

“A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women”

Muzeum Susch, Susch
January 2 – June 30

by Alice Bucknell



Joan Semmel, *Untitled*, 1972; oil on canvas; 118.7 x 174.6 cm. Grazyna Kulczyk Collection.
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Dicks and slits abound in the inaugural exhibition at Muzeum Susch in Switzerland, titled “A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women”. But to stop short at the superficial symbolism of these forms would exclude entire universes of feeling and meaning. If sexuality can be understood as a language, the show speaks in heteroglossia. A cacophonous conversation on gender and sexuality between 37 artists across three floors, it makes one thing clear: it isn’t interested in singular readings of either. Some works brood quietly on the walls while others unravel uproariously at dead center; golden gourds, pregnant plaster slits and blue motherhood are all part of the equation stemming from the female-focused collection of Muzeum founder Gra yna Kulczyk. The exhibition kicks off with a subversive striptease by Hannah Wilke, whose contentious video work *Hannah Wilke Through the Large Glass* (1976) gets a room of its own. Wilke seductively peels off layers while framed by a Duchamp sculpture, weaponizing her sexuality to problematize the viewers’ gaze across art history and between highbrow and pop culture. Sarah Lucas’s gargantuan golden gourd *Florian* (2013) and Judith Bernstein’s bristly charcoal screw *One Panel Vertical #1* (1978) are locked in a phallic face-off in the glitzy new ground floor gallery. In the side room, famed canvas slasher Lucio Fontana meets

his match in Magdalena Abakanowicz’s sisal *Black Garment 8* (1970), a monumental woven sculpture that bucks traditional size constraints of the medium. Upstairs, in a room titled Joy of Sex, porn aesthetics are co-opted by Betty Tomkins and Natalia LL, whose works straddle the line between explicit industry-grade graphics and acerbic social critique. In the Origin room, Fontana gets a dig by Maria Bartusová, whose *Hommage à Fontana II* (1987) transforms his violent cut into a pregnant space, a single plaster egg peeping out of the torn canvas. On the third and final floor, the room Motherhood in Blue uses death as a metaphor to explore the complicated relationship between mother and child. Andrzej Wróblewski’s poignant *Mother with Dead Child* (1949) and Nicole Eisenman’s unforgettable *Hanging Birth* (1994) present one life eclipsed by another, breaking the symbiotic relationship sustained by society. “A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women” is powerful because it goes beyond the binary, acknowledging tension between “masculine” and “feminine” as just a sliver of the larger social and sexual strata through which it works. It offers no solutions, instead serving as a provocation to ditch our desire for an easy read, so we might soak in the layers of anguish, fear, lust, strength and vulnerability shifting beneath the surface.