

SYLVIA ZIEMANN: KEEPING HOUSE AT THE END OF THE WORLD

The Misfortune Teller

By Sandee Moore

There must always be a starting point: circling through this exhibition like the hands of a clock moving forward in time or the first card extracted from the deck in a three-card divination spread. Sylvia Ziemann, an artist and tarot card reader for over 40 years, knows that we must begin with the past. ¹

Among the paintings, each teeming with iconography and “human themes” ² befitting a tarot card, in Ziemann’s exhibition *Keeping House at the End of the World* is a single, modestly-sized painting of a foursome of card-playing rabbits dressed in medieval garb. *Playing the Game* may not appear to be the most important artwork in the exhibition, but it is the one from which all ideas and themes emerge. As a magician plucks rabbit after rabbit from a top hat, meanings and references are pulled one after another from this canvas.

The party gathers around a circular table set on a flat, grassy field under a cloudless blue sky. However, it’s not a simple image of chummy leisure. The other players at the table don’t notice the card one of the players has whisked behind his back, but viewers of the painting do. The colonnade of teepees on the left side of the composition signals that this painting is an allegory for dishonest treaty negotiations on the Canadian prairies.

This same row of conical structures appears in the ultimate kitsch painting, *A Friend In Need* (1903) by Cassius Marcellus Coolidge. Known colloquially as *Dogs Playing Poker*, a picture of sailboats hangs on the parlour wall behind the canine cheaters’ gaming table. In restaging *A Friend In Need*, Ziemann politicizes the painting’s goofy premise and creates a situation to understand the humorous politics of the original kitsch subject.

Mid-twentieth-century art critics reviled kitsch for its mass appeal offering pleasure devoid of social critique or philosophical insight. Kitsch, however, is akin to folk art. Folk art employs magic to explain a cruel and senseless world, while the sentimental and irreverent pleasures of kitsch can be viewed as subversive rejections of oppressive social control.

The swindler in Ziemann’s painting (and in Coolidge’s) clutches the Ace of Spades, a portent of death. ³ The shadow of the apocalypse, as dark and singular as the Ace of Spades, grasped in a cheating paw is the fate promised by this painting. However, as a fortune teller, Ziemann understands that with an end comes a new beginning.

A haphazard coalition of tarot cards and folk traditions known as Carnival are the instruments through which I interpret the narrative of Ziemann’s world. Her words, uncannily anticipating the framework of my essay, ring in my ears, “Synchronicity is two things happening at the same time that are unconnected but have meaning together.” ⁴

As the forerunners of playing cards, Tarot cards came into widespread use in the 15th Century; fittingly, François Rabelais wrote his raucous work of carnivalesque folk horror *The Life of Gargantua and of Pantagruel* a short time later. In times when European society was regulated by elites of the clergy and the gentry, tarot and carnival celebrations momentarily placed power in the hands of the disenfranchised. Fortune telling recasts the constant ills of plague and famine as deliberately dealt, while carnival practices, like declaring a child bishop for the day, ridicule oppressive authority.

From Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin’s reading of Rabelais comes the notion of Carnival not as an event but as an approach. Bakhtin extends the disruptive quality of the carnival to grotesque representations of



Playing the Game, oil on canvas, 76.2 x 91.4 cm, 2018, SK Arts Permanent Collection.

(left): *Practice of Pareidolia*, mixed media, 130.3 x 46.8 x 61.2 cm, 2020
 (centre): *Protest at the End of the World*, mixed media, 130.3 x 46.8 x 61.2 cm, 2020
 (right): *Path to Individuation*, mixed media, 130.3 x 46.8 x 61.2 cm, 2020



the body. The grotesque body detaches from the oppressive structure of the socially-contained body through excretion and dismemberment. "[The grotesque body] consists of orifices and convexities that present another, newly conceived, body. It is a point of transition in a life eternally renewed, the inexhaustible vessel of death and conception."⁵

If the grotesque body promises radical rebirth, so too do the Death Card, represented by a spritely skeleton in modern tarot decks, and Ziemann's drawings of viscera.

This same mingling of death and vitality, of degradation as an affirmation of regeneration and renewal, is most potent in Ziemann's black-inked drawings of body parts. A procession of lungs, heart muscles, dismembered torsos, skulls and guts, liberated from their restrictive roles within the body hierarchy, take on the work of thinking, feeling, remembering and dreaming. Ziemann stuffs these organs and cavities with symbols and words in a stream of consciousness process. There are larval insects, a primate with a paintbrush, gas masks, high rises, mass graves, burrowing animals, and volcanoes spewing hot lava and choking ash.

She works medical illustration in reverse; instead of making sense of a sloppy jumble of blood, tissues and organs, she amplifies the chaos. Her drawings are an anarchic mix of forms spanning journaling, concrete poetry, mind mapping and board games.

