

Press Release

Horror

Curated by Jill Mulleady

November 21, 2025–February 14, 2026

Public Reception: November 20, 6–8pm

Sprüth Magers, Los Angeles

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Monika Sprüth and Philomene Magers are pleased to present *Horror*, an intergenerational group exhibition curated by Jill Mulleady. In conceiving the exhibition, Mulleady was inspired by the long history of horror in film and literature, as well as by Mike Kelley's 1993 group exhibition and publication, *The Uncanny*, a curatorial statement which explored the complex interplay of recognition, memory, and repression. Over thirty years on, *Horror* takes Kelley's project as a touchstone, moving beyond the psychological discomfort of the uncanny toward the explicit shock of horror.

With Dario Argento, Antonin Artaud, Oliver Bak, Bruce Conner, Mati Diop & Fatima Al Qadiri, Cyprien Gaillard, Jonathan Glazer, Anne Imhof, Arthur Jafa, Asger Jorn, Mike Kelley, Karen Kilimnik, Harmony Korine, Tetsumi Kudo, Mire Lee, Diego Marcon, Tyler Mitchell, Ottessa Moshfegh, Jill Mulleady, Precious Okoyomon, Sondra Perry, Carol Rama, Cindy Sherman, Pol Taburet, Henry Taylor, Paul Thek, Rosemarie Trockel, Andra Ursuta, Kara Walker and Jordan Wolfson.

Horror

The concept of the uncanny, as articulated by Sigmund Freud and later explored by artists such as Mike Kelley, centers on the unsettling psychological tension created when the familiar is revealed to be disturbingly strange – a repressed domesticity surfacing in unsettling form. However, when we shift the critical focus from the intellectual discomfort of the uncanny to the visceral, aesthetic shock of horror, the artistic mechanism changes from one of subtle recognition to one of necessary confrontation: it is the deliberate application of fear and repulsion to unlock deeper psycho-social truths.

The central mechanism of horror in art is the distortion of the familiar. Just as Kelley in *The Uncanny* juxtaposed realist figurative sculptures with collections of common objects (the "Harems"), horror takes things we inherently trust – the human form, domestic spaces, children's toys, or the natural world – and renders them repulsive. Horror finds its true power in betrayal.

The body as a site of transformation, mimicry, and vulnerability is central to the practices of artists such as **Cindy Sherman, Tyler Mitchell, Sondra Perry, and Precious Okoyomon**. When hyper-realistic human sculpture is covered in viscera or contorted by internal psychological trauma (as in the work of **Paul Thek** or the choreographies of **Anne Imhof**), the work

immediately bypasses intellectual apprehension. The resulting visceral dread forces the viewer to deal with the subject on a primal level, making the artwork a direct site of confrontation with mortality and decay. It transforms the object of comfort into an object of abjection.

This concept of the abject finds its strongest theoretical mooring in the work of Julia Kristeva, who in *Powers of Horror* defines it not simply as the disgusting, but as that which has been violently cast out of the symbolic order – the primordial system of rejections that constructs the boundaries of the self. The abject is the "fraught boundary": the corpse, bodily waste, or the repressed memory of the maternal body. It is the inescapable horror of what disturbs our fundamental identity, system, and order. Art that employs horror, therefore, functions as a controlled space to reintroduce this fundamental threat.

By forcing the viewer into confrontation with the abject, the artwork tests the very limits of the subject. The grotesque rendering of the body – the use of viscera and decay – acts as a reminder of the body's ultimate chaos and dissolution, bypassing intellectual distance entirely. This corporeal dissolution is visibly manifested in the raw, organic materials used by **Carol Rama**, the systematic fragmentation of the human form in the sculptures of **Tetsumi Kudo** and **Andra Ursuta**, the fluid, kinetic, often repulsive machinery of **Mire Lee**, and the radical performance, films, and recordings of **Antonin Artaud** and **Mike Kelley**. This is why horror is so crucial: it challenges the cleanliness of the "I" that has been separated from the "not-I," making the aesthetic experience a momentary regression to a point before the subject was fully defined.

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Horror acts as a powerful cultural seismograph, tracking the anxieties of its specific era. It provides an allegorical space to process fears that are too massive or systemic to confront directly. In this context, the monster is never truly supernatural; it is always a metaphor for institutional or political failure. This is particularly evident when confronting the horrors of history, where the systemic trauma of racial oppression and violence is translated into potent figuration by artists such as **Kara Walker**, **Arthur Jafa**, and **Henry Taylor**.

Other works, from the cinematic terror captured by **Dario Argento** and **Diego Marcon** and the depictions of systemic horror by **Jonathan Glazer**, to the critical destruction embodied by **Jordan Wolfson** and the subversive fragments of **Bruce Conner**, channel collective anxiety to expose political failure and institutional malaise. By displacing these real, intangible societal anxieties onto a fictional monster or a violently distorted figure, narrative, or space, the work offers an urgent, safe pressure release.

Ultimately, the most profound discovery when engaging with horror is the ambitious goal that lies beyond fear: empathy. While the initial reaction is one of repulsion, the journey from revulsion to recognition – realizing that the source of the terror is the human condition itself – catalyzes understanding. From the psychologically charged paintings of **Karen Kilimnik** and **Asger Jorn** to the brilliant dark humor of **Rosemarie Trockel**, **Harmony Korine**, and **Otessa Moshfegh**, the exhibition forces self-reflection. It is in this context that appears the potent idea of the ghost – the lingering, invisible presence that represents unresolved trauma and historical shadow. The spectral nature extends to the architectural haunting found in the work of **Cyprien Gaillard** and the figural paintings of **Pol Taburet** and **Oliver Bak**, along with the immersive soundscapes featuring the audio compositions of **Mati Diop & Fatima Al Qadiri** all contributing to this shift.

By shocking us into intense self-reflection about what we fear and why, horror connects our internal landscape to the wider human narrative; it transcends chaos, becoming a tool for reflecting a profound empathy for the precariousness of the human experience.

— Jill Mulleady

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