

# 'Pauline Curnier Jardin' at Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, Helsinki, 11 October 2024 – 23 February 2025

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Pauline Curnier Jardin, *Tunnel of Love*, 2024, installation view at Kiasma, Helsinki, photo courtesy of the Finnish National Gallery / Petri Virtanen

Sex and death feature prominently in the work of Pauline Curnier Jardin at Kiasma. These are acts that link me to you, to everyone else. The fact that each one of us was born because our parents coupled, the fact that we will pass away, our souls, some say, hovering in the air above our bodies, no longer here but in some indecipherable sphere, is inescapable. Death stalks us, inexorable, implacable, while sex... well, sex is what all the love songs are about. All those crooners don't just want to hold the hand of the object of their affection, they have a bit more thrusting in mind. Blood is also present in many of the French artist's works. For her, it is not only the product of pain but the signification of life. When it is moving, it means a person is alive. Curnier Jardin has a cinema background and gore is one of her interests.

The show sees the entire fifth floor of Kiasma transformed into an immersive theme park, and this colourful, funfair-like setting serves as a counterbalance to the dark, grotesque and often shocking reality of her work.

As the visitor enters the show, they encounter *Luna Kino* (2022), one of three striking installations at Kiasma created in collaboration with scenographer Rachel Garcia. It pays homage to a real cinema in Germany that remained open during World War II as a tool of mass entertainment and morale. Acting as a reflection of the subtextual horror, Curnier Jardin's installation presents a slightly raised, yawning cave entrance arching above the spread legs of a reclining female figure, while behind her is a thin, translucent screen with a thick, red liquid dripping down into small clumps. This is enclosed within a khaki-coloured military tent with a film that is not wholesome family fun but something one might come across at a regular funfair. What Jardin provides here is a peepshow of sexual drawings activated by a coin slot. The drawings are from the Feel Good Co-operative set up and co-founded by the artist during the Covid lockdowns in 2020. The co-operative includes creatives, Colombian trans sex workers, and their allies. The sex workers are based in Rome and were paid for their drawings. Jardin revealed in the press conference that she has always been keen on working with the most marginalised people in society, hence her collaboration with the sex workers. She also revealed that 'Each work has a heavy story but looks playful', and that amusement parks have always been a source of inspiration for her. She enjoys constructing big structures, like some of those in the exhibition, likes the spectacular gestures performed in them and enjoys appropriating their structure for her purposes.



Pauline Curnier Jardin, *Luna Kino*, 2022, installation view at Kiasma, Helsinki, photo courtesy of the Finnish National Gallery / Petri Virtanen

Another installation, the *Tunnel of Love* (2024), precedes the *Hot Flashes Forest* (2019). Then the visitor can make their way to the final installation – a monumental colosseum that is reminiscent of flesh. Here, visitors can watch the twenty-one-minute-long film *Fat to Ashes* (2021). But more on that later.

In *Hot Flashes Forest* the artist creates a red forest by displaying deflated vinyl fabric figures vertically resembling a two-dimensional forest of cutout trees. They represent the anonymous older female form. The figures hang around the dimly lit gallery like discarded clothing, symbolising dehydrating meat. A film, *Bled Out* (2019), is projected; it depicts the ageing female body as a source of contraband sexuality. Clearly, the title refers to the hot flashes or flushes menopausal women experience. The film features elderly imprisoned women whose crime involves their murders of innocent young men who inadvertently encounter them. Just before each murder, the women experience a bizarre resurgence of menstruation, representing a twisted blend of sexual and murderous desire. *Bled Out* employs minimal dialogue but is rich in shocking visual details, showing blood and stains in a sensational style. The artist uses these graphic scenes not merely for shock value but with a satirical and theatrical approach that embraces camp. The overall exhibit presents a plasticised relic that challenges societal perceptions of the female form and ageing sexuality.



Pauline Curnier Jardin, *Hot Flashes Forest*, 2019, installation view at Kiasma, Helsinki, photo courtesy of the Finnish National Gallery / Petri Virtanen

The visitor then arrives at an installation that is set up like a cinema, with benches and a large screen showing *Fat to Ashes*. It combines three cinematic snapshots: a religious festival for St Agatha, the slaughter of a pig and the Cologne Carnival. The title signifies the week of excess from ‘Fat Thursday’ to Ash Wednesday, marking the shift into Lent. The film portrays

these activities as spaces of transgression and transformation, linking ancient cult rituals to modern societal functions such as gathering and performative display. One notable detail is an Italian dessert shaped like a breast, consumed during the feast for St Agatha. The lively images of the Cologne Carnival reflect a final episode of collective celebration before the onset of the COVID-19 lockdown. This is not one for vegetarians as the pig butchering is done on a rural farm; this is not the mechanised mass slaughtering that most people are dimly aware of. You see the animal hoisted up, blood flowing from its neck as it hangs upside down. In the film about the martyrdom of St Agatha, there is footage of children re-enacting her ordeal. In the final film you see some revellers dressed up as the police, those agents of social control, while some women add a sour note by blacking up. I asked the artist why she showed that. She replied that she had wrestled with it, but that she wanted to ensure people saw the full range of ways in which people expressed themselves at the festival.



Pauline Curnier Jardin, *Fat to Ashes*, 2021, installation view at Kiasma, Helsinki, photo courtesy of the Finnish National Gallery / Petri Virtanen

The film reminds me, particularly the martyrdom section, of a Nan Goldin masterpiece I saw in 2024. Shot between 2004 and 2022, Goldin's *Sisters, Saints, Sibyls* is arranged like a triptych, and I saw it, appropriately enough, in an historic Welsh church in central London alongside some friendly female German tourists I had been chatting with in the queue to get in.<sup>1</sup> It begins with the martyrdom of St Barbara who suffered for her Christian faith, then goes on to the story of Goldin's older sister, also named Barbara, who was the victim of 1950s societal

<sup>1</sup> For more on Nan Goldin's *Sisters, Saints, Sibyls*, see the Gagosian gallery website: <https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2024/nan-goldin-sisters-saints-sibyls>

pressure, and mental torture, due to her unwillingness as a teenager in smalltown USA, surrounded by small-minded people, to conform. The final section was a potted biography of Goldin's life. Goldin narrates events in each video, accompanied by a soundtrack of American pop music. In the final section, she talks about and depicts a montage of lovers, friends and acquaintances, fascinating strangers all glammed up, the androgynous, all kinds of gorgeous people, the non-binary, non-heteronormative, people taking drugs, coming down from drugs, drinking, living – all set to a stirring soundtrack before reaching a climax with Johnny Cash's maudlin masterpiece, his cover of Nine Inch Nails's *Hurt*, which made us sigh, the images, the music, the voiceover throwing us a flurry of punches until we were knocked out under the weight of its staggering power.



Pauline Curnier Jardin, film still from *Fat to Ashes*, 2021, courtesy of the artist, ChertLüdde, Berlin and Ellen de Bruijne Projects, Amsterdam

I remember that poor pig in Curnier Jardin's video tied up, twisting on the rope, its throat slit, bleeding. It reminded me then, and it still reminds me, that we come into the world breathless, helpless and vulnerable. On our deathbed, we will be just as weak. When done here, we will all take that journey into endless night. Curnier Jardin's exhibition raises questions around sex and death; it is a revelation.

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