

MANUELA GERNEDEL
Piper Keys, London, UK

Images of Manuela Gernedel's kitchen sink float on the walls of her solo exhibition, 'Snakes', at Piper Keys. Since March, the artist-run space has been hosted at Raven Row (whose own exhibition programme finished last year) in its converted Spitalfields town houses at 56–58 Artillery Lane. Gernedel's 20 drawings (all works 2018) are held behind simple sheets of glass, giving them a clean, archival feel. Meticulously sketched in graphite and coloured pencil, each offers a view into a simple aluminum sink. Familiar objects pass across the basin: a cooking pot, a pair of forks, a yellow scrubbing sponge. I never see the tap, but there's a strainer catching the clods of coffee and flecks of tomato before they slip down the drain.

At the centre of the room, in a different register entirely, three ceramic foetuses are gathered on a tabletop. They are pink and glossy and just over life-size. At first I ignore these gory creatures because they are a little difficult to look at. As human-animal composites, they have strange and grotesque proportions: their tiny hands are out of kilter with their swollen heads and they have old faces, which appear senile. Long umbilical cords snake around their bodies, fastening them to pink birthing sacs that remind me of booster seats. Glazed with streaks of scarlet, they look bloodstained and aborted.

Gernedel, who also makes DIY pop music under the name Manuela, is the mother of two small children and her visual practice explicitly negotiates making art and motherhood. The sink drawings began as a GIF, shown at Focal Point in 2015, in which a frantic loop of photographs depicted her kitchen in various states of disarray. 'I had two very young children at the time, and not a lot/no time to make art,' she explains. In response, she turned the kitchen into a studio, making housework into the subject of her art. This is not exactly new – in the 1970s, Mierle Laderman Ukeles performed domestic chores in the museum, washing floors and dusting vitrines – but, half a century on, it still feels quietly radical. 'I will simply do these maintenance everyday things, and flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them as art,' wrote Ukeles in her 1969 'Manifesto for Maintenance Art', written after the birth of her first child. By making the sink into a still life, Gernedel, too, calls for a reassessment of the value of housework, flushing up the daily chores and fixes them on the gallery walls.



Gernedel's drawings really are marvellous: the silvery sink and shiny pots have a surreal gleam to them, as if the fairy liquid has made everything supernaturally reflective. Occasionally, her body can be found mirrored in the aluminium surfaces: a shadow folding into the basin; her shoes poking into the frame. I read the still lifes in the same way that I read other people's shopping in the supermarket queue: a hot-water bottle and a packet of Cystopurin in one drawing – a urine infection? A stack of take-out dishes in another – a night off? Like a diary, they are records of everyday living.

In an accompanying text, the writer J.A. Harrington alludes to haruspicy, the Roman art of divination using animal entrails – which might account for the tangled cords of the fetuses, the 'snakes' of the exhibition's title. Are they auspicious? Perhaps they're magical spirits who do the dishes secretly by night. It's a nice idea, but when I look at the pink life-forms they remain defiantly uterine and it's hard to separate them from the job of motherhood. If there's any epic sacrifice, it's independence, art. As Ukeles puts it: 'Maintenance is a drag; it takes all the fucking time.'

Izabella Scott

JULIEN NGUYEN
Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London, UK

From a flurry of flecks in tempera and oil, England's patron saint emerges in drag. A panel painting by Julien Nguyen, *St George and the Dragon* (all works, 2018) depicts an attenuated female figure pouting in a red coat. Hips thrust to the side, she theatrically points her sword at a red-eyed demon. Her setting suggests that she is not of this world. A meticulous play of geometries and hues creates the illusion of a steel recess, which hovers somewhere between *trompe l'oeil* sculpted niche and spacecraft accessory. In spite of her flouncing pose, the figure's facial expression is notably withdrawn. Hanging her head and looking askance, she appears disillusioned by the fantasy role she is playing. Bored beyond belief.

The spirit of drag seeps into every corner of 'Ex Forti Dulcedo', Nguyen's first exhibition with Stuart Shave/Modern Art. Dainty millennials play sacred figures from the Western canon in archetypal poses: a sunken-eyed gamin impersonates St John baptizing the messiah; a floppy-haired youth bears Christ's stigmata on his palm; and the hallowed infants from Leonardo da Vinci's *Virgin and Child with Saint Anne and Saint John* (c.1499–1500) are reimagined as two long-limbed teens. Futuristic designs eddy into Nguyen's quasi-religious scenes: a metal disk hovers over Christ's *Baptism* like a gaming icon; a glowing red grid overhangs the *Flagellation*; and vast sweeps of steel and marble frame the Virgin's *Annunciation* in an austere



architectural setting. In the midst of this cross-pollination, icons are rendered incomplete: the adolescent figures of Christ and John tail off into rough surface markings, as if their sprouting bodies were outgrowing the narrative.

