refuse in the streets, warmer weather for breeding.

Puppies sends me links to videos of horses "inside out," their skeletal structures painted on their skins, like live anatomical animations. They are incredibly beautiful and melancholic. As an allusion to the horsemen of the apocalypse, the way they flow through obstacle courses takes on a feeling of the inevitable, the vast economic, political and ecological conditions that spiral, vortex-like, towards collapse. But the animals are in their element, oblivious, carrying on. The horses, the stuffed rats, the mannequins: all of them hover somewhere between life and death, lightness straining against gravity.

For the opening, Puppies will perform a mimesis of Trisha Donnelly's demonstration from 2002, in which she road into a gallery on horseback, dressed as a Napoleonic courier, and delivered a declaration of defeat. But the words are laced with defiance. *My fall will be great but it will be useful*. Puppies' exhibition has a lot of darkness in it, but this element feels more hopeful, in the way that I see her remakes and homages as a form of sustenance, multiplicity and continuum. *with this I am electric*.

Whenever I contemplate Puppies' work a schematic comes to mind. As humans evolved, new parts of the brain were added on like rooms in an expanding house. The oldest parts are still there at the center, the flight-or-flight reptilian brain, with layers built around it: language and logic, emotions and memory, abstraction and metaphor. I experience Puppies' work like an opening of doors between these rooms, pacing through them on pathways and loops between gut feelings and complexes of meaning. It can be dizzying at times.

The confluence of emotions Puppies describes experiencing in her transition are profound: exhilaration and joy, bleakness and loss. The grave has a symbolic finality that is fundamentally irreconcilable with the ways of memory, the hauntings of the past. How it is constantly revived, relived, re-felt in the present, and how that can feel interminable. Mortality has been a central theme for Puppies from the beginning, reflecting both her early close encounters with death and now moving through the death of an old self. In her work, Puppies gives form to this thing of formlessness, or un-forming, bearing it in all the ways in which it is strange, intimate, unknowable.

- Rose Bouthillier, 2019