



DIANA THORNEYCROFT
BLACK FOREST (DARK WATERS)
JUNE 28 – AUGUST 24, 2018

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COVER: Diana Thorneycroft, *Rain and Birches (in Fiddler's Green)*, digital photograph, 2017
OPPOSITE PAGE: Diana Thorneycroft, *Herd*, installation (detail), 2017

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DIANA THORNEYCROFT
BLACK FOREST (dark waters)

Text by Natalia Lebedinskaia



“...they fashioned monsters deformed by a freak of nature or by the whim and fancy of the workers, who in these grotesque pictures make things outside of any rule, attaching the finest thread to a weight that it cannot support, to a horse legs of leaves, to a man the legs of a crane, and similar follies...”

Giorgio Vasari, *About Painting*, circa 1550



Over one hundred and sixty toy horses gallop up a snow-covered ramp into a wall. Half of them trigger a familiar childhood memory and I can almost feel their smooth hollow plastic under my hand - an unmistakable classic Breyer body. Frozen mid-stride, the horses are lean and muscular, with strange proportions that seem to accentuate a particular standard of equine beauty, both human and animal.

Among them sit over seventy radically different horses. Diana Thorneycroft has modified them with materials fit for a medieval apothecary: clay, gesso, acrylic, pencil crayon, graphite, water colour, glue,

ABOVE: Diana Thorneycroft, *Herd*, installation (detail), 2017



gel medium, clear tar gel, quake hold, flour paste, smoke, Japanese rice paper, rubber, twine, string, wire, sinew, thread, leather, fabric, lace, metal clamps, willow, doll hair, doll parts, horse hair, cat hair, rabbit fur, pubic hair, cat whiskers, badger claws, spider web, midges, mosquitoes, wasps, flies, aphids, feathers, rabbit feet, shells, cat scabs, flower stamens, pollen, lamb fur, bird claws, porcupine quills, horns, skulls, cat claw, rabbit backbone, dried onion roots, wild rice, dried carrots, lead weights, toy wheels, metal clamps, wood, artificial leech, seeds, plants, earth, sugar, rust, blood, spit, and nails.

These horses have been baked, melted, bloated, disfigured, augmented, and reconfigured.

Thorneycroft has made them into hybrids that are both familiar and foreign, repulsive and seductive to the touch, unpredictable even to her, and with a level of detail and affection that has rendered them utterly unique. These horse bodies are no longer contained: they leak pus, produce scabs, and grow protrusions, while their skin is blotted with rashes, weeping sores, and unexpected tufts of hair. Their long winding tongues have no way of retreating back into the mouth; some studded with thorns, these tendrils of their inner body are left permanently on view.

As Thorneycroft was developing the world for these horses and their stories, another class of beings emerged – the herdsmen. Fashioned from GI Joe and other humanoid figures, they have been altered with many of the same materials. Herdsmen with no legs, armless drummers, and blind conductors command the narratives of the accompanying series of photographs.

This body of work began with research into the history of freak shows, traveling circuses, and carnivals as sites in which radically different bodies have been put on display for centuries. Thorneycroft wanted to explore the complex negotiation of agency, resistance, and exploitation that lies at the core of these practices. The ways in which we relate to these bodies lies in contrast to how they relate to



TOP: Diana Thorneycroft, *Deity (on fire)*, 2017, digital photograph

BOTTOM: Diana Thorneycroft, *Tongue Maker (and his habitués)*, 2017, digital photograph

one another; the difference between these acts of looking and empathy do not easily lend themselves to interpretation. While the body becomes spectacle, these sites also function as places for transgression and acceptance.



In *Black Forest (dark waters)*, the horses and their herdsmen exist within these relationships, both towards each other and to their audience. They occupy the realm of the uncanny and the grotesque. A term once used to reference architectural opulence of Emperor Nero's underground palace, grotesque has shifted to refer to a combination of ugliness, display, and excess. Throughout art history, it has been

ABOVE: Diana Thorneycroft, *Red-berry Girl (with Grace)*, 2015, digital photograph

marked by displaying incongruities as a means of reasserting boundaries of acceptable behaviour: the absurdity of the combination—old/young; animal/human; inside/outside—made spectacle.

The architecture in the photographs is an extension of these grotesque bodies, repeated in the nearby series of sculptural dwellings in *The Village*. These structures, like the bodies that occupy them, blur and reverse the boundaries between inside and outside. Some of them flow and connect to one another and to their inhabitants through tubes, such as in the *Winter Feeding Station*, others are decorated with textures that resemble skin, such as the *Shaman's Hut*. Some of their surfaces are covered in drawings that almost directly reference the aesthetic of the wall frescoes that lined the walls of Emperor Nero's underground palaces, but are pushed further into the uncanny. The drawings are like blueprints or diagrams to a world we have only the most cursory access to through these figures and the photographs. Arranged around a square, the scale of the installation resembles the attraction and sense of awe that accompanies miniature towns and dioramas. However, while the little worlds of dioramas are meant to make the viewers feel in complete control ("Look at me threatening to squish that building like Godzilla!"), *The Village* obeys its own rules. Instead of the comfort afforded by the sense of this omnipotent and omniscient control, *The Village* confronts us with difference and abjection,



ABOVE: Diana Thorneycroft, *The Phocomelia Drum Band*, 2018, digital photograph



and therefore calls into question the idyllic safety and easy relationships that its diminutive scale would seem to suggest.