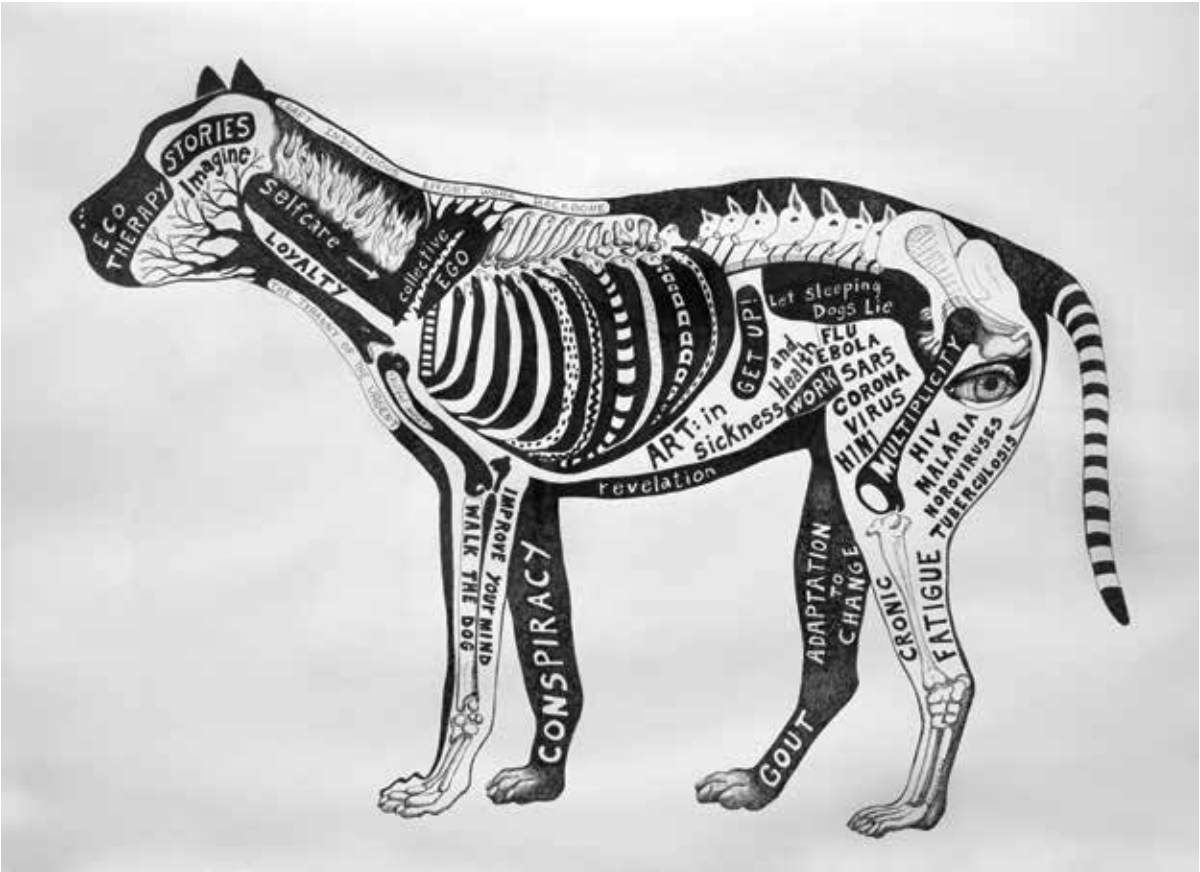
The grotesque body – incomplete, unbounded, abnormal, expanding, bulging, protruding and branching off – inverts the rationalistic privileging of mind over body. It also proposes an anti-Capitalist social body. As opposed to the individualized body (it is self-sufficient and speaks in its name alone), in the grotesque body, death brings nothing to an end (the ancestral body is renewed for the next generation).

Ziemann's images of the grotesque body are akin to the defleshed figure of the Death tarot card. They celebrate not death, but an end to individualism and the regeneration of a new body: unlimited, belonging to everyone and constantly renewed.

Returning to the motif of the three-card spread, if Death is the second card representing the present, then apocalypse must be the prophecy for the future, at least as far as *Keeping House at the End of the World* is concerned. Appropriately, the tarot card that often foretells the end of the world, The Tower, is an architecture named by Bakhtin as a subversive rupture in the smooth surface of hegemony. Towers and subterranean passages are the architectural analogs to the protrusions and orifices of the grotesque body.⁷

Two dioramas, a water tower (*Hope for the Best, Prepare for the Worst*) and an underground bunker (*Bunker Commune*), mark the transition from the large gallery filled with paintings and drawings to the smaller gallery that houses scaled-down cataclysms.

