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## Who Cracks the Whip?: Angharad Williams by Gabriela Acha

05.07.2021

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Welsh artist Angharad Williams's eclectic practice encompasses diverse forms —from painting to sculpture, as well as video, installations, and performances. These expressions are informed by questions around authority, speech, and class. Due to the constraints of the pandemic,

strongly performative nature is still palpable, hinting at a will to escape from the structures of the establishment. Influenced by popular culture, literature, and current events, her works explore the unstable nature of humankind, its intrinsic wildness, and the sensuality and violence embedded in the most banal, seemingly unspectacular situations.

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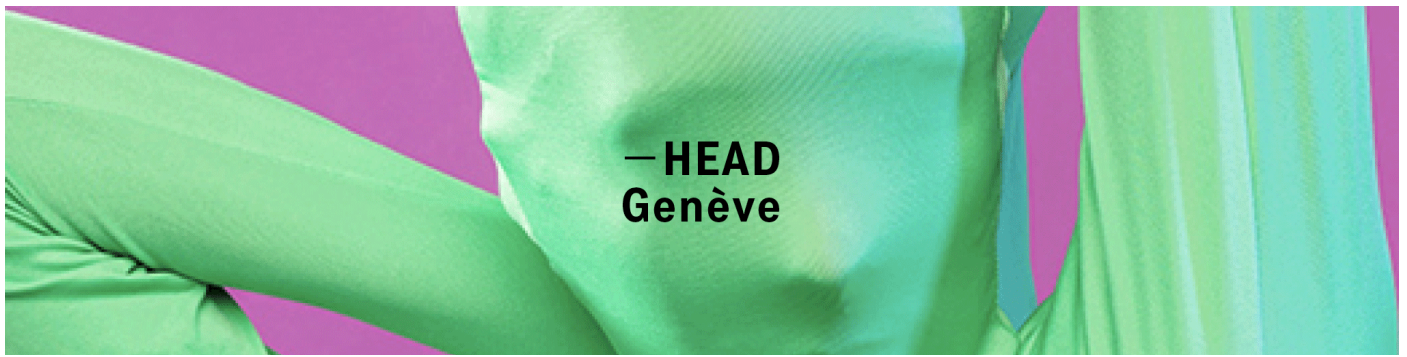
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Williams's interest in deeper layers of meaning hidden in everyday language underlies her attention to the final line in Lyndon B. Johnson's famous "Daisy" ad from his 1964 campaign: "We must either love each other, or we must die." The ad depicts a little girl counting haltingly from one to ten while picking a daisy's petals. The image zooms into her pupil and freezes while a man's voice-over counts down from ten to zero. Then, a mushroom cloud appears in the blackness of her pupil. The child's erratic counting charmed Williams, but what drew her to depict the black-and-white scene in her painting *Daisy* (2020) was a reflection on the authority orchestrating the impact of certain words which, in this case, resulted in a landslide victory for Johnson as president.

In the "Daisy" ad, the speech was meant to evoke paternalistic sentiments and trust in the power of (Johnson's) authority. Words meaning is in fact not intrinsic but conditioned by their social context <sup>1</sup> and hence, the term "love" is "confusing and misleading." <sup>2</sup> As bell hooks claims, it "can mean almost nothing or absolutely everything." <sup>3</sup> In Williams's exhibition *High Horse* at Kevin Space, Vienna (2021), the word "love" can be seen explicitly on seventeen paintings. The motif's size remains stable while the letters alternate color combinations of the same palette and the canvases' placements overload the space, covering doorways and windows. The expression "high horse" usually alludes to someone assuming an illegitimate authority. But who has the power to legitimize whether one is rightly on the horse? Rather than looking for specific definitions, Williams's paintings present themselves as semiotic dilemmas.

