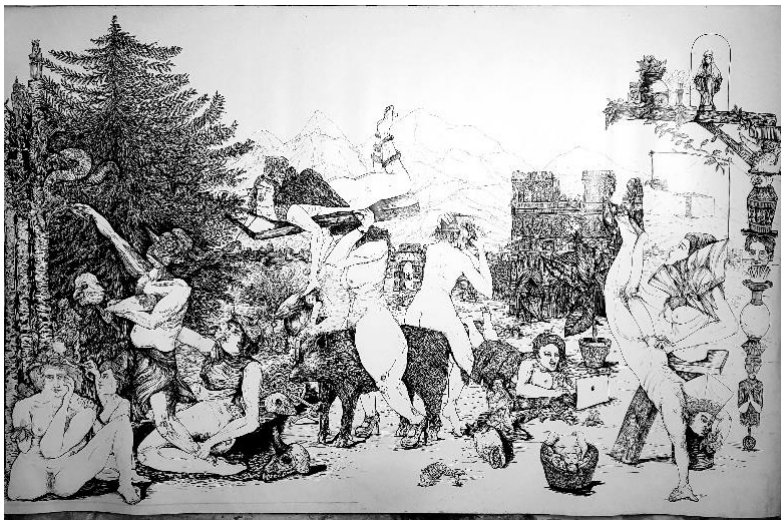


A Blessing in Disguise

Representations of the 'fatal woman' can be dated back to thousands of years ago. In 19th century France, England and Belgium, she became a medium used by a sophisticated masculine artistic culture to explore its own struggle with sexuality in a world wherein women were slowly claiming their position on stage.

The association of woman with 'nature' was not inspired by a romantic vision on the feminine. Rather, it served a masculine strategy of submission: "... *The femme fatale and the pure woman were reformulations of the ancient paradigm 'woman as nature', a model that tyrannically dominated discourses on womanhood in late-19th century France. Woman as nature was conceived of as an opposition to the higher masculine realm of human consciousness and culture, whose inhabitants strove to transcend and thus control both nature and women as its embodiment...*"¹



A Sunday Afternoon – Annelies Van Mol



Sin Altar in the studio of Franz von Stuck²

While in the previous show *All that Glitter is No Gold* the work *A Sunday Afternoon* figured as the 'final image' or pièce de résistance, it now became the point of departure for 'A Blessing in Disguise', part two of this double show. With reference to the 'altar' the German symbolist painter Franz von Stuck constructed around his famous painting *Die Sünde* in his house in Munich, we take a step back and present a series of altars that question the legacy of the 19th century interpretations of the concept of 'the fatal woman' in the way it was pulled through modernity into our present times.

In this show, we declare the *femme fatale* a symbol of revenge against all enduring forms of machismo and patriarchal power. At the same time, she may be seen to represent sexual freedom and to hint at the fact of fluidity of gender and sexual orientation. In this perspective, the tension between sexual attraction driven by lust and curiosity and the anxiety of losing oneself in a fatal perverse adventure remains, although now in an emancipated liberated way: whatever body and whatever sexual mind, to be human is to live with the fantasies that constantly aim to lure us into decadent pleasure beyond and against nature. Facing this blessing, the fatal is not in the concession but in the denial.

Annelies van Mol & Gaston Meskens, *The Arts Institute, Antwerp, 25 March 2022*

¹ Quoted from *Passionate Discontent – Creativity, Gender and French Symbolist Art*, Patricia Mathews, The University of Chicago Press, 1997

² Photo: Stadtmuseum, Munich, taken from the book *Franz von Stuck, Eros & Pathos*, 1995, Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, Published by Waanders bv, Zwolle.

Die Stürzende Sirene

Why would it all be dead
If life sucks you in;
In a moment of fear
For what will eat you
Drown you
Transform you
Into what you really are.
A slave
To the body.
A stupid victim of your own fictional
Expectations.

Your self-abandonment wants to be immeasurable;
This is your happiness.
The nameless suffering of your love
Has always been that you are expected
To limit your devotion.

You ask 'What shall we do to make life worth living?'
A question to which, in your case, there is no answer,
And which is, by the way, an unfailing symptom
Of the beginning of the decay of a civilisation.

The madness of one makes many mad,
And he who is bitten by a snake fears the lizard;
The gaping wound
That sucks him in
Again.

You are wandering around,
Walking the tightrope.
I seek new perfumes, large blossoms, pleasures still untasted;
Ein Stürzende Sirene
Not available
Anymore.

So if you go
Your own way.
You'll never be able
To cross the frontiers of thought...
To feel the feverish desire for the unknown,
The unsatisfied longing for an ideal,
The craving to escape from the horrible realities of life.

One-dimensional man
One-dimensional hero
One-dimensional loser