

Elizabeth Xi Bauer presents: *The moon between my teeth*

A duo exhibition with Gokula Stoffel and Alexandra Zarins

Curated by Maria do Carmo M. P. de Pontes

In *Transformations* (1971), Anne Sexton retells fairytales by the Grimm Brothers, looking beneath the surface for meanings that are not immediately obvious. The siblings' gathering of folk tales, first published as *Children's and Household Tales* in 1812¹, collected stories that for centuries had been transmitted orally – often by women. Such 'cautionary tales' – for every folklore is a cautionary tale – propagated popular wisdoms like 'be kind to your family', 'be patient and love will come for you', 'evil will be punished and good rewarded in the end', and so forth. In Sexton's perspective, layers of misogyny and abuse² that are embedded in these narratives are brought to the fore, in a matter-of-fact, raw style that is characteristic of the poet. The title of this exhibition, *The moon between my teeth*, is borrowed from one of *Transformations'* poems; namely, *The Frog Prince*.

Sexton's act of placing a heroic narrative within a mundane perspective, echoes with **Alexandra Zarins'** voice as a painter of everyday life. There is an undeniable theatricality in the manner that she chooses to depict her subjects – a fairytale-ness, if you like – but her choice of subjects confirms her as a portraitist of her times. *Road Trip, pt ii* (2022-23), for instance, depicts two entwined bodies in the backseat of a car, seemingly exhausted after a night out. The night itself takes centre stage in compositions such as *The Kiss*, *The Lemon Lounge* and *Disagio's* (all 2023). The latter, which stands for 'discomfort', or 'inconvenience' in Italian, shows several standing bodies sharing a same space, like a dance floor, barely a centimetre between them. As in several of her paintings, none of the faces are visible, which grants her subjects a right to anonymity that is increasingly rare in our contemporary world. Zarins uses her experiences as inspiration for her works, but rather than painting from photographs, she first creates study drawings to spatially arrange her compositions. These are then reproduced in canvas, on a much bigger scale, with oil paint and a variety of colours that manage to be dark and pastel at once. The works on show are part of the same thematic universe, as if all the action on view had happened during one eventful night out. And what would fairytales be without nights out?

Gokula Stoffel's practice is set in a multiverse of its own, where figures seem to jump from one composition to the next, then back with new elements and off to a third one. The artist's vocabulary encompasses many medias, reflecting the extent of her curiosity, though this display focusses on sculptures made mainly by cold porcelain and resin. These are used to create shapes like limbs, body parts and faces that could be interchanged and reconfigured among them – as they often are in the artist's studio – in a lotto-like operation that allows myriad presentations. Playing with tridimensionality itself, all her pieces are hung on walls. One exception to this rule is the largest work on show: *Losing game* (2023). It consists of two figures violently holding hands, as if grabbing more than cuddling. Their torso, arms and legs are made by various bits of handwoven fabric sewed together, creating a rainbow of sorts, whereas their legs depart from the wall to reach the floor, forming a V-shaped volume that's reminiscent of Fred Sandback's sculptures. Another couple on show, *Moon & Sun* (2023) share not only the same hue of green but a same pair of feet and hands, a deep entwinement that on the one hand alludes to symbiosis, on the other highlights the impossibility of love: their hands are together but the rest of them is deeply apart. Throughout the space, Stoffel exhibits a few other faces, faces with hands, faces with hands and body parts, all of which – as in Zarins' paintings – establish a roughly one-to-one scale to the human body. Such artifice creates an immersive environment, where the somber, at times daunting creatures of both artists seem to be dancing a same waltz.

¹ *Kinder und Hausmärchen*

² It's important here to acknowledge a biography of Sexton written by Diane Middlebrook, which claims that the poet abused her daughters. This quotation of Sexton is not an endorsement of her or comment on the ongoing controversy regarding her life.