

Sif Itona Westerberg

House of Dionysus

21 August - 26 September 2020

Q & A WITH SIF ITONA WESTERBERG

SG: Your debuting solo show with Gether Contemporary "House of Dionysus" opens 21 August. Can you tell us a bit about the concept of the show?

SIW: The show will consist of a series of large reliefs, installed like a frieze moving through the gallery space. It depicts a procession in honour of Dionysus, greek deity of wine and ecstasy. I wished to go into the potential of ecstasy as a state of change, and as a point where we, in unity, become something more or other than ourselves.

Worship of Dionysus, has been associated with wild orgies, and complete loss of inhibition and restraint. But it has also represented a deep and mystic connection to nature, and a sanctuary for those marginalised by patriarchy, such as slaves, women and queers.

I have, since childhood, been drawn to mythology, and in recent years I have tried to bring ancient mythologies of metamorphosis, into our current time, because I wish for us to remember, that throughout history, we have had more fluid and elastic ways of connecting and relating to our ecosystem. The human body changing form and morphing into other, is, perhaps, the oldest act of rebellion against a human-centric world order.

In western attempts at civilisation we have suppressed, and written out pagan rituals of connecting to nature, or drawing power or even magic from nature. And if there ever was a time when we needed those skills, it would be now, as we are entering a man made ecological crisis disproportional to anything ever before.

I wanted to make a show where bodily transgression was centre point, and to play with the notion that maybe in celebration and in unity we can tap into something that is older and bigger than contemporary individualism.

SG: The show was conceptually conceived just after the onset of the Corona virus. Does the show in some way relate to or reflect the situation the world has gone through since then?

SIW: Yes, like you said I started working on the concept of the show right as the world started closing down, and

this naturally affected my process a lot. For me to do a show about unity and procession, at the high point of isolation, and curfews is probably no coincidence.

I have, for years, been very interested in the many ways that human presence on earth is leaving traces, and changing the ecology of the planet. And how nature, technology and living species are intertwining, as a consequence of accelerated industrial capitalism, with great intentional and unintentional consequences for our ecosystem.

And here came this virus, that so vividly reminded us, just how thin the membrane, that separates the human body, from its surroundings, really is. The fact that this virus is transmitted by droplets and touch, and can remain alive on dead surfaces, until it finds a new human host, just made it all the more visible and tangible, that humans are constantly leaving traces everywhere. But it also reminded us that we are one species. I can't remember ever being in a situation where all of human life was simultaneously affected by the same thing, regardless of politics or nationalities or economics. For something so small as a virus, to bring us this much out of balance, is humbling. That all the money and all the technology of the world can't just fix this, should teach us something valuable, about the future ecological crises we will encounter.

I wanted to make a show that didn't exactly point to all of this, but instead drew upon the inherent ability we have to connect, with each other and with the world we live in. Nietzsche imagined a primordial unity, a universal blossom that could be accessed through the influence of Dionysus, by letting go and acting in unity and ecstasy, cosmic oneness could be achieved.

SG: The show will consist of 7 large wall reliefs made of aerated concrete blocks. Why have you chosen to work in this material and what special properties does it facilitate?

SIW: Well, for starters, it is easy to work with, I can carve everything by hand, because it is a soft material, compared to stone or marble, and I don't have to use machines when I work. But I like the fact that it is a modern industrial material. By carving ancient motives into contemporary building blocks, I wish to initiate a conversation about current states, and my choice of material becomes an active player in that conversation. I build my reliefs from separate blocks and mount them with metal bolts, and I think that by mimicking building structures, and having all my works conform to the same grit, and standardised blocks, it serves as a reminder, that everything in this world is built from smaller parts, and that we can deconstruct and rearrange and build new structures, from these parts, when we need to.

SG: Thank you