

## ART

### 'In the Shadow of the Maggot' at Anton Kern Gallery



Im Schatten der Made (In the Shadow of the Maggot) (2010) by John Bock.

Everything we do is in the shadow of the maggot—but why the long face? There's always something newish under the sun. In a season of group shows and greatest hits, John Bock and the Anton Kern Gallery have transformed the usual repackaging into an absorbing entertainment of transformation. In the front room of the gallery, a black velvet curtain hanging in a square creates a cool, dark theater for *Im Schatten der Made* (In the Shadow of the Maggot), 2010, a full-length movie written and directed by Mr. Bock and produced by the artist and gallery with the Universal Museum in Graz, Germany, and the Museum Tinguely in Basel, Switzerland, where it was presented last year.

Shot in black and white, *Im Schatten der Made* is theatrical, hysterical, persistently elliptical. It casually mixes contemporary physical culture, actors with contemporary looks, and contemporary video effects with self-aware but sincere 1920s-style melodrama and worn but still wriggling symbolism. Props from the movie fill vitrines that line the sides of the viewing room, providing a slight subliminal foreshadowing and strange, colorful contrast; a suite of new collages in loose thematic relation to the movie hang in the back room.

The movie opens on one Professor Lehmbbruch (played by Matti Isan Blind) at home experimenting with sugar cubes. They might be the interchangeable building blocks of the modern economy, or old-fashioned geometric truths made ridiculously material, but they could also be props from a commercial photo shoot. The cubes are white, the Professor wears black; his collar is white, his beard and mascara are black. In the next room Merle (Friederike Kempfer), a wife or anima in trailing white sleeves, marches a marionette up and down and wears a soup pot on her head. When the Professor uses an eyedropper to douse a cube, you can't tell whether he's filled it with ink or blood.

Enter the true artist, superego, persona, or charlatan: the director, Mr. Bock. He is dressed as a priest, with a large white cross around his neck (presumably gold, but played by white, in film as in traditional heraldry) and a white Bible with a black, Y-shaped cross. Merle curtsies and Mr. Bock announces that he's on a mission from God. The Professor continues his manic, uninspired experiments while Mr. Bock, the Priest, steps into the other room, where the camera lingers on the shadow of his hand against the train of Merle's white dress.

This conjunction of familiar, stagey fakery with the genuine violence that follows is to the point: The camera flips away regularly to a cheery, cartoonishly menacing black puppet of a maggot that's crawling the walls. The maggot looks more like a worm, and Mr. Bock, who grew up on a farm in Germany, knows that there is no fertilizer more effective than worm castings: acrid and black, like finely sifted dirt, this material seems like the final product of decomposition, a reduction of multiple, once-living forms to meaningless homogeneity. But the worms are alive, and their castings contain the germs of an uncentered but powerfully generative fertility. Après le déluge, the ooze.

In the Professor's laboratory, a ramshackle studio well appointed with plastic tubing, plastic water bottles, a rotary telephone, a spinning bicycle wheel, and a dancing potato, the Professor declares himself a genius—in a title card reading "Ich bin ein Genie!"—and creates life, or tries to: He constructs, with a porridge of bloody ink, a spandex unitard, a mechanical heart, and straw, the figure of a man. When he flips a the toilet-paper-tube switch, colors flash but nothing happens. And when he is struck with inspiration, it also comes in color: He has a glowing yellow-brown vision of Christ's fingernail, which reposes in a vial in the church, and he runs right off to steal it. But it's not His nails that give life. When Merle enters the lab and finds the inert figure—which shimmers, in her eyes, into an actual man—she bends his arm and bends his finger, just as the maggot bends itself along, and then gives him a kiss. His eyes glow orange like the Terminator. She shrieks and runs out. He staggers to his feet, raises his arms like Frankenstein, and clumps right after her.

This android (Adrian Lohmüller) wanders through an Expressionist forest. He finds his reflection in a puddle. Black makeup on his cheeks look like scars. A glowing blond Christ child appears hanging from a tree, and the android offers it a handful of black mud and pulls at its trailing white gown.

In the church, meanwhile, the Professor lifts the relic vial out of its case, laughing maniacally, but is discovered in the act by Father Bock, who produces an Expressionist cross—its shorter bar is made of two separate, not quite even pieces, so that it carries a faint whiff of a cubist swastika—and beats him to the ground, knocking off his cast-iron top hat. The vial falls and opens and the nail slides slowly out on the surface of a puddle of water.

The raging priest rushes out into the forest, where he finds the android and, in a kind of double-reverse eucharist, extends a fork from his cross and stabs him repeatedly, spraying himself with blood. Like Doubting Thomas, he sticks his finger into the wound and presses the man-made pulse until it gives out. For a moment, everything is red—black blood included—but when Merle, also wandering in the forest, finds the android's blood, and then his inert body, she performs her own strange double reversal, rolling up a leaf to make a straw and blowing the juice of a blackberry into a large prop penis. The penis descends; the android revives; and he and Merle make out.

But this doesn't last, either: With the help of a journeyman he's just met (Heiner Franzen) and his puppet brother, the Priest pulls the lovers apart. The android is drawn and quartered, pulled into pieces by painted stage horses, while Merle is thrown into a bare, pastoral prison cell.

While Merle cowers in dirty straw, the Priest delivers himself of a pompous speech while drinking from a bottle of blood. (He also takes a moment to plug in a toaster.) "I'm not a monster (Unmensch)," he says, before kneeling down to rape her with his cross. The important point—and one way in which this work is thoroughly of the moment, or at least the long, postwar moment—is this: The cross is not the priest's sexual organ; it is his sexual organ that is a cross.

Dissolve into a montage of continued assaults, after each of which the Priest makes himself a slice of white toast, takes one bite, and tosses the rest onto Merle's body. She hides the slices in the straw, apparently refusing his brutal, mechanistic communion—but once she's amassed enough, she chews the slices to wet pieces and molds them into a head. She removes her white dress and fills it with straw. She assembles her animus on the floor. And once again, she wakes him with a kiss: The lovers canoodle in prison, in the shadow of the maggot that climbs the walls.

The satire is there if you want it, though it seems beside the point to want it when it keeps such promiscuous company with simple entertainment. But this is not a happy ending, either, because it's really no ending at all—the priest will come back, the android will be remurdered and resurrected, the willowy blond will scream. The cycle of violence will continue. Be sure to see the decapitated Barbie in the back room, and the photo of Klaus Kinski with a crocheted penis protector.

WILL HEINRICH