

Matthew Cowan The Scream of the Strawbear

Kunsthalle Gießen in cooperation with the Oberhessisches Museum and the Literarisches Zentrum Gießen

Curated by Dr. Nadia Ismail

Duration: 07.09. – 17.11.2019

Press event

04.09.2019, 11 am

in the Kunsthalle Gießen

with Matthew Cowan (artist), Dr. Nadia Ismail (Director of the Kunsthalle), Dr. Katharina Weick-Joch (Director of the Oberhessisches Museum)

Opening: Friday, 06.09.2019, 7pm at the Kunsthalle Gießen / Hermann-Levi-Saal

Official greeting

Dietlind Grabe-Bolz

Mayor of the City of Gießen

Introduction

Dr. Nadia Ismail, Director of the Kunsthalle Gießen und curator of the exhibition

Dr. Katharina Weick-Joch, Director of the Oberhessisches Museum

The artist is present.

Matthew Cowan (*1974, Auckland, New Zealand) lives and works in Berlin. After studying Psychology in Auckland, New Zealand he studied Fine Art at the University of Northumbria in Newcastle upon Tyne, UK. He is currently working on his doctorate at the Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki, Finland.

Many thanks go to David Barnes, Boss Morris, Dr. Ludwig Brake (Stadtarchiv Gießen), Prof. Dr. Siegfried Becker (Institute for European Ethnology/Cultural Science, Philipps-University Marburg), Volunteer Fire Brigade Rittershausen, Volunteer Fire Brigade Steinbrücken, Tradition club of Königsberg, Prof. Dr. Volker Wissemann (Scientific Director of the Botanical Garden Gießen)

The exhibition is supported by Canon Giessen GmbH, KONE Foundation and the volunteer association of Gießen.

Matthew Cowan explores European customs and the role that they play in today's world with his photographs, videos, installations and performances. Rituals, clothing, and costumes are central to his work. In the exhibition, the artist from New Zealand adopts different traditions from Giessen and its surrounding areas and places them in the context of contemporary art. Instead of just documenting, he focuses on the spectacular, the mysterious and the strange. He transfers the things that he is particularly interested in to contemporary art, such as the play with masquerades, with rituals and ritualistic objects as well as the kind of subversive humour that always comes with such customs.

Matthew Cowan is developing a large scale installation for the Kunstahalle Gießen that is defined by a curtain creating its own space and its own world within the Kunsthalle. There is a man's face surrounded by straw on the curtains fabric. This almost surreal scene reveals a brief moment of transformation in which the real human turns into the strawbear. The title of the show refers both to the ritual of the strawbear and to the scream that it emits. Songs of supplication, ridicule and protest that are sung during public processions can be interpreted as historical precursors of this cry. The strawbear, unrecognisable in his costume, continues them on in an alienated form. Just like the Maimann, whose tradition Cowan has also studied, the Strawbear belongs to annual customs. During carnival season or Whitsun these creatures would roam the streets of various villages in central Hesse with the aim of collecting eggs and bacon that were eaten together at the end of the ceremony while the straw man was being ritually sacrificed in the fire. In pre-industrial agrarian societies, the dead, dry straw was a reminder of the hardship of winter that was to be driven away and the food was representative of the good life. However, the Maimann, with his green robe of leaves introduced a fertile time. In our abundant world, these symbolic figures have lost their former essential meanings. By creating fictitious costumes that visualise a supposed custom, Matthew Cowan places them in a quasi-historical context that is linked as much to the myth of the Wild Man as it is to various forms of disguise. In this way he emphasises the strangeness implied in the customs despite the geographical proximity, while at the same time, he reveals the sculptural quality of the traditional figures. With costumes made of cameras and microphones, he refers to the devices with which he himself observes and records the various customs.

In his herbarium, Matthew Cowan seizes on a further facet of ritual that has been passed on for decades. Dried or pressed and then glued to a sheet of paper, local medicinal plants from the Botanical Gardens imply a superstition that has persisted in part to the present day, where the plants hold a special significance. They are accessible to visitors in the exhibition for independent research.

Sound also plays an important role in Matthew Cowan's exhibition *The Scream of the Strawbear*. The singer David Barnes from New Zealand wrote his own traditional songs based on Hessian legends for the artist, they can now be heard in the exhibition in Gießen. Through text and sound, Cowan combines vocals from New Zealand with Hessian traditions.

Matthew Cowan also traces the current handling of (past) customs in various historical and folklore museums. Based on his solo exhibition in the Kunsthalle, he has also made a guest appearance in the Oberhessisches Museum. With an audio-visual piece that echoes *The Scream of the Strawbear*, he artistically utilises the top floor of the Heidenturm for the first time. Furthermore, he also presents an intervention in the Leib'sches Haus. Historical pipes from the Gail'sche Sammlung, traditional roof ornaments and historical brooms from the Oberhessisches Museum form a part of Matthew Cowan's installation in the Kunsthalle and are thus transferred into the context of contemporary art.

Connections of the disparate run through the oeuvre of Matthew Cowan. Geographical boundaries become blurred, as do the different customs he explores around the world, including the repeated use of tobacco pipes within the exhibition. Thusly he brings together the English tradition of the Morris dance, which is performed in part around clay pipes that are placed on the floor, with the tobacco industry that is historically anchored in and around Gießen. The Oberhessisches Museum has a department dedicated to this history, an exhibit of which has been moved to the Kunsthalle.

Accompanying Program

10 questions for...

Matthew Cowan

With Dr. Katharina Weick-Joch (Director of the Oberhessisches Museum), Prof. Volker Wissemann (Director of the Botanischer Garten) und Dr. Nadia Ismail (Director of the Kunsthalle)

Thursday, 31.10.2019, 7 pm

Reading by

Nico Bleutge

in cooperation with the Literarischen Zentrum Gießen (Literary center of Gießen)

Thursday, 14.11.2019, 7 pm

Art education

Dialogführung Dialogue-Tour

with Marta Dannoritzer of the Kunsthalle Gießen und Natascha Lenz of the Oberhessisches Museum

Thursday, 26.09.2019, 5 pm

Family workshop ‚Masquerade‘

for children from 6 years on, accompanied by their parents

Sunday, 20.10.2019, 11 am

Meeting point: Kunsthalle

Registration until 16.10.2019 at kunsthalle@giessen.de

Guided Tour by the curator

Thursday 07.11.2019, 5 pm

Guides tours: Kunsthalle + Oberhessisches Museum

Tuesdays, 2-3:30 pm, 10.09. + 24.09. +22.10

Saturdays, 2-:30 pm, 07.09. + 05.10 + 16.11.

Meeting point: Kunsthalle

Art and Coffee

with Fabian Stein and Ehrenamt e.V.
Wednesdays, 18.09. + 30.10.2019 at 3 pm
Registration at kunsthalle@giessen.de
Participation fee 2,50 €

Art education in individual conversations

Tuesdays, 2-4 pm, 08.10. + 05.11.
Saturdays, 3 – 5 pm, 21.09. + 19.10. + 02.11.

Entrance to all events is free of charge.

Opening Times

Tuesdays to Saturdays, 10 am – 6 pm
Saturday, 12.10.2019, 10 am – 3 pm
Closed: The day of German unification, 03.10.2019