

HR GIGER X HANS BELLMER

The Schinkel Pavillon presents a second volume of the exhibition dedicated to HR Giger, this time entering a dialogue with the work of one of his lifelong inspirations: the subversive German Surrealist Hans Bellmer. Based on research, this exhibition aims to explore the formal and thematic convergences of these two artists, whose bond is little known to date. It also underscores HR Giger's position as a late Surrealist, recognising him as a fine artist, and challenging his historical siloing as a figure only relevant to popular culture. The pairing of Bellmer's delicate and meticulous oeuvre with the bold and striking style that characterises Giger might seem unlikely. Nevertheless, both artists pursued the same goal: to rebel against the aesthetic and political conventions of their time, and face us with the unseemly parts of our nature.

Two Iconic Creatures

Hans Bellmer's *Die Puppe* (1934) and HR Giger's *Xenomorph* (1979) are two fantasy creatures which have won a place in the collective imagination of art lovers and fans of the horror genre. As first and second generation Surrealists, the two artists were inspired by psychoanalysis, a fact which probably lies at the root of the impact that their creatures cause. Both Giger and Bellmer seem to reach into the depths of our psyche and speak to our darkest fears and desires, as if they knew their language much better than our conscious selves.

The exhibition features the legendary volume *Les Jeux de la Poupée* (1949), which collects the photographs of Hans Bellmer's erotic doll. The first iteration of *Die Puppe* was created in the early thirties in Germany, a somber period in which the Nazis were seizing power. Nazi propaganda provided a political and aesthetic blueprint, promoting models such as the neoclassical, immaculate bodies portrayed in Leni Riefenstahl's documentary *Olympia: Festival of the Nations* (1938). While these statuesque athletes performed their exploits in the 1936 Olympic games, Bellmer was playing with a little "monster" he had created for his private pleasure: a doll with movable parts based on his cousin Ursula which, in this artistic form, he could rearrange to his will, and possess endlessly. Between 1934-36 he created several versions of the piece, eliminating, adding, or replicating female limbs, first using household items such as broomsticks, and afterwards incorporating ball joints to increase mobility and game possibilities. The Nazis, adamant about repressing any politico-aesthetic insurgence, declared his work "degenerate" ("entartete"), leading to his flight from Germany in 1938. He reallocated in Paris where he was well-received by the Surrealist group. The book on display is a collaboration with Paul Éluard, who selected the photographs with Bellmer and wrote an extensive text to accompany them. Giger's photo-series displayed on the top floor (1966) manifest his admiration for Bellmer's *Puppe*. Here, the Swiss artist seems to have constructed his own version of the famous doll, presenting bodies composed of female parts (belonging to his then-model and lover, Li Tobler), and animal-like fragments such as tentacles and feline spinal cords.

Several pieces and items in the exhibition allude to HR Giger's most famous creation: *Xenomorph*, the monster in the 1979 Ridley Scott's 'Alien' film which won him an Oscar for Best Visual Effects. The famous filmmaker's interest was sparked when he was given a copy of Giger's *Necronomicon* (1977), the first major compendium of his images, in which he merges elements of the mechanised world with the human anatomy. In it, sex, violence, male, female, animal, and human blend into a state of constant flux. On view, the Alien sketches trace the design and construction of the eponymous creature and other special effects made for the film, while previously un-exhibited private diaries provide an intimate insight into Giger's artistic processes. Interestingly, Giger's implication in the Alien film grew out of his collaboration with the visual effects expert Dan O'Bannon, whom he met during the preparations for the legendary unrealised *Dune* film at the beginning of the 70s. Its mythical director, Alejandro Jodorowsky, involved Giger in the project upon recommendation of arguably the most genius Surrealist artist: Salvador Dalí. On view on the top floor, the *Harkonnen Environment* (1981), a set of table and chairs created for Baron Harkonnen, the villain of this cinematographic masterpiece that never came to be.

Sex and Politics

A wave of dark eroticism seems to traverse the rooms and chambers of the Schinkel Pavillon. What do we see when faced with exposed anatomies in a state of arousal, or with scenes of explicit sexual acts? Do these artists merely want to provoke, or indulge in their personal perversions? Is there, perhaps, a more profound invitation to re-assess our beliefs, thoughts, sentiments, and conventions?

Hans Bellmer's exquisite drawings and prints lead the visitor's eye along a myriad of details and perfectly calculated strokes in a delicate act of seduction. Contrary to what one might think, works such as *Etude pour Madame Edwarda* (1950), or *Female nude*, unabashedly depicting sexual themes, are far removed from pornography. While the latter is two-dimensional, and an object of fast consumption, Bellmer's works are an invitation to surrender to the delight of looking with the fullness of one's being, as if one were captivated by the subtle gestures and physical idiosyncrasies of one's lover. Though his themes are almost always brazen, and sometimes involve risky power games, his overflowing sensitivity and intelligence make the contemplation of his work a full sensory experience, as if the voyeur that one becomes were part and parcel of the work. For instance, the drawing *La Céphalopode (a Sade)* (1965), exposes the behind of (probably) his life-companion, the fabulous Berlin-born poet and draftsman, Unica Zürn, with whom Bellmer shared a sadomasochistic relationship fully embraced by both. The woman, reduced to her erogenous zones in the drawing, seems to be screaming, perhaps in pleasure, perhaps in pain, probably in both. Is this a cruel act of artistic, and sexual domination? Mysteriously, the beholder cannot grasp the image at once - the eye is directed, withheld and released by Bellmer's masterful and sensitive lines and graphic details. He imbues us in his *jouissance*, making us complicit of his experience, which is a deep exploration into the nature of desire, and the dark, unknown forces it stirs in us. His most important reflections around the the body, perception, and desire, are collected in his extremely influential text *Little Anatomy of the Physical Unconscious or The Anatomy of the Image* (1957), that has been later illustrated by pieces such as *Transfert des Sens* (1966), on view at the exhibition.

The sexual liberation on the one hand and the growing social isolation resulting from the rapid technological progress of the 20th century on the other fuelled Giger's imagination. In his dark universe forms merge into one another in a constant flux - male turns to female, to monster, to machine, and all protagonists seem to be part of a circuit fuelled by an uncanny desire. Though his scenes often involve nudity and explicit sexual acts, they seem to be more technological than than erotic. They resemble perhaps, the plans of a complex machine that involves organisms and industrial appliances, rather than orgies or other forms of sexual rendezvous. His view of sex and reproduction is manifested in his iconic *Birthmachine* drawings (1967 and 1965-66) and the *Suitcase Baby* sculpture (1967), on display at the exhibition. This "machine" is ready to "birth" baby aviation-officers holding pistols to their temples, reflecting Giger's deep fears concerning the nuclear arms race that was in full swing at the time, and his anxieties related to birthing children into a world that is cruel and contaminated. His most sexualised works belong to the series *Erotomechanics* and *Necronom*, to which *Necronom IV* and *Erotomechanics V* (on view) belong. These works, which depict sexual scenes and monstrously enflamed anatomies, are somewhere in between organic, architectural, and industrial. Contrary to Bellmer's erotic scenes, their passion is not infectious, but almost programmed, like a mechanical instrument. They manifest Giger's inspiration in Marcel Duchamp's *Bachelor Machine* (1915-23), which cryptically dissects the mechanics of desire and its circuits involving bodies, mechanical parts and architectures. This masterpiece and its themes, fundamental to HR Giger, may be considered an inspiration to Bellmer as well.