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# Myth Kissed and Foam-Born: JANNIS MARWITZ

BY  
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*Even among an extraordinary generation of figurative painters, JANNIS MARWITZ stands out for his distinctive, challenging visual idiom. Elegiac, myth-laden motifs, often borrowed from Greco-Roman funerary reliefs, stage a disturbing feast of physicality. In these works, the Brussels-based German artist uses a caustic palette and a painting style that combines old techniques with contemporary appeal.*















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Courtesy: the artist and Damien & The Love Guru, Brussels.  
Photo: Alexey Shlyk
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Courtesy: the artist and Lucas Hirsch, Düsseldorf
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Courtesy: the artist and Lucas Hirsch, Düsseldorf
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Photo: Andrea Pisapia / Spazio Orti 14
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Courtesy: the artist and Lucas Hirsch, Düsseldorf

Even today, it is hard to know whether Jacob Burckhardt was delighted or disgusted by Andrea Pozzo's frescos in Rome's Church of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, which he called a "playground of unscrupulousness." Either way, the unbridled sensationalism of their blending of architecture and tromp l'oeil drew a strong response from the Swiss scholar. His reaction to Pozzo might be fittingly applied to the paintings of Jannis Marwitz, who in today's deregulated art world has succeeded in establishing something akin to a *terribilità* all his own. Contemporaries who share this quality, like Julian Nguyen or Tracy Molis, are few and far between. At art fairs, spellbound collectors drag their spouses to see one of his works, only to be declared insane for such a blatant error of taste. Be it admiration or rejection, then, judgments on Marwitz's work tend to be voiced in absolute terms.



The impact of a picture like *Untitled* (2016) on the viewer's emotions is surely due to its referencing of motifs and stylistic modes from Greco-Roman mythology. It shows Medea's murder of her rival Kreusa, in a version derived from the relief on a Roman sarcophagus that Marwitz has copied with great virtuosity. The burning Kreusa figure actually appears three times in the picture in different sizes, versions sampled from two other reliefs. Within Western art, classical antiquity is still held up as the unequalled ideal of prototypical beauty. On the other hand, since being coopted by fascism and then "reborn" in the post-modern vulgarity of Las Vegas, it has been corrupted. And Marwitz clearly proposes both readings: that of the connoisseur of classical antiquity who conveys the elegiac composition and pathos of the reliefs, even trying to render the three-dimensionality of the original; and that of shamelessly plundering the heritage of antiquity for a picture whose dramatic color scheme seems to have been borrowed from Paintbrush, with an added aggressive depth created by a dark red glow in the background.

Both readings are as wrong as they are permissible. Like most of Marwitz's work, this picture can be understood as a veneration of the classical originals yet also articulates a deep attachment to contemporary digital imaging software. The curious choice of colors for *Untitled* and many other pictures based on classical reliefs, for instance, draws on a "negative" effect offered by camera phones. Based on this color inversion, Marwitz developed the inscrutable, idiosyncratic palette that enters into a mysterious liaison with his highly three-dimensional painting. He clearly likes the idea of sarcophagus reliefs, which must have had a proto-filmic quality about them when viewed by the light of oil lamps in burial chambers. This is probably why the flesh in his pictures changes into a soft, doughy mass that conveys more of a blurred memory of physicality. One is immediately reminded of Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject that confronts the ego in its limits and its fears, showing it that life is always already infected with death.

Perhaps it is precisely this that upsets so many art-fair-going spouses. Although the artist borrows mainly positive motifs from the funerary reliefs, in the 2017 exhibition *Like Unhappy Fruit* at Lucas Hirsch Gallery, Düsseldorf, a recurring theme was the death-defying mythic love between Selene and Endy-

mion, beautifully rendered in watercolor, charcoal, and gouache on silk in the small-format painting *Untitled* (2017). Another recurring motif is a tipsy Dionysius supported by a satyr. This celebration of the pleasures of life within a slightly morbid frame can only be interpreted as humor. Looking at the exhibition more closely, further clues were discernible, such as the occasional cartoonish line, making it look like Marwitz wanted to animate the reliefs. In the glowing, bilious green Dionysius portrait *Untitled* (2017), the god of wine has an oddly queered body, supported by a lewd-looking satyr with a chiseled six-pack. *Comme des fruits malheureux* (2017) is especially ironic, zooming in on the image of Dionysius to the point where all the mythological superstructure vanishes, leaving behind pure painting-porn of curtains, cloaks, and flesh. In this painting in particular, Marwitz showcases skills that borrow from premodern painting techniques, in which pale, opaque colors in underlying layers act as a mirror, reflecting back the light passing through the transparent upper layers. The paint appears to be lit from behind, like a picture on an iPhone.