Thorneycroft spent four definitive years of her childhood on a military base near the Black Forest in Germany, one of the only remaining parts of the ancient woods that once covered most of Europe. A site of Roman legends, Grimm's fairy tales, and early European folklore, the Black Forest also carries the history and bloodshed of World War II—the history of the war kept current with the danger of hidden live grenades, trenches, burnt out tanks, and overgrown lookout points. The area was a forbidden zone for the kids growing up on the military base,



ABOVE: Diana Thorneycroft, *Guard on the Edge (of the forest and the night)*, 2017, digital photograph



but Thorneycroft “jumped the fence” and spent hours exploring it with her friends. As she wandered into the forest against her parents’ orders, the blend of trepidation, fear, and freedom became a formative experience for her art practice.

The Black Forest in Thorneycroft’s photographs is the site of narratives that play out between the horses from the Herd and their keepers. Titled *Black Forest (dark waters)*, they provide a glimpse into the relationships between the architecture, herdsman, horses, and other inhabitants of Thorneycroft’s constructed world. While *Black Forest* is a reference to the forest of Thorneycroft’s childhood, *dark waters* is a description of her process in constructing the images.

ABOVE: Dianna Thorneycroft, *Herd-girl (gardener and memory keeper)*, 2015, digital photograph

During two recent Manitoba Arts Council residencies at Clear Lake in the Riding Mountain National Park, Thorneycroft set up tableaus in the lake and surrounding woods and waited for the night to come. She then used the process she had developed with her previous bodies of work in the studio to paint the images with a flashlight, without a fixed source of light¹. As a result, the figures in the images appear as if they are the light source, illuminated by a glow. They are clearly staged and artificially illuminated tableaus, enhancing the sense of spectacle and carnivalesque in the work.

The tableaus either affirm or refute our projections onto the figures and their narratives. The ramp the horses gallop on appears in one of the images, titled *Forest Ruin (with horse and deer)*, but its scale in relation to the figures is nothing like the ramp in the gallery. The relationship between the herdsmen and the horses is further called into question with the titles: why is there the noose in the *Birdmen (ranch hands and members of the selection committee)*, what is the purpose of the axe in *Herd-girl (gardener and memory keeper)*, and why are there so many severed limbs? There is a continued negotiation of power between care and harm, destruction and affection. In these combination of bodies and architecture, it becomes impossible to form a position on the internal ethics of Thorneycroft's world, which makes the viewer's position even more disorienting and unsettling.

1 All of the photographs were lit using a flashlight, before the Deep Bay residencies and after.



The horses and their caretakers, inspire fear for —and of— them as they dance, leak, torture, and perform while other animals gather to watch.

ABOVE: Diana Thorneycroft, *Birdmen* (ranch hands and members of the selection committee) (detail), 2015, digital photograph

LIST OF WORKS:

Herd, 2015, altered horses on ramp, mixed media

DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHS:

Birdmen (ranch hands and members of the selection committee), 2015, digital photograph

Deity (on fire), 2017, digital photograph

Equestrian (nutritionist), 2016, digital photograph

Forest Ruin (with horse and deer), 2017, digital photograph

Guard on the Edge (of the forest and the night), 2017, digital photograph

Herd-girl (gardener and memory keeper), 2015, digital photograph

Horse-head Girl (pathologist and pony entertainer), 2015, digital photograph

Rain and Birches (in Fiddler's Green), 2017, digital photograph

Red-berry Girl (with Grace), 2015, digital photograph

Ring-boy's Water Dream, 2017, digital photograph

Shaman's Hut, 2018, digital photograph

Spot-face Boy (chef and snake charmer), 2015, digital photograph

Storm (mother and daughter), 2017, digital photograph

The Blind Conductor (of the Phocomelia Drum Band), 2018, digital photograph

The Phocomelia Drum Band, 2018, digital photograph

The Vet (and the darkest one), 2017, digital photograph

Tongue Maker (and his habitués), 2017, digital photograph

Winter Dancing Horses (with accordion playing inseminator), 2017, digital photograph

Woodsman (wood gatherer and amputator), 2015, digital photograph

THE VILLAGE:

Birdmen on Sentinel Poles, 2018, 9 altered G.I. Joes, clay, colour pencil crayon, charcoal, gesso, acrylic paint, gel medium, wood, sinew, rope, rabbit fur, nails

Phocomelia Drum Band with Carl the Blind Conductor, 2018, 12 altered G.I. Joes, clay, colour pencil crayon, chalk pastel, paper, acrylic paint, gesso, wood, glue, wax, dried cranberries, hardware