By subtly warping religious iconography, Nguyen plays with the process by which one thing comes to signify another. This is dramatized in his portrayal of the *Annunciation* – the archetypal moment Mary's body is imbued with divine meaning. Depicted at the apex of a monumental enclosure, the Virgin raises a hand to an angel kneeling in the distance. Echoing the smooth geometries of her surroundings, her head is portrayed as a flawless sphere, her face a schema of thick swirls. Deprived of expression, the Virgin almost seems burdened by the rigid pictorial order that's been imposed on her. Other areas of the surface increase this sense of tension: the figures' hands are patches of scratchy markings; the space between them a stretch of empty ground. By leaving portions of the work unfinished, Nguyen unmoors the characters from their places in the biblical narrative and leaves them floating in an ambiguous space. The story once preceded the image; now, the image precedes the story.

Slipping out of their conventional meanings, Nguyen's figures seem rebellious. A teenage Christ nods his head and shrugs his hands up on a crucifix in the style of an emo rapper greeting his fans on stage ('I can take this'), while an introspective Virgin sheds luminous tears, eyes aglow, as if bemoaning her responsibility in the salvation story. And a melancholic Christ is haunted by a Chinese dragon in the *Flagellation* – a *mise en scène* of some inner battle. Androgynous, inflammatory and highly eroticized, Nguyen's figures pick up on the taboo undercurrents of conventional religious depictions.

Kye Semper Solus is perhaps autobiographical: a long, statuesque figure is depicted sitting dreamily at an easel. White calligraphic markings wind whimsically up his arm and face, which rhyme with a pen portrayed in his hand. In contrast with the works in the rest of the show, the perspective is off-kilter, with the lines of the easel trailing obliquely into a murky background. Isolated in an indefinite space, the figure might be seen as an allegory for Nguyen's own process of skewing conventional forms. *Ex Forti Dulcedo*. Out of strength, sweetness.

Mimi Chu



This page
Tejal Shah, *Between the Waves*, 2012, film still

Opposite page Above
Manuela Gernedel, *Untitled*, 2018, coloured pencil on paper, 42 x 30 cm

Below
Julien Nguyen, *Mary, Anne, Christ, and John*, 2018, oil and tempera on aluminium panel, 1.4 x 1.2 m

TEJAL SHAH
Mimosa House, London, UK

'I am drawn,' Tejal Shah says in an interview accompanying her solo exhibition at Mimosa House, 'to the edge of things.' 'As It Is' opens with a single framed image on a quiet hallway: *She Lost Her Mind* (2018) is a print of a miniature painting that depicts Chhinnamasta, the self-decapitating tantric deity, leaning over a copulating couple. Headless, the goddess is not cleaved but doubled, her violence both reflexive and shared. But things are slightly awry in this appropriated image: Shah places male genitalia on the female goddess.

The show continues toward the queer: its identity wavering and unstable, slinking between porous thresholds. *Between the Waves* (2012) is a five-channel video installation, spread across two rooms and a stairwell. Each video portrays its own self-contained cosmology and, together, they form an illogical, incohesive whole. This disjunction is not without intention, inviting the viewer to resist narrative and enter the artist's carnal worlds.

Landfill Dance (2012) features a string of bodies in white dresses and gas masks as they tip-toe over piles of garbage, discovering strange and beautiful relics. The scraps cease to be inert objects, instead radiating an uncanny aura. Though visibly located in an Indian metropolis, the action seems to suspend time and place, so that the precarious, dancing bodies appear as aliens on an extinct Earth, without origin or the prospect of a future.

A Fable in Five Chapters (2012) is a 26-minute film set in what the artist describes as 'a long-anticipated, post-gender, post-anthropocene'

environment. Images of inter-species, limb-locked, eco-sexual beings abound. This 'family of hybrid creatures engaged in a ritual trying to preserve what's left', exist in an imaginary place between witchcraft and pseudo-science, between a healing utopia and an imminent catastrophe. This in-betweenness is the liveliest form of queer love.

Shah's imagery seems to invite the viewer towards Buddhist thought: a non-dual, multiplicity of being, such that the self and other merge, and meaning is mirrored by the landscape. Waves lash, sprays of pomegranate juice obfuscate the camera lens as two bodies fuck with their horns; a salt desert glitters. Each aerial mangrove root becomes a site of exotic care. In her 1982 essay 'Soujourner', a meditation on human life and the natural world, Annie Dillard writes that mangroves 'can and do exist as floating islands, as trees upright and loose, alive and homeless on the water.' In this way, the characters in the film become mangroves, detached in their togetherness. With a playful DIY sensibility, each one wears a recycled dress, reminiscent of a lab coat, topped with a unicorn-meets-seahorse phallic cone as a hat.

Language itself is queered. Four poems by Minal Hajratwala, who is also one of the protagonists in *A Fable*, flash on an iPad, one letter at a time, in the form of the dots and dashes of morse code. As a line from 'Regeneration' (2012) has it: 'We walk invisibly / Through the spitting could-be'. At such moments, Shah seems to grasp at a fluid space of gender and sexuality, and a planet caught between a conditional future and a factual, but precarious, present. 'As It Is' conjectures, in line with Buddhist philosophy, that ontology and ecology are enmeshed, like a ghost net in an ocean.

Himali Singh