

Roni Horn

Recent Drawings

17 March
— 6 May 2023

Press Release

'An elusive red figure darting about in the Venetian darkness; a red dwarf burning out beyond Saturn; a nasty gang of runts in red snowsuits acting out in a North American suburb; an attractive young Italian woman dressed in red is stalked by a lesbian serial killer; a village girl, the prettiest you can imagine, in a red velvet hood cut from the belly of a sleeping wolf....'

So reads the full title of the *Red Figure* (2022) series, one of three new bodies of work that American artist Roni Horn is presenting in her fifth exhibition at the gallery. The presentation, which also includes *Wits' End Mash* (2019) and *Frick and Fracks* (2018/2022), emphasizes the primacy of drawing in the artist's practice and highlights the new directions in which she is taking the medium. Clouds of handwritten idiomatic expressions (*Wits' End Mash*) and a log (*Red Figure*)—in which the artist records the passage of time through enigmatic juxtapositions of words and images—testify to a broadening and deepening of Horn's fascination with language, identity and meaning. These ensembles are accompanied by a series of abstract, eight-part watercolours—the *Frick and Fracks*—wherein Horn explores the concepts of similarity and difference.

Roni Horn has been creating innovative and technically complex works on paper for almost four decades. Describing drawing as her 'primary activity' and 'a kind of breathing activity on a daily level', it is the only medium that she has consistently worked in throughout her extensive career. In the *Wits' End Mash* series, displayed on the ground floor, the artist explores the complexities and ambiguities of language through handwritten idioms, clichés, and colloquialisms. 'Away with the fairies', 'laugh my head off' and 'fly in the ointment' are just a few of the peculiar yet recognisable phrases that she takes as source material. Horn asked 300 people to each commit five such vernacular phrases to paper, which she subsequently made into individual silkscreens. In *Wits' End Sampler*, shown at the Menil Collection in Houston (2018-19), the artist screen-printed the phrases directly onto the gallery walls. In this new iteration of the work, clusters of 75 to 350 idioms converge in dense, cloud-like formations. Each phrase is individually printed in a complex and layered process. Superimposed and overlapping, the words are sometimes legible, at other times indecipherable. Idioms, by definition, are phrases whose sense cannot be ascertained from the individual meanings of the constituent words: 'up in the air' means 'undecided', for example. This shift from recognition to incomprehension in *Wits' End Mash*, as well as from readability to illegibility, gives charged visual expression to the ambiguities and vagaries of written and verbal communication.

Words—both prosaic and factual—also play a crucial role in *Red Figure*, a new series that can be read as an extension of *LOG*, a suite of 406 works on paper that Horn created as part of a daily practice over fourteen months in 2019 and 2020. In a format resembling an open book, the artist juxtaposes a deeply personal selection of words and images across two adjacent sheets of paper: quotations, collages, photographs, film stills, screenshots, casual musings, information about the news and weather, not to mention personal lists and original texts. The result is an idiosyncratic body of work that not only affords an insight into the mind of the artist, but also echoes and reinforces the themes she frequently explores in her oeuvre. A detailed examination reveals the

significance of place, with Iceland, New York and Austerlitz (NY) featuring heavily as the places where she primarily lives and works; travel (Zurich, London and the Grand Canyon); extreme weather conditions (from a searing heatwave in Switzerland to the phenomenon of ice eggs on a Finnish beach), but also a poetic list of the many and varied words for rain in the English language (a response, perhaps, to the almost 100 words that exist for snow in Icelandic). The artist herself appears in several works, most notably in 'Roni Horn' by Liz Taylor (as a counterpoint to 'Liz Taylor' by Roni Horn). Animals and the natural world are another dominant theme: underwater species, a dog, a bear, and the rarest of all possible creatures, a white raven and a white giraffe.

And while words are noticeably absent from the eight-part *Frick and Fracks*, all unique watercolours, both the series and its title allude to the idea of similarity and difference. The expression 'frick frack' has its origins in a Swiss comedy ice-skating partnership, Werner Groebli and Hans Mauch, whose stage names were Frick and Frack. Beginning in the 1930s, their association was so enduring (almost fifty years), and they were at one time so well known, that their names have entered the English language as slang for two people who are very close, practically inseparable, or sometimes indistinguishable. Horn's vivid abstract shapes, placed side-by-side like upturned cards from a memory game, are non-identical pairs of pairs. In comparing and contrasting the forms, viewers become aware of the subtle correspondences and variances in the unique, hand-painted formations.

Roni Horn (b. 1955, New York) lives and works in New York. The following exhibitions by the artist are opening in 2023: *Roni Horn: I am Paralyzed with Hope*, Botín Centre, Santander, Spain (March); and the He Art Museum, Foshan (June). Recent solo exhibitions include: *A rat surrendered here*, Château La Coste, Le Puy-Sainte-Réparate, France (2021); *You are the Weather*, Kunsthaus Göttingen, Göttingen, Germany (2021) and Fondation Beyeler, Basel, Switzerland (2020); *Gold Field*, installation at the Menil Collection, Houston, TX, USA (2021); *Roni Horn*, UMass Amherst Museum, Fine Arts Center, University of Massachusetts, USA (2020); *Air Burial* (permanent installation), Ekebergparken Park, Oslo, Norway (2019); *When I Breathe, I Draw, Parts I & II*, Menil Collection, Houston, TX, USA (2019).

For further inquiries please contact the gallery at info@xavierhufkens.com or at +32(0)2 639 67 30. For press enquiries contact anazoe@xavierhufkens.com

#ronihorn
#xavierhufkens

Twitter: @XavierHufkens
Instagram: @xavierhufkens
Facebook: Xavier Hufkens