

Thaddaeus Ropac

London Paris Salzburg



1. Bjarne Melgaard, *Cat/Dog Walk*, 2020.

Press Release

Bjarne Melgaard ***Elisabeth and Me***

Opening
Paris Marais
Wednesday 9 December 2020, 3pm-8pm

9 December 2020 - 13 February 2021
Thaddaeus Ropac
7, rue Debelleye
75003 Paris

Thaddaeus Ropac Paris is pleased to announce the exhibition *Elisabeth and Me* (sic)* with new paintings by Norwegian artist Bjarne Melgaard inspired by the life and work of Elizabeth Wurtzel (1967–2020), the author of *Prozac Nation*. Independent, radical and non-consensual, Bjarne Melgaard is known for his provocative approach to art, dealing with social, political and ideological issues. His new paintings reflect the psychological and social consequences of the current pandemic, such as depression and isolation. They are displayed on specially designed wallpapers referencing Elizabeth Wurtzel's life and writings for a site-specific installation.

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2. Bjarne Melgaard, *Untitled*, 2020.

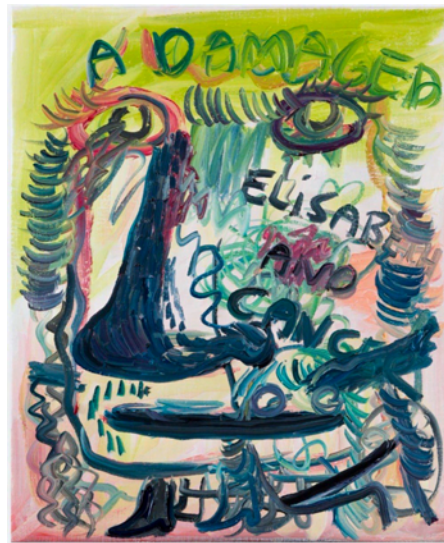
Polymorphously prolific, Melgaard works across the arts in painting, sculpture, installation, fashion, literature, architecture, curating, video and augmented/virtual reality. He frequently incorporates a wide range of multimedia elements and invites other collaborators into his interdisciplinary projects.

Melgaard's new series was initiated by his experience of today's society and his visceral interest in Elizabeth Wurtzel: "My new body of work came from the fact of being in lockdown and rereading Elisabeth Wurtzel's book *Prozac Nation* published in 1994 where she chronicles her battle with depression and *More, now, again: A Memoir of Addiction* from 2004 that centres primarily on her struggle with addiction and isolation. No other writers have had such an impact on me as her. For this exhibition in Paris she is again at the epicentre as my fellow-mate in my own paintings. Forever the protagonist of unapologetic behaviour and creative genius, her voice resonates more with me now than ever before. In these troubled times Elisabeth seems like the best of companions when lockdowns and isolation is such a new part of our common experience."

Melgaard never met Elizabeth Wurtzel in person but felt connected to "the uneasiness, the unpleasantness of her writing" as a way to confront the most difficult problems. Only recently he discovered by chance that they had not only common roots in the Nordic culture, but also the same Norwegian psychotherapist who she visited every year before she died in 2020. In her cult novel *Prozac Nation*, Elizabeth Wurtzel wrote in 1994: "That is all I want in life: for this pain to seem purposeful" and added at the end of her poignant testimony "The fact that depression seems to be 'in the air' right now can be both the cause and result of a level of societal malaise that so many feel." Melgaard's nonstop creative practice has always been cognisant of the lows of human nature. Investigating, sharing and embracing Elizabeth Wurtzel's witty and painful self-scrutinizing and her dystopian worldview guided him to this series of expressive, vividly coloured canvases. They are populated by hybrid human and animal characters, cat or dog-like, with sexual connotations, exploring the fluidity of gender and open for multiple interpretations, ranging from a seemingly childlike humour to despair and the uncanny.

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3. Bjarne Melgaard, *Untitled*, 2020.

Melgaard's characteristic rapid brushstrokes indicate an urge to express himself without any restrictions, to capture a relevant feeling about the here and now. Contrasting with its joyful colours, the paintings echo the darkness and pain that he recognises in Wurtzel's writings, which become particularly poignant in light of the current global social-psychological crisis. Commenting on the diptych entitled *Dog/Cat Walk* that pairs two of his semi-cartoonish characters, Melgaard says that it impersonates our current life experiences, as we "walk over ourselves starring in our own everyday drama".