Mother and Daughter, 2017, altered G.I. Joe and altered plastic horse, clay, colour pencil crayon, paper, horse hair, gel medium

The Vet, 2017, altered doll, clay, plastic horse legs, clay, colour pencil crayon, paper, toy doctor's bag, toy lantern

Old Man Minotaur, 2016, altered doll, plastic horse legs, clay, paper, colour pencil crayon, toy chain saw

Accordion Player, 2016, altered doll, clay, colour pencil crayon, miniature toy accordion

Horse with Porcupine Quills, 2015, altered plastic horse, bone, clay, colour pencil crayon, paper, porcupine quills, mat medium

Ring Boy's Stand, 2017, *stand*: wood, string, rusty nails, bolts, matches, fabric, witch's hair, metal horse bit, *ring boy*: altered G.I. Joe, clay, colour pencil crayon, lace, mat gel medium

Mystic Horse (Ama), 2018, altered plastic horse, colour pencil crayon, wood, paint, rabbit fur, diffuser, scented oils, water

Shaman's Hut, 2018, wood, pigeon head, rabbit fur, doll hand, clay, paper, pencil crayon, cardboard, nails, bolts, glue, altered doll (inside)

Hugo's Prison, 2018, *prison*: wood, cardboard, bamboo, wood filler, hardware, sinew, fur, wire, paper, string, colour pencil crayons, gesso, charcoal, glue, *Hugo*: altered G.I. Joe, clay, gesso, acrylic, paper, colour pencil crayon, *Deity*: altered horse, colour pencil crayon, fur, mat gel medium, clay

THE VILLAGE (CONTINUED):

Hugo's Ladder, 2017, bamboo, sinew, colour pencil crayon, hardware, paper, glue

Drawing Condo I (with hanging man), 2018, *condo*: wood, sinew, hardware, charcoal, colour pencil crayon, fabric, plaster, toy horse leg, rabbit fur, bone, fish tongue, wire, acrylic paint, rabbit foot, dried beets, thread, paper, glue, gesso, *hanging man*: altered doll, clay, colour pencil crayon, sinew, fur, toy rubber boot

Swing Set (with porn star), 2018, *swing*: 5 altered dolls, wood, fur, colour pencil crayon, gesso, chain, sinew, black acrylic paint, glue, *porn star*: altered G.I. Joe, clay, colour pencil crayon, mat gel medium, paper

Tongue Maker's Workshop, 2018, altered G.I. Joe, wood, clay, colour pencil crayon, toy axe, lace, hardware, string, paper, vegetation, foam, glue, wooden box

Drawing Condo II (with Woodsman and Guillaume's Centaur), 2018, *condo*: wood, hardware, glue, fabric, plastic toy horse leg, dead bird, fur detritus, charcoal, colour pencil crayon, thread, bone, sinew, gesso, colour pencil crayon, rabbit fur, *Woodsman*: altered G.I. Joe, toy horse hair, toy axe, acrylic paint, gesso, pencil, colour pencil crayon, clay, *Guillaume's Centaur*: altered doll, altered horse, clay, fabric, acrylic, charcoal, paper, gel, medium

Vagina Dentata Storage Facility, 2018, *facility with attached "vagina dentata"*: wood, cardboard, colour pencil crayons, nails, paper, fur, wood, cardboard, claws, shells, fur, hardware, pins, teeth, wax, sinew, horse hair, *VD employee*: altered G.I. Joe, clay, colour pencil crayon, gel medium

Rabbit Fur Ladder, 2018, wood, gel medium, rabbit fur, dirt, vegetation, colour pencil crayon, charcoal, hair, ink, dead bugs

Drawing Condo III (with Blow Fish Horse), 2018, *condo*: wood, hardware, rabbit fur, bone, metal "comb", sinew, plastic doll leg, dried vegetation, gesso, colour pencil crayon, *Blow Fish Horse*: altered plastic toy horse, graphite, black pencil crayon

Guard on the Edge, 2017, *stand*: wood, charcoal, colour pencil crayon, hardware, rusty nails, gesso, *Guard*: altered doll, plastic horse leg, clay, wood, charcoal, colour pencil crayon

Winter Dancing Feeding Station, 2018, *station*: wood, hardware, found and reused wood, lace, fabric, thread, rabbit fur, sheep wool, fish bones, colour pencil crayon, gesso, acrylic paint, clay, fake snow, *figures*: altered dolls and G.I.Joes, clay, colour pencil crayon, mat gel medium, bugs, wax, sinew, hardware, plastic tubing

UP NEXT:

ADVANCED AND GRADUATING STUDENTS, BRANDON UNIVERSITY
VISUAL AND ABORIGINAL ARTS DEPARTMENT

BETWEEN IV

SEPTEMBER 13 – OCTOBER 20, 2018

The AGSM is supported by the Canada Council for the Arts, the Manitoba Arts Council and the City of Brandon.



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204.727.1036
INFO@AGSM.CA
AGSM.CA