PUPPETS FOR PAIN

A response to Diana Thorneycroft’s *Black Forest Sanatorium*
written by Robert Everett-Green
**Puppets for Pain**

In consumer culture, everything in the world exists to end up in a shopping cart. Diana Thorneycroft takes this idea in a macabre and comic direction in her first-ever animation, *Black Forest Sanatorium* (2020). The wordless seven-minute film follows a vaguely horse-headed puppet named Quinn as he tours a secluded hospital, pushing a cart which he gradually fills with things belonging to the inmates.

The dog-faced gatekeeper checks out the visitor not by sniffing his bum, as we might expect, but with a long and presumably searching look. Once Quinn is inside the gate, however, there’s no one to supervise his self-serving tour of the building. Christine Fellows’ eerie soundtrack sets us up for spookiness, with a dash of the camp comedy of vintage, low-budget horror films.

Desire, for Quinn, is a zero-sum phenomenon. He takes only what others are already obsessed with: a red hydrant, plucked like a zither by a patient in the TV room; a small oar, which another inmate waves around like a windmill blade; and a hank of black hair from a twitching character shackled to a sofa. All these losses are suffered without protest, as if the losers had already internalized the notion that they have no control over anything.

Quinn’s thefts become more intimate as he goes on. One puppet’s long tongue laps up dripping, viscous fluid from the face of a boy-doll’s head. Quinn investigates the fluid with his attenuated fingers, then pilfers the head. Behind a barred window, a patient writhes through unsettled dreams, while Quinn strokes the legs of a creature embedded in her abdomen. The next thing we see is the patient waking under a blood-stained sheet, while Quinn heads for the exit. He seems to be undergoing a metamorphosis: his belly bulges, as if life has begun blooming in a womb of his own.

This disturbing scene reminds us that a sanatorium, in its practical and legal history, was often a place where violence was done, and rights were taken away. The English Lunacy Act of 1845 abolished the right of any unwilling patient to challenge their confinement in the courts. In the 1920s and ‘30s, Alberta and British Columbia passed legislation that permitted sterilization of “mental defectives” in the provinces’ asylums and sanatoria. Over 3,000 patients – one-quarter of them Indigenous – were robbed of their fertility by the time the laws were repealed in the 1970s.

The only inmate free from Quinn’s pilfering hand is an anthropomorphic horse who glides freely through the forest, swinging a leg into balletic arabesques, with a squeak like that of a rusty hinge. One of Thorneycroft’s sets on display at PLATFORM reveals that this dancer previously did her stunts while standing on the seat of a tricycle, as circus riders used to stand on a running horse. The tricycle lies on its side in the foyer, with one broken shackle as a sign of former captivity.

Like many of the horses in Thorneycroft’s recent installation, *Black Forest (dark waters)*, some characters in *Black Forest Sanatorium* have been upholstered like the furniture they sit on, with
stitches that stand out like scars. We’re reminded that this animation is an artist’s world by several miniature Thornycroft drawings on the walls, one of which includes a direct reference to the Hell section of Hieronymus Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1515).

Going even more “meta,” *Black Forest Sanatorium* also features an artist’s studio, with tools and props similar to what one might find in Thornycroft’s own studio in the Exchange District. One anguished character scratches out a sketch on the wall with a long stick, his whole-body wrenching with the effort. His pointed teeth are bared, and worm-like entities surge in and out of his chest. Has there ever been a more tortured portrait of the artist?

In the hall outside this studio, Quinn encounters a wall filled with round, fleshy objects, no two the same, and all resembling something between a nipple and a Danish pastry. Obsession, in this case, is proved by the fact that the artist-puppet made so many of them. One of these takes pride of place in the assemblage Quinn makes from the sanatorium loot. It’s a properly Frankensteinian result: we can even see the new creature’s breath condensing on a glass. But this monster isn’t throwing little girls into ponds. It’s on the wall, in a frame, like a piece of art.

In that sense, *Black Forest Sanatorium* is a parable of an artist’s process. We might even say: of Thornycroft’s process, which includes gathering many kinds of objects, from toy horses to animal bones, and then remaking them through stitching, melting, cutting, painting, and many other manual operations. The puppets in her film are all changelings, which retain enough of their former shape to land uncomfortably between toy, fetish object, and monstrosity.

Adding animation to her process, Thornycroft demands even more of the viewer. You can’t see everything with one viewing, or even several, which is why displaying her sets and puppets is such a great idea. We can get a really good look at them and see the physical signs of her exhaustive and always fascinating practice.

- Robert Everett-Green
Diana Thorneycroft is a Winnipeg artist who has exhibited various bodies of work across Canada, the United States and Europe, as well as in Moscow, Tokyo and Sydney. She is the recipient of numerous awards including the 2016 Manitoba Arts Award of Distinction, an Assistance to Visual Arts Long-term Grant from the Canada Council, several Senior Arts Grants from the Manitoba Arts Council and a Fleck Fellowship from the Banff Centre for the Arts.

Robert Everett-Green has written about visual arts for The Globe and Mail, Geist, Border Crossings and Canadian Art magazine. He is the author of one novel, the acclaimed In a Wide Country, and is at work on a second. He lives in Toronto.

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IMAGE | Diana Thorneycroft, Horse-head Girl, digital photograph, 2021