My hope is that by bringing the viewer into my mythos, through story, play and an invitation to reflection, that the work can offer alternative musings that speak to whatever moments of anxiety the viewer might hold. Ordering the chaos of the everyday is a task that is common as dirt. - Sylvia Ziemann



Previous page (top left): Installation view at MJM&AG

Previous page (top right): Installation view of *Carnival at the End of the World*

Previous page (bottom): *Dog Days*, ink on paper, 55.9 x 76.2 cm, 2022

(top): *Accidental Utopia*, oil on canvas, 243.8 x 182.9 cm, 2017

(bottom left): *Conversation Over Old Bones*, oil on board, 22.9 x 22.9 cm, 2002

(bottom centre): *Turn Everything On Its Head*, oil on canvas, 40.6 x 40.6 cm, 2017

(bottom right): *Crossroads*, oil on board, 22.9 x 22.9 cm, 2022



Ziemann has reduced present-day apocalyptic fervour to a potent essence in her miniature dioramas *Carnival at the End of the World & Quarantine Diaries*. The campy magic of miniaturization shrinks the disasters of inequality, climate change, economic collapse, war and pandemics. Engineers and children have long used the miniature as a method for understanding and mastering large and complex systems by making it possible to perceive them at a glance.

Carnival at the End of the World is a sprawling yet tiny boomtown built on the shrunken ruins of our failed civilization. This fictional post-apocalyptic township at the foot of a mountain of trash bags both imagines a terrifying future and recreates the past. The horror embedded in this geography and architecture does not need interpretation; it is factual. Ziemann based the fractured collage of buildings in *Carnival at the End of the World* on her parents' experiences in World War II. "Hamburg, after the bombings, looked like this with just a few walls standing. Cities were rebuilt from the rubble of demolished buildings using the same bricks."⁸

Businesses essential to this place rebuilt on a foundation of trauma are dreams and dream interpretation, gaming houses, bars and distilleries, spiritual advisors, bakeries, and recycling facilities. Some of the doll-like inhabitants of this disastrous little world appear carefree; they gather around a fire pit, sprawl on the grass to watch a movie or scale the garbage mountain. Others busily avoid peril: an animalesque figure drags the injured to safety, and a circus ringmaster crouches on a large cage preventing the escape of his sideshow attraction. Viewers entering this room of miniatures are recast as mighty giants, magnifying the vulnerability of the denizens of this precarious settlement.

Also in this darkened space are Ziemann's *Quarantine Diaries*, a row of boxes reproducing the confines of the COVID-19 lockdown. Peeping inside

the confining walls, we can see a variety of scenes in which animal avatars take on the bleak, sincere and frivolous activities of humans in quarantine: they craft protest signs, gaze into dancing campfire flames, gamble, draw pictures of contagions, grapple with test tubes in a lab and mount puppet shows.

Author Susan Stewart equates the miniature to interiority – the privacy of one's inner world, inner life and interior of the body.⁹ The most intimate of the *Quarantine Diaries* reveals the interior life of a rabbit burrowed deep into its bed. A dresser drawer stuffed with a billowing stockpile of used tissues hangs open, divulging this shameful cache. The mucus that saturates the tissues has escaped the body, symbolizing the rabbit's desire to transcend the limits of the self and reject the social order that subjugates it.

Conversely, by containing the most potent agents of social control, anxiety and dread inside dollhouse structures, Ziemann domesticates, feminizes, infantilizes and renders them harmless.

Ziemann models our doom, paints our dreams, and tells us of our future and past. She is a fortune teller and a misfortune teller.

¹ Sylvia Ziemann (artist) in conversation with the author, March 2022.

² Sylvia Ziemann (artist) in conversation with the author, March 2022.

³ Herb Friedman, "The Death Card," *Psych Warrior*, accessed May 20, 2022. <https://web.archive.org/web/20140715120241/http://www.psywarrior.com/DeathCardsAce.html>.

⁴ Sylvia Ziemann (artist) in conversation with the author, March 2022. Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 232.

⁵ Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 227.

⁶ Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 227.

⁷ Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 226.

⁸ Sylvia Ziemann (artist) in discussion with the author, March 2022. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the*

⁹ *Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984).

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ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Sylvia Ziemann works in sculpture, painting, drawing, and puppet film. Her work explores our growing fear of the domestic other, our neighbours, and the creeping anxiety that our cocoons might be breached from without or within. Some work looks into the future of living spaces and how individuals might respond to environmental challenges caused by climate change, pandemics and extreme conditions. Born in Edmonton she earned a diploma in painting from the Alberta College of Art and Design (1983), a BFA from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (1986) and MFA from the University of Regina (2014). She currently teaches art at the University of Regina.

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