Painting smaller formats for his exhibition in Paris has allowed Melgaard to engage in a more intimate and psychological tête-à-tête with his female alter-ego. The animalized figure of Elizabeth Wurtzel on candy-coloured blue, green or pink backgrounds haunts his paintings as an obscure object of his different feelings and desires. In his eyes these characters (either in his paintings, novels or other artistic fields) are like "signatures" and Melgaard sees his new paintings "as portraits of me and Elisabeth and maybe also of how I can feel and relate to her ideas and writings, especially about addiction."

However, by depicting an existing person like Wurtzel, Melgaard steps into different phantasmagoric grounds, where the blending of real and fictional characters allows him to establish his very own 'mythology'. In her author's note of *Prozac Nation*, Wurtzel quoted the Talmud: "We do not see things as they are. We see them as we are". In his homage to her thinking, Melgaard pursues his own introspection. By layering auto-biographical sediments of his life and crossing different genres and forms, he constantly reinvents his artistic expression through the flow of his auto-fictional narratives: "The characters in my paintings - are they good or bad? I don't know. It can be debatable. There is something subversive in it and in a way that intensifies the extreme quality of my pictures."

In his specially conceived installation for Paris, the layering of meaning and the permanent hybridity present in Melgaard's works is dramatized by the display of his paintings on three different wallpapers created by Martin Kvamme and produced by Rolf Hoff and his company Signex AS, which transform the gallery spaces "in a very simple gesture", as Melgaard says. Two psychedelic wallpapers feature cinematic streams of fragmented photographs and drawings representing the protagonist of the exhibition, Elizabeth Wurtzel, together with other generational icons like Lydia Lunch or Heather Locklear. A third graphic wallpaper projects a selection of sharp quotes from *Prozac Nation* on the walls, as if sending arrows of thoughts into the future.

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4. Installation view of "Bjarne Melgaard: Elisabeth and Me"

Melgaard embraces a clash of (sub)cultures through his exploration of a narrative beyond the concept of high/low, good/evil, where his family of invented characters evolve. By constantly pushing the boundaries, he challenges the perception as well as the social, sexual and psychological position of the viewer. Melgaard firmly believes that "the aim of art is to gain from exploring the negative spaces of a culture". By tracing trips into the voids and organizing his seemingly chaotic universe, he creates a visceral language based on a visual dynamism that may connect relevantly with us as we negotiate the complicated, disruptive, challenging times we are living in.

* Bjarne Melgaard spells the name of Elizabeth Wurtzel in his own way: Elisabeth Wurtzel.

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5. Bjarne Melgaard, *Cheese Man*, 2020.

Bjarne Melgaard to participate in the AR festival “Unreal City” in London from 8th December to 5th January

As a multi-disciplinary artist embracing the innovative technologies and revolutionary fields of expression, Bjarne Melgaard has been invited to participate with a new AR production at *Unreal City*, London’s largest public festival of augmented reality art organized by Acute Art and Dazed Media from 8th December to 5th January. The relevance in these troubled times where many of the important cultural sites are all closed, was to reinvest the shared space of the city. Following Acute’s mission to democratise art bringing it to yet unexplored places, the festival features 36 virtual outdoor sculptures arranged as a walking tour along the River Thames by leading artists including Nina Chanel Abney, Olafur Eliasson, Cao Fei, Alicja Kwade, Koo Jeong A, Marco Brambilla alongside new and never-seen-before works by Darren Bader, KAWS, Bjarne Melgaard and Tomás Saraceno.

On this special occasion Melgaard has produced a new sophisticated AR animation work featuring new characters made from VR and then built out in AR but also some of his historic characters such as Octo or the Lightbulb Man that premiered at his first solo exhibition at Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1997. “It’s like a crazy mini-retrospective of everything for ten minutes and freely available to all the visitors” Melgaard comments on this unprecedented experience that follows up his AR project *The Trip* produced by Acute Art in 2019 that premiered at the Sundance Film Festival earlier this year.