At this point, if not before, one might warily ask whether this is not just another male painter with an approach based on technical virtuosity, backed up with some clever art historical references. Or, to put the question differently: Are these anachronistic motifs and this focus on technique really necessary? In Marwitz's case, the answer is a clear yes. He may be enchanted by the pathos-laden, dynamic compositions of the mythical scenes, but his interest in their content is peripheral at best. Instead, his engagement with them always concentrates on the body, in a way that goes beyond conventional gender norms. After the funerary reliefs in *Like Unhappy Fruit*, the artist's next solo show, *Bonaventura Jannis Marwitzle* at Damien & The Love Guru, Brussels, revolved around birth—the birth from foam of an ungendered body. Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (1485-1486) supplied the pretext for this and was quoted in several works in the show. *Untitled* (2018) shows a scallop held by large hands in which a greenish, again strangely sexless Venus sits, with three similarly sexless cupids buzzing around. As if this motif, rendered in a garish, acidly palette, were not mysterious enough already, the main figure holds a black button in his? her? its? hand that has simply been stuck to the canvas in the appropriate place. Is it a matter of tearing a hole in the picture's mythological dimension with the most profane possible object, one that comes from an entirely different historical period? Or does the button, its bulbous form reflecting light, represent an ironic doubling of the picture's painted mimicry of three-dimensional flesh? In any case, it is another of the unscrupulousnesses of which there seem to be no shortage in Marwitz's work.

This refreshing, audacious cannibalization of Botticelli continues in *The Hurricane* (2018) and in a variation painted on silk, *Untitled* (2018). Zephyr blows hard while plump fish and slippery marine creatures celebrate a watery orgy in the foamy sea. At the center of the picture, a strangely melted, disproportioned body hangs at a slant, not clearly identifiable as belonging to a woman. Diagonally behind the person's head, a mighty bull rises up, its outlines sketchily unfinished. Although all the ingredients are there for the birth from foam of a beauty, one is immediately reminded of the Rape of Europa, perhaps the version by Noël-Nicolas Coypel, whose soft, almost powdery palette Marwitz echoes here. When asked, the artist mentions a sarcophagus with a shell portrait featuring a sea thiasus at the Louvre, from which he extracted the woman and bull motif. So, he adds with a grin, the woman is a nereid, the bull a hippocamp. The truth is probably neither nereid/hippocamp nor Europa/bull, emphasizing instead the similarities between the two, while avoiding clear attributions. Or, in other words: Marwitz plays here with a visual source and with the viewer's knowledge by transporting a mythical being into an entirely profane context. In this way, he provokes the initial misreading, which then fails to add up: the bull has impressive nostrils, but no horns, and Europa was not abducted by a cow. But the artist also omitted the fish-tail that would have made the cow into a hippocamp. This impossibility of identifying either the mythological models in the pictures, nor their resurgence since the Renaissance (*Birth of Venus*, *Rape of Europa*), is what makes the wonder. They themselves are born of foam, bastard offspring of various visual cultures, slippery beauties of unknown provenance.

Winningly, Marwitz also specifically addresses this whimsicality arising from the confrontation between mythical knowledge and an unknowing (uninitiated) audience. *Birth of Venus (domestic)* (2018) shows an interior in which, before the eyes of an amazed boy, the birth of Venus is re-created in a soup bowl. An older woman pours water onto the wooden figure in the bowl from above; the water runs off into a basin in the foreground, from where the scene is surveyed by two large fish (who may once have been Aphrodite and Eros). The scene is surrounded by a strange, auratic shimmer that lends this naive replica a (tongue-in-cheek?) sublimity. One suspects the painter might even be commenting on his own work. Moreover, the dark interior, the striking facial traits of the figures, and the overall gloomy atmosphere point to the Flemish tradition, which fools around in this case with the mythical treasures of the Mediterranean. Another outrageous hybrid that really shouldn't work, but which for precisely this reason becomes artistically productive.

As is so often the case in Marwitz's work, there is a second version of this painting, *Birth of Venus (interior)* (2018), presenting the same content in slightly varied form. Scanning through his oeuvre to date, one finds the same gestures, folded fabrics, physical forms, and motifs recurring again and again in minor variations and reconfigurations. Like a universal law, the pictures contain a self-relinquishing transformation, a transgression. The isolated picture, the isolated body, seems not to exist for Marwitz. Pictures, bodies, and body pictures can change shape like soft

flesh, dying and being reborn. Gender boundaries blur, features of specific historical periods and cultural spheres whirl into one another, and even the dividing lines between life and death become strangely indeterminate. One special irony is that the legacy of classical antiquity, harnessed to all manner of discriminatory agendas by the political right, is nimbly harmonized here with current theories of the (queer) body. Ideal and aberration form an amalgam—another unscrupulousness, of course, but an essential one.



JANNIS MARWITZ (b. 1985, Nürnberg) lives and works in Brussels. He studied at Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Hamburg and Städelschule, Frankfurt am Main between 2007-2013 and DeAteliers, Amsterdam from 2013-2015. His recent and upcoming solo exhibitions include: Dortmunder Kunstverein (2019); SUNDY, London (2019); *Bonaventura Jannis Marwitzle*, Damien & The Love Guru, Brussels (2018); *Like unbappy fruit*, Lucas Hirsch, Düsseldorf (2017); D.E.L.F., Vienna (2017); *The year is over now*, Marwan, Amsterdam (2016). Recent group exhibitions include: *Guten Morgen, Europa!*, A Tale Of A Tub, Rotterdam (2019); *Where Do Streams Run To?*, Damien & The Love Guru x Lucas Hirsch, CFAlive, Milan (2019); *Don Quixote*, Barbara Weiss, Berlin (2018); *Metamorphoseon*, Sultana, Paris (2018); *FOAF*, ChertLüdde, Berlin (2018); *SM*, Sans Titre 2016, Marseille (2018); *Augury*, BQ, Berlin (2016); *Aby Warburg. Mnemosyne Bildatlas*, ZKM Karlsruhe (2016).

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