

EN An introvert insomniac with an enticingly playful mind and beard envy. The South African artist Marlene Steyn puts her many selves on display at Galerie d'YS in a wonderfully weird empathy project. "Really?! We're talking about the leg hair?" — KURT SNOEKX • PHOTO: HELEEN RODIERS

Marlene Steyn

Pretzel perfect



EXPO

Marlene Steyn could have been the author of best-selling books like *Painting Says Haaaa* or *That Beard Is Mine*, but things turned out differently. "How Cannibals Cuddle" was the South African artist's first solo show, exhibited in London in 2014, the city where she completed her MA in painting at the Royal College of Art that same year. Since then, she has been assembling a fascinating body of work that is as humorous as it is human, as immediate as it is layered, as close to home as it is out there. Her drawings, paintings, and sculptures all evoke a fantastic, dream-like, topsy-turvy universe, where bodies and faces show themselves twisted, fleshless, extremely pliant, or gnarled, and are knit back together with long hair and strange joints.

"The many selves or my selves," she calls this fantastical assembly that inhabits her work, and which came tumbling straight out of life, the dialogue inside her own head, psychoanalysis, and the history of art. "We are much more complex than we think we are. The ego is very illusory. We are all so influenced by our surroundings, connected to everybody and everything around us. Our unconsciousness rules us. So in my work, I like to transform the subject into a plurality." Galerie d'YS is immersed in this multiplicity. The walls exhibit bodies and body parts that blend together and are overlaid with playful, colourful, intimate fragments on paper. "Paper is such a fragile medium and in this sense it is the perfect material to just have an honest moment where you can't overthink

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something, but figure stuff out, literally, with figures. When you approach a canvas, it's always like [*transforms her many selves into an angel choir:*] 'Haaaaaa'. It's a formal encounter. Whereas in drawing, when you make a mark, it doesn't matter if it's super awkward or the proportion isn't right. It all stays in that moment." "Drawing is filtering life," Marlene Steyn says. "I'm an introvert in a family of extraverts. Drawing for me was always a pause to think, to

make sense of the world. It still feels like that. When things get a bit overwhelming I need to sit with my sketchbooks. Sculpting has the same immediacy: making the body and allowing gravity to shape it. You can go crazy with the knots and the twisting. My figures end up almost like pretzels. Ugly, but good ugly. [*Laughs*] Incomplete, not yet finished, always in a process of becoming."

COME OUT AND PLAY

Marlene Steyn weaves this dynamism into a self-portrait that expands the intimate into a greater whole. "South Africa has quite a difficult past where people always tended to project otherness onto others. This whole project of finding strangeness within yourself, realizing that you yourself are incomplete, always changing, and so imperfect, leads you to tolerate the world much more. This is almost like an empathy project."

"People put so much pressure on themselves to be this super coherent, sorted out person. Likewise, we are prone to imposing really strict gender roles. By making the figures more androgynous and allowing the females to have leg hair sometimes, or unwaxed eyebrows, it just opens it up. It feels like it liberates the female figure. Because we are so taught to think in a certain way. I often get that question at shows: 'Why did you give her that hair?' Really?! You have all this stuff happening, and we're talking about the leg hair? I like the hair because it comes from inside you, like the unconscious. And I've got beard envy. [*Laughs*] It's a thing I have, yes. I look at beards and all I think is: 'Oh, how I'd like...'" **E**

MARLENE STEYN: SHOUTY INSIDES
> 14/4, Galerie d'YS, www.galeriedys.com