Because we lack an agreed understanding of what love means, abuse often becomes acceptable <sup>4</sup> and, in abusive scenarios, caregivers are perceived as figures of power. Possibly because the hierarchies between "commander" and "subordinate" feel like "stable places," <sup>5</sup> these are enhanced by the architecture of certain structures and items. The forms of pulpits, for instance, outline levels of inequality in order to legitimize religious, political, or academic speech, as conveyed by the "authorities" <sup>6</sup> behind them.

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Her series *Scarecrows* was originally shown at LISZT, Berlin (2018) but continued beyond. In it, Williams replicated pulpits using white foam board, as well fireplaces. The copy-cats directing focus to their architecture, highlighting the physical structures buttressing speech acts. The sizes of Williams' pulpits apply one-to-one scale at times, but at other times they do not. In these works, Williams gestures toward the notion that the size of an object is, in part, defined by the instrument used to measure it. Scale is a recurrent topic in Williams's work, notably in her site-specific installation *Without the Scales* at Schiefe Zähne, Berlin (2020), composed of a series of four round convex mirrors hanging on the walls, distorting every element in the room. In the past, "sorcerer's eyes" mirrors were used by butlers to supervise their patrons' well-being while avoiding direct eye contact. In Williams's hands, the mirrors reflected, each distinctly, the silhouette of a human shadow that the artist had made from rubber and that was lying on the gallery's floor, surrounded by flowers.

The "stolen flowers" on the wall-to-wall carpeted floor that comprise *Nobody wins* (2020) recall ephemeral interactions with nature. In contrast to humans, nature lacks a consciousness of authority and morality. Its chaotic yet coordinated dynamics motivate Williams to dedicate some of her works to nature, such as her colorful oil painting *Trout, paragon* (2020) or her text-performance *The Trout* (2020–21). Inspired by Edward Albee's play *The Zoo Story* (1959), the sensual moment in which the tale's protagonist interacts very intimately with the animal precedes a merciless, almost vicious aggression. The trout projects a perversion possible only in human minds. As in misbegotten versions of love, sensuality turns into violence, and a sudden "betrayal" triggers an unexpected turn of events.

Animals represent possible social structures other than the ones imposed by tradition and history. Our "stable places" might, at points, imprison us, and Williams thinks of tactics to escape those, which often involve verbal form. In the work *From Flowers to Felons* (2021), for instance, a wheeled plywood model depicts an upside down prison building, serving as pedestal for a plexiglass vitrine tagged with the words "flowers" and "felons." Taken together, Angharad Williams's work gestures at the lack of hierarchy-free spaces for consensual speech, and proposes models beyond traditional taxonomies and structures of power. Her recurrent nods to nature may represent an impulse to reach for tools to cope with alternative forms of governance and decision-taking. Despite the notion of consensus, however, there is an immanence of power dynamics and violence in any interpersonal interaction, a latent quality that she praises and absorbs in her narratives. Ultimately, one of the questions that Williams is posing may be, Who cracks the whip?

Angharad Williams (Ynys Môn) is an artist living in Môn and Berlin. Recent solo exhibitions include *High Horse*, Kevin Space, Vienna (2021); *Without the Scales*, Schiefe Zähne, Berlin (2020); *Witness*, Haus Zur Liebe, Schaffhausen (2019); *Island Mentality*, Peak, London (2019); and *Scarecrows*, LISZT, Berlin (2018). Performances have taken place at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin (2020); Swabbingrad, Munich (2020); ICA, London (2019); and Radiophrenia, Glasgow (2017). Forthcoming projects will take place at Jerwood Arts, London, and Stadtgalerie Bern (both 2021). A solo exhibition by Williams will open at MOSTYN, Wales (2022).

Gabriela Acha is a writer based in Berlin. She launched the publication *Agathe Bauer* through TLTRPreß in 2019, in collaboration with peers Romy Kießling and Maru Mushtrieva. Her next publication, *Metal*, in collaboration with artist Jorge Miñano, will see the light later this year.

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