Daniel Birnbaum, Artistic Director, Acute Art said: “The arrival of augmented reality has given rise to a new immaterial art form and nothing could be more exciting for me as a curator than the opportunity to explore these possibilities with some of today’s key artists. The emergence of a new medium presents new possibilities for art and for the ways art can reach broader audiences. Join us in this voyage into uncharted terrain!”

To experience Bjarne Melgaard’s latest AR work as part of the exhibition *Unreal City* visitors are invited to download the free [Acute Art app](#) through which they can view the map and the works. Download the app for free [here](#).

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6. Bjarne Melgaard. Photo: Johann Lindeberg

About the artist

Bjarne Melgaard first developed his neo-expressionist, gestural style of painting in the mid-1990s, often addressing marginal and subcultural phenomena to raise provocative and critical questions about society. He explores the darker side of humanity, such as self-destructive tendencies, deviant sexuality or fringe religious beliefs, pushing the boundaries of acceptability in order to probe social, political and ideological issues. His distinct iconography is influenced by Norse mythology, but also draws from popular culture, with references as diverse as the Pink Panther, *Planet of the Apes*, Symbolist painter Edvard Munch and author Elizabeth Wurtzel. His work across disciplines and media encompasses painting, sculpture, installation, fashion, literature, architecture, curating, video and augmented/virtual reality.

Melgaard's expressive, coloured canvases are executed in thickly crusted oil paint against a bright, often monochromatic ground. Many of these works also incorporate Norwegian or English phrases as a counterpoint to the imagery. The result is an intimately introspective body of work, filled with "personal archetypes" that reveal the artist's sustained investigation into an ultimate "embrace of male sexuality" as a riotous celebration tinged with angst. Although he does not consider himself an explicitly political artist, his work is rooted in an early identification with queer politics and identity from the 1970s and 1980s. He also engages with Munch's legacy in Norway, addressing similarly profound themes including sexuality, desire, alienation and death, although transformed into Melgaard's own idiosyncratic idiom.

Born in Sydney to Norwegian parents, Melgaard was raised in Oslo and studied at the Norwegian National Academy of Fine Arts, moving to the Netherlands in 1991 to complete his studies at the Rijksakademie, Amsterdam, and the Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht. The artist lived and worked in New York for a decade, before returning to Oslo in 2017. He represented Norway at the 54th Venice Biennale (2011) and has also participated in the Lyon Biennale (2000 and 2013) and the Whitney Biennial (2014).

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His work was the subject of a mid-career retrospective at the Astrup Fearnley Museum, Oslo (2010), followed by *Melgaard + Munch – The End Of It All Has Already Happened* at the Munch Museum, Oslo (2015), which placed his work in direct dialogue with that of Edvard Munch. The following year, Rizzoli published the first comprehensive monograph of his career. Melgaard's book, *A New Novel* (2012), was the first English-language novel to be published by Aschehoug in Norway. His most recent novel *De Etterlatte* will be released in 2021 by the prestigious Norwegian publisher Oktober, that also works with Karl Ove Knausgård.

In 2019, he created his first virtual reality work *My Trip* with Acute Art, which was shown at the Julia Stoschek Foundation in Berlin. Together with Steiff, he is creating a toy collection to be showcased at Kunsthall Stavanger in 2022, in collaboration with the musician and artist Chris Korda, which includes a retrospective of her career. A major retrospective at the Munch Museum, Oslo in 2023 will be the first comprehensive survey of Melgaard's career at a public institution in his homeland.



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#BjarneMelgaard#ElisabthandMe#UnrealCities

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Credits

1. Bjarne Melgaard, *Cat/Dog Walk*, 2020. Oil paint on canvas.
Diptych: 61 x 50 cm (24 x 19,7 in) each
 2. Bjarne Melgaard, *Untitled*, 2020. Oil paint on canvas. 46 x 38 cm (18,11 x 14,96 in)
 3. Bjarne Melgaard, *Untitled*, 2020, Oil paint on canvas. 61 x 50 cm (24,02 x 19,69 in)
 4. *Bjarne Melgaard: Elisabeth and Me*, Installation view with wallpapers
designed by Martin Kvamme and produced by Signex AS
 5. Bjarne Melgaard, *Cheese Man*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Acute Art
 6. Bjarne Melgaard. Photo: Johann Lindeberg
- All images: © Bjarne Melgaard / ADAGP, Paris, 2020

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