

Esther Teichmann
Mythologies











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Esther Teichmann (b. 1980, Germany) graduated from the Royal College of Art with a Masters in Fine Art in 2005. She is currently a senior lecturer at the London College of Communication and will spend the coming year as a guest artist at the California College of Art in San Francisco. Teichmann's practice merges photography, collage, painting and the moving image. In her work Teichmann explores the genesis of desire and fantasy and how they are closely linked to the experiences of loss and representation. Her work has been exhibited and published internationally, including solo exhibitions in the UK, Australia, Germany and Switzerland. Esther Teichmann recently published *Drinking Air*, a limited edition artist book.

What in particular grabbed you about the medium of photography when you did your Masters in Fine Art at the Royal College of Art?

Inherent to the photographic, as to desire and love, is the paradox and impossibility of grasping a body, the quest to close the gap between oneself and the other, the image, and the inevitable distance which always remains. As much as the photograph is a question of this body of desire, it is also a moment of violence, of wanting to possess that which is always beyond reach.

My relationship with photography has little to do with delivering transparency or a copy. Rather, the camera and image function here as metaphors for subjectivity, memory and desire. The real is transformed from one thing into another in a magical totemistic process, fracturing any claims of the photograph as evidence. Photography delivers the possibly universal and timeless desire to become one with another, which we seek within the lovers' embrace.

In your work you explore themes of loss, grief, fantasy and desire, using a variety of media (photography, inks, acrylics) and a range of source material from Orientalist paintings to literature. When and how did those themes emerge for you as an artist?

I am drawn to works that explore human relationships and look at desire and loss as bound up with one another. Growing up in southern Germany in the Rhine Valley next to the Black Forest, I was introduced to works by artists such as Cranach and Grünewald. The eroticism, violence and fantastical landscapes in their paintings had a huge impact on me and have always stayed with me. I go back to my hometown regularly and do some of my work there, using the swamp-and-cave landscape as a backdrop to stage narratives. I am fascinated by what we can never know about the bodies and subjects we desire, about the mother and lover's lives before we knew them, and the people they are when not with us. It is within that context that I'm interested in the fantasy and exoticism of the other, which underpins Orientalist painting. My parents were both displaced from their home and origin in different ways, so I was always aware of a sort of inherited homesickness and the impossibility of returning to something which no longer exists.

Your also create work around the idea of the primal loss of the mother, who, as it says in your statement, necessarily turns away. It sounds rather psychoanalytical. Was that your starting point for the project?

I am fascinated by what we can never know.

interview by Anne-Celine Jaeger

All my bodies of work stem from autobiographical experiences reworked and restaged into fictional and fantastical narratives. I am interested in psychoanalysis only to the extent that I see it as fiction, the drama of the family, and think it has much in common with how an artist works, in terms of a process of associations, leaping from one thing to another that are connected in imaginative and contingent ways. A lot of the philosophers and writers I'm interested in - Maurice Blanchot, Georges Bataille, Julia Kristeva or Marguerite Duras - were or are influenced by psychoanalysis.

Can you tell me a little bit about your approach to executing your ideas using mixed media?

In my sketchbooks I have always written fictional texts alongside the image-making, and draw on the photographs and create extensions to them to plan further set constructions and new images. But then I realized those were as much the work as the final image, so I began including reference material, collages, etchings and painting into photographs and film pieces with voice-over narratives. The slippage between photographic and other media is something I have always worked with and perhaps it is a reflection of the works I'm drawn to and look at within my research.

You recently published a limited-edition artist book called *Drinking Air*, which features the past six years of your work, alongside prose. What was your concept for the book and are you happy with the outcome?

A printer I have worked with for years approached me about creating a sample book for him to target artists working with self-published limited editions. I wanted to use the opportunity to test out ideas for creating more of a sketchbook-

like artist book in small numbers - the edition of fifty included a 10x8-inch edition contact print - rather than a monograph with an essay by an art historian or critic. I think some aspects work better than others, but it really helped me to think more about the book space and the relationship between text and image and how I can develop and rework that for future publications. The process of testing out those ideas really helped to me think about other ways of exhibiting work.

You are currently a senior lecturer at the London College of Communication. Do you feel there is a specific academic language used in writing artist statements about work that can exclude a broader audience?

Like any specialized area, the language used to talk about art definitely can overcomplicate and veil meaning and as a result it might feel inaccessible to a broader audience. When used as a trope to sound academic this kind of text quickly falls apart and becomes a parody of itself.

Many artists have a very close relationship to language and writing, generating a different kind of literature or text - I for one am most captivated by those texts which I am never fully able to grasp, which change and shift with each rereading.

What are you currently working on?

I am rewriting scripts for new moving-image pieces, which follow on, although they are also stand-alone pieces, from *In Search of Lightning*. I'm also thinking about what kinds of voices to cast for the voice-overs. During the summer I will be filming and editing the new works in California. I have also just spent a few weeks in the studio working on black-and-white images of bodies against sky backdrops, which have a strange charged atmosphere of inside and outside space collapsed. Working with 10x8-inch plate cameras and spending time in a black-and-white darkroom again is exhilarating after spending months in editing suites on the